



The main illustration depicts Asuna and Kirito in a night festival setting. Asuna, on the left, has long black hair and purple eyes, wearing a red and black kimono with a large red bow. Kirito, on the right, has silver hair and green eyes, wearing a white and red kimono. They are both looking towards the viewer. In the background, there are silhouettes of trees, a black cat, and orange festival lanterns. The title 'SWORD ART ONLINE ALTERNATIVE' is at the top in red, and 'clover's REGRET' is in large green and white letters. A large green number '1' is on the right.

SWORD ART ONLINE ALTERNATIVE

clover's REGRET

1

SOITIRO WATASE

ILLUSTRATION BY ♣ GINTA

SUPERVISED BY ♣ REKI KAWAHARA

SWORD ART ONLINE
ソードアート・オンライン

SWORD ART ONLINE ALTERNATIVE

CLOVER'S REGRET

SOITIRO WATASE

ILLUSTRATION BY  GINTA

SUPERVISED BY  REKI KAWAHARA

DESIGN BY  BEE-PEE





“Wasn’t there
a monster fox
like him in The
Fox’s Wedding
Parade...?”

“I specialize in
using my mind.
I’ll leave the
fighting to you,
so I hope you’ll
give it your all.”

Nayuta

Age seventeen.
Plays a warrior
priestess in *Asuka
Empire*. Skilled at
close combat. Her
real name is Yurina
Kushiinada. Goes
at her own speed
and tends to show
little emotion.

“Uh, is he for
real...? Forget a
wind-weasel, this
guy couldn’t even
beat a regular
weasel...”




“If you agree to sign, I will proceed with all my ability to fulfill your request within one week, as we discussed.”

“...And is your company in good hands, given that its president spends his time playing games...?”

Klever

An *Asuka Empire* player who calls himself a detective. Aloof and hard to pin down, he's handsome but comes off as extremely sketchy. In real life, he looks exactly like his avatar.

“I don't get it... Can you make it simpler? Like, so an elementary schooler would understand.”



“I’m afraid I’m just making everything harder on the rest of you, but if you can look past that...”

“Are you ready, Koyomi?”

Yanagi

Age seventy-seven. Plays a monk in Asuka Empire. Hired Klever to complete a quest called Ghost Orchestra for an absurd amount of money.

“Nayu, if we manage to meet up again, will you shower me with praise and rewards?”

“It seems we have a ghost in this quest, after all...”



“I’m grateful
that you were
so eager to help
out that you took
off during the
busy season.”

“It’s just so
cozy in here...”

Koyomi

Age twenty-three. Plays a
ninja in *Asuka Empire*. Her real
name is Shiori Koyomihara.
She’s older than high schooler
Nayuta but looks like she’s still
in middle school. Lightens
the atmosphere and keeps
everyone engaged.



"I'll defang that
giant snake in
three seconds.
Just stand back
and watch."

"N=Nayu!
Are you all
right?! You
aren't hurt,
are you?!"

"It's not
running—it's
coming right
for us."

"How
ghastly..."

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“Yum! How is this so good?! It’s even better than Itsumaden pudding, the top dish at Do Rota Bo Parlor!”

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clover's REGRET

1

SOITIRO WATASE
ILLUSTRATION BY  GINTA
SUPERVISED BY  REKI KAWAHARA


NEW YORK

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SWORD ART ONLINE ALTERNATIVE

CLOVER'S REGRET



SOITIRO WATASE

Supervised by Reki Kawahara

Translation by Stephen Paul

Cover art by Ginta

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

SWORD ART ONLINE ALTERNATIVE CLOVERS REGRET Vol. 1

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Edited by Dengeki Bunko

First published in Japan in 2016 by KADOKAWA CORPORATION, Tokyo.

English translation rights arranged with KADOKAWA CORPORATION, Tokyo, through TUTTLE-MORI AGENCY, INC., Tokyo.

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150 West 30th Street, 19th Floor

New York, NY 10001

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First Yen On Edition: August 2024

Edited by Yen On Editorial: Emma McClain Designed by Yen Press Design:
Andy Swist Yen On is an imprint of Yen Press, LLC.

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data is available.

ISBNs: 978-1-9753-9068-6 (paperback) 978-1-9753-9069-3 (ebook)

E3-20240806-JV-NF-ORI

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108 Apparitions Event Outline

- This event will be based in a new neighborhood, Ayakashi Alley, to be implemented in the Kanto region, and will feature 108 quests to be unveiled throughout the year.
- The 108 quests will come in the following three categories:
 - One Hundred Tales: User-submitted stories built with the Seed engine.
 - Seven Mysteries: Tie-in events with our sponsorship partners. These will be large-scale events for many players to undertake together.
 - Grand Finale: To be unveiled in the last week of the event. Details are being kept top secret.

We anticipate a few possible issues based on trends observed in user-submitted quests. For any inquiries regarding these matters, please contact Torao at the error-testing lab.

The page is decorated with several light gray floral motifs. In the top right corner, there is a cluster of small, five-petaled flowers. Below this, towards the center, is a larger, more complex floral arrangement. In the bottom left area, there are a few more small flowers, including one with a distinct center. The overall design is minimalist and elegant.

Chapter 1

Three-Leaf Detective

In the distance, you can hear the sound of festival music.

The flutes are high and sprightly, the drums nimble, and the koto strings graceful, all attuned with one another in a frenzy of activity.

Up close, you imagine the instruments would produce a lively racket, but this far away, the sound is somehow lonely.

No one knows where the music comes from.

They call it the ghost orchestra.

If you move away, the music disappears, and no matter how hard you try, you can never get closer to it.

It's not coming from the sky above, or from the ground below. Seek out the source, and you'll only wander in circles with nothing to show for it.

The orchestra plays on somewhere in the distance, heard but not seen, mocking anyone who might attempt to find its origin.

And there, sitting on the darkened stone steps leading up to a desolate little shrine, was Nayuta, dressed in her priestess garb, idly listening.

She had the sense this had happened once before—long, long ago. She'd been all alone and in the dark, tired and lost...

Of course, she knew this was just a trick of the imagination, and that nearly all people had dreamed up such a scenario as children.

It's dark, and you're sitting on the steps leading up to a shrine, gazing at the empty road below, listening to the festival music...

The bamboo grove's leaves rustle. You look up at the night sky, where countless stars twinkle, until a touch on your shoulder grabs your attention, and you turn around to find no one...

The sound of an incoming message broke Nayuta out of her reverie.

A menu window floated in the air before her face, displaying a message from a friend.

Yoo-hoo. Whatcha doing, Nayu?

Nayuta looked down and closed her eyes for a few moments. It was something she did often, a reflexive tic that acted as a switch between states of activity.

She let out a long, slow breath, then quickly typed out a message.

Searching for the ghost orchestra. The requirements to activate the quest aren't clear, so I've been trying different things.

The next message came without missing a beat.

Oh, that... The one where you can hear an orchestra playing but can't find it? I heard you can hear someone crying after you make an offering, so people think that's probably one of the activation switches. Is that the one you mean?

That's the one. Do you have any other information about it?

I don't know if I'd call any of that "information." Those are more like fishy rumors without a good source—but since it's been three days since the update with no progress, maybe you need a special item to advance. Wanna put that on the back burner and do a different quest with me? Apparently, you can get a decent katana from Kagome, Kagome, but the fright index is eight, and I'm too scared to try it alone...

All right. I'll come to you.

Thanks! You're the best, Nayu! I'll be waiting at the Monster Cat Teahouse.

Nayuta closed the window and stood up from the stone steps.

Her long black hair and the sleeves of her priestess robe swayed with the movement. She leaped all the way down to the bottom of the stairs.

Unlike in the real world, there was hardly any sensation of impact. Her limbs felt as light as wings.

Not all players experienced their bodily senses the same way. Nayuta was a warrior priestess, which meant that her jumping skills were top notch. Plus, she'd learned the evolved form of the skill Eight-Boat Leap, called Unrivaled Leap, which made her even lighter on her feet.

On the other hand, because she prioritized lightweight armor above all else, she'd narrowed down her options, resulting in weak defense and a short

weapon reach.

The typical strategy for warrior priestesses was to equip a long katana—the weapon type that gave them a job bonus—and wear heavy armor in order to compensate for their low constitution stat; it was *not* typical to focus on enhancing their innately powerful jumping ability. In that sense, Nayuta's build choices went against the grain.

Moving around was easier for her, but a moment's carelessness could be fatal, which made it a rather fringe build—not recommended if you were serious about high-level play.

Nayuta sped down an empty country road, lit by nothing but the moon, sliding along with phenomenal speed. At her side, a gust of wind sent the rice stalks in the paddies swaying.

The cool rustling was not enough to drown out the subtle, ghostly sound of music, however.

The lilting, dancing flute; the steady, faithful taiko drum; the stately, beautiful koto—each sound was full of vigor, overflowing with life, and yet the melody itself was somehow mournful.

As she flew down the path to the closest teleportation point, gazing out over the moonlit paddies, Nayuta noticed something strange and stopped.

It was a tiny roadside shrine honoring a traveler's god, one she hadn't seen coming the other way. The roof of the shrine only came up to her waist, and the stone statue housed inside was suitably small. A note had been placed as an offering toward the front of it.

This definitely wasn't here before... Was offering coins at the shrine down the road the switch that caused it to appear?

Nayuta was hesitant to take something that had been offered to the shrine, but it was very likely the note was a hint of some kind. She picked it up and read the message inside. It was written in ink with a brush by an unskilled hand.

I want to eat botamochi.

It was just the one line.

In fact, it was so simple that she felt compelled to turn it over, just to make sure there was nothing on the other side. There wasn't.

Perplexed, Nayuta examined the stone statue under the shrine's roof.

The head of the statue was carved into the crying face of a young child.

§

The Japanese-themed VRMMORPG *Asuka Empire* had unveiled its latest event, 108 Apparitions.

The event had been launched along with a new area called Ayakashi Alley and was set to include 108 different quests and events, large and small, to be released over the course of an entire year.

Domestically, *Asuka Empire* was second in player population only to *Alfheim Online*, but its user base had stagnated recently, and this major update was a bid to save the game's status.

With the spread of the Seed engine, full-dive-capable virtual worlds had become just as feasible for individuals to build as major companies, leading to a massive expansion in the number of options for players.

As a result, each game's existing userbase was steadily diffusing across a multitude of other games, forcing a few of the smaller ones to close down.

Despite its considerable size, *Asuka Empire* was feeling the pressure these days, too. This new event, then, was meant to draw in both developers and players.

108 Apparitions, as the name suggested, would consist of 108 quests in total. This number was split among the One Hundred Tales, the Seven Mysteries, and the Grand Finale to take place at the end. The majority of the One Hundred Tales would consist of works submitted by players.

The makers of the game were accepting user-created quests crafted in the Seed engine and would officially implement eight to ten per month from a pool of countless submissions. The winners not only had their work used in the game but were awarded a prize for their efforts. In other words, it was a quest-creating contest for the player base.

When this was announced, there had been a natural inclination among players to assume it was a desperate ploy by the developers to collect enough quests for the event. But given the explosive popularity of *The Seed*, once the contest began in earnest, the developers soon had so many excellent entries that those same players could hardly choose which quests they were most excited to play.

The developers even reached out to students at technical schools and university programming clubs, who eagerly agreed to work the project into graduate activities, summer vacation assignments, and the like.

It would have been a major task to create an entirely new game with its own system, environment, and art from scratch in such a short time. But *Asuka Empire's* assets and creation system meant all that could be skipped, leaving only story programming, cutscenes, and voice work to figure out.

For the entrants, the contest was a fun diversion, kind of like making a haunted house for their school's culture festival, but open for anyone to join.

The Seven Mysteries, on the other hand, were unrelated to the contest. These quests would be tie-ins with major companies offering consumer products such as snacks, fashion, soft drinks, figurines, and so on. Not only would their products appear in the quests, but items related to the game would also be developed and sold by those companies in the real world for a limited time.

This festival-like event was a major gamble for the developers. But now, three months in, it appeared to have wildly exceeded their expectations.

Unlike *SAO*, which was eventually shut down after several thousand people died, *ALO*, which had to change hands after its involvement in live human experimentation came to light, and *GGO*, in which the lurid (though less fatal) Death Gun incident had occurred, *Asuka Empire* had yet to suffer a major scandal. To this day, it maintained a reputation for delivering a safe and reliable experience.

"...The thing is, this event isn't really an unqualified smash success. For one thing, it's basically all horror, right? Everyone likes a horror movie or two, but when you have to watch one hundred and eight horror movies in a row, it's gonna get old. Sure, some of the quests are more comedic, but then you have

stuff like Vanquishing the Folding-Screen Tiger, which looks like a comedy but then pulls the rug out from under you!”

“...I haven’t beaten that one yet, but I hear it’s positively nightmarish.”

Nayuta was sitting in a corner of the Monster Cat Teahouse, listening to a round of complaints from her ninja friend Koyomi.

The Vanquishing the Folding-Screen Tiger quest was based on the well-known story of a quick-witted monk who, when challenged by the shogun to “vanquish the tiger painted on this folding screen,” had replied, “Then chase the tiger out of the screen for me so that I may do so.”

In the quest, players were taken to a Western-style mansion from the Taisho era in the early 1900s. The story began in a lighthearted and comical way, but halfway through, the tiger did indeed pop out of the folding screen and slaughter the NPCs in the room in a truly horrific and gruesome fashion.

The tiger then hid somewhere in the mansion, and players had to find a way to slay it, but every wrong step put them face-to-face with more mangled NPC corpses. What’s more, the tiger was designed to be too tough to kill in battle, resulting in a high-adrenaline horror scenario where a player’s only choice was to flee in terror.

In order to finish the quest, you had to trap the tiger and return it to the screen. Many players who tackled it came away with an increased fear of large predators, and some couldn’t even eat meat for weeks.

The quest’s designer had spared no detail, from the steam rising off freshly strewn blood and entrails to the marrow oozing from snapped bones. NPCs that had suffered fatal wounds but hadn’t yet died would shriek and wail in their final moments, adding a little spice to the hellish portrait of what had formerly been a humorous little folktale.

There were moral standards for what VRMMORPGs could depict, but each company implemented the rules differently and with varying strictness. *Asuka Empire*’s developers had announced that they would hold themselves to the standard set by horror movies for this event, and the tiger quest had apparently been right on the line of what they could get away with.

If there were any problems with content in the future, there was a good chance the authorities would step in to regulate it.

“...I heard they decided to tone down that quest, though...”

“All they did was add a setting to toggle the gore mosaic on or off and update the fright index from five to seven. Oh, and they added a dead-body sensor that you can use if you’re worried about having a heart attack. But it costs money to rent—three hundred yen per day. It’s a total rip-off! That story’s not even spooky or mysterious, it’s just straight-up splatter horror! And the rewards are so tiny compared to the trauma... Open wide, Nayuta.”

Trying to calm herself down, or perhaps to prevent any flashbacks from the quest, Koyomi picked up a *warabi mochi* on a toothpick and held it out toward Nayuta’s face. Nayuta felt a bit awkward, like she was some animal being fed, but she opened her mouth anyway.

The wonderfully sticky texture of the mochi was the perfect complement to the light, nutty sweetness of the toasted soybean flour dusted on the outside. The sensation was almost the same as that of eating a real *warabi mochi*.

“...Mmph... And the Kagome, Kagome quest you want to try next has a fright index of eight?” Nayuta asked. “That’s even higher than the tiger quest. Are you sure you want to do this?”

Koyomi scowled. Her lively expressions, childlike features, and four-foot-seven height made her seem quite young, but as a matter of fact, she was a grown adult several years older than Nayuta.

“That’s the problem...but the fright index the devs assign to these quests isn’t always consistent, and according to reviews, this one isn’t as high on the gore factor, so I’m thinking it might suit me more. Plus, the reward for finishing it is the ninja blade Void. It’s supposed to be good against spirit-type enemies, so I really want to get my hands on it. Please, Nayuta! Help me! You’re not bothered by scary stuff, right?!”

Nayuta wasn’t impervious to horror. She just had a bit more resistance than most—or maybe she was simply too dense to feel afraid. None of the quests so far in this event had scared her.

All it took for Koyomi, on the other hand, was a few skeletal samurai to chase her around, and her screams were practically ultrasonic. As her friend, Nayuta felt a little bad sending her off into a spooky situation all alone.

“I don’t mind helping, of course...but my character build is kind of weird, so I don’t know if I’ll be much use in battle. Is there no one else you can ask?”

Koyomi cackled. “Oh, very funny. You’re the toughest player I know, Nayu. Also, the recommended level for the quest isn’t very high. I could probably beat it on my own, but everyone says it’s scary... I don’t want to wander into a haunted house alone, and I’d feel awkward if I got spooked and wound up hugging a guy. Plus, you’re always cool and in control, and you seem so reliable... See? Please!”

“All right. I could use a ghost-fighting weapon, too. I’ll go with you.”

Nayuta had planned to agree right from the start. Theirs was a give-and-take relationship, after all.

“Thank you! That’s why I love asking you, Nayu—you’re such a pushover! Open wide!”

With a huge smile, Koyomi offered Nayuta another *warabi mochi*.

“...I’m not doing this for the mochi... Oh, were you going to eat some of this *mamekan*, too?”

Nayuta used a wooden spoon to scoop up some sweetened agar jelly and red peas from a little bowl and held it up to Koyomi’s mouth. The other girl wasted no time chomping down on the spoon.

“Mmm! Delicious!”

“...Glad to hear it,” Nayuta said, wondering if Koyomi was truly the older one here.

The Monster Cat Teahouse was a popular spot in Ayakashi Alley, but there were only a few customers in its cramped interior. This didn’t mean the business was in trouble, however—in order to preserve the proper atmosphere, the game had implemented an instanced shop system.

What appeared to be a single building was split into numerous identical

copies on the inside. Visitors were divided among the many copies, so no matter when you arrived, the shop was never jam packed. If you were meeting up with others, all it took was a quick registration outside using your in-game friend list to get matched to the same space.

It was also common to rent the place out for a fee and hold online gatherings there.

Since nothing killed the mood in a haunted house faster than having it choked with crowds, the developers had wisely imposed a similar instance system for many of the quests in the yearlong event.

Instances came in four types.

“Dares” were solo adventures that had to be entered alone.

“Linked fates,” on the other hand, were limited to a single party.

“Chance encounters” could be experienced with other players, as long as their number was under the required limit.

Lastly, “cosmic mysteries” were areas with no player limit; theoretically, all the players in the game could gather there at once.

Many of the stores in Ayakashi Alley were treated as chance encounters in order to reduce crowding.

The Vanquishing the Folding-Screen Tiger quest that had traumatized Koyomi was a single-player dare, while the Ghost Orchestra quest Nayuta had been investigating earlier and the Kagome, Kagome quest she’d agreed to help with were both linked fates limited to a single party.

Because of this system, even regular customers of the same business rarely saw each other unless they specifically tried to meet up.

On the other hand, because there were so few customers in the same space, players tended to form connections with the strangers they met inside these cozy little shops. It was just two months ago, right after the Monster Cat Teahouse opened, that Nayuta and Koyomi had first met.

It had all started when the *nekomata*, the strange split-tailed cats working at the teahouse, got the two girls’ orders wrong, giving Nayuta’s *mamekan* to

Koyomi and Koyomi's *warabi mochi* to Nayuta.

This was not a simple mistake but a programmed event that was arranged to happen a certain percentage of the time, to add a bit of character to the *nekomata*. It had happened to Nayuta and Koyomi again after that from time to time, and by now it was simply a part of the shop's charm.

The *nekomata* didn't apologize when this happened, instead simply looking on with curiosity. These teahouse workers were not attractive young girls with cat ears, incidentally, but realistic-looking cats that walked on two legs.

They came in a variety of breeds and colors, including a black cat, a tortoiseshell, a tabby, a Russian blue, a Scottish fold, and a Munchkin. All of them looked cute wearing their matching *happi* coats. That said, they were aloof and distracted, and they often disregarded their jobs to nap around the teahouse. Sometimes they even sat on customers' laps like they belonged there.

They never spoke a word, simply stopping by to take orders and bring out the food. Some fishy eyewitness reports held that back in the kitchen, an elderly, sage-like Norwegian Forest cat silently pored over the traditional Japanese sweets the shop specialized in.

In the virtual world, no one had to worry about cat allergies, and a large number of visitors came specifically to see the cats. Nayuta and Koyomi had come for that reason, found that they got along, and begun to form parties together.

Just then, the shop's wooden sliding door clattered open, ushering in a new customer.

A black cat trotted past the pair of girls on its way to greet the visitor.

"Pardon me, I was hoping to ask for directions," said an old traveling monk. He wore a woven straw hat on his head and gaiters on his feet, and he held a pewter staff—in other words, he had the starting equipment of the monk job.

If he went the fighting route, he could specialize as a warrior-monk or a renegade, and if he focused on magic, he could become a mendicant or a high priest. Still, compared to flashy jobs like samurai and ninja, monk was

undoubtedly less sexy. Plus, it was quite rare to see an older person, given the general trend in player ages.

When registering a character in *Asuka Empire* for the first time, the AmuSphere performed a body scan, so most of the characters reflected how their players looked in the real world.

Once scanned, you could change your facial features to a certain extent, or you could adjust your figure by padding your clothes beforehand, for example—but it was quite hard to change one's age or sex.

As part of the growing diversity of VRMMORPGs, attractions for elderly players were more numerous than ever, although they tended to be more like experiences than games, such as simulated train journeys in a sleeper car, mountain climbing, fishing, and living in the countryside. Most elderly users opted for these experiences, and only a small minority took part in battle-centric games.

Reduced strength could be compensated for with gear and bonuses, but there was no helping reaction speed. And in battles, reaction time was often the single biggest factor separating victory from defeat.

The elderly monk carefully took off his woven straw hat. He was the very picture of rustic simplicity. In fact, he seemed more like a side character in a samurai movie than a player in a game.

The black cat in the *happi* coat stared up at the old man. He looked down at the cat, somewhat bewildered.

“...A cat...? Er...well...pardon me, but can you understand me? I was hoping to ask for directions...”

Koyomi shot to her feet at once. “Sir, those cats are just empty AIs. They can’t handle any kind of fancy conversation! Where do you want to go? I can show you, if I know where it is.”

Nayuta was shy, and she couldn’t help but marvel at the way Koyomi didn’t hesitate for a second to help a person in need, even in a game.

“Is this your first time in Ayakashi Alley?” she asked. “Around here, there are warp zones right in the middle of roads... If it’s a registered location you’re

after, you should be able to find it in the navigation menu. But I don't suppose it's registered, is it?"

The elderly monk seemed startled to be greeted by two young women, but then he recovered, remembering that he was not in the real world. He smiled and bowed, then strode over to where they were seated.

"Ah, thank you so much. My name is Yanagi. As you've guessed, I'm new to all of this... I'm looking for a place around here called the Three-Leaf Detective Agency. Do you know of it?"

"Oh, I'm Nayuta. This ninja is Koyomi, and, um...you said you're looking for a detective agency?" she repeated, looking at her friend for help. "Have you heard of it, Koyomi?"

"Nope, never... A detective agency sounds a little out of place for this setting, too... Are you sure you're talking about *Asuka Empire*, sir?"

Since the expansion of The Seed, more and more games were coming out every day, including relatively niche ones with small player bases. Surely at least *one* of them featured detectives, but that element didn't seem to fit the old-fashioned Japanese setting of *Asuka Empire*, and there was no player job called detective.

"Well, yes, I believe so," said the man. "Though it seems it's more of a hobby than anything... Pardon my intrusion. If you don't know of it, I'll try elsewhere..."

He started to turn away, but Koyomi held him back. "Wait, wait, wait! I didn't say I had no idea! If it's not in the navigation system, and it's an individual player using a private space for some special purpose..."

"...Yes, I suppose it would have to be *there*," Nayuta agreed, catching on.

She was talking about the backstreet area of Ayakashi Alley: Yoiyami Street. Rental space was notably cheaper there than on the main street, and many individuals ran their own boutique businesses in this dark and sketchy-looking area—some for profit, others merely as a hobby.

The developers had envisioned it as a crowded shopping arcade on festival day—packed with open-air stalls. But when you added the horror element, the

impression became much more chaotic, and in reality, it more closely resembled a black market.

Because of the number of shops and their high turnover rate, most of them didn't bother adding their locations to the navigation system. That said, it was an area where you could find many strange items and services for sale.

"...Sir, would this agency happen to be in Yoiyami Street?"

"That's exactly the place. I feel certain it's around here," said the old monk, his face creasing into a relieved smile.

Koyomi bounced up from her chair. "Perfect! Shall we show him the way before we do our quest, Nayuta?"

"No complaints from me."

Yoiyami Street would be hard to find for a beginner, after all. Simply taking him there would be easier than trying to explain the route. They stood up and selected the payment option from the player menu.

The *nekomata* shopkeeper deftly operated an antique register to settle their bills, its forked tail swaying gently as it worked. If they simply walked out of the shop, the funds would be withdrawn automatically, but paying at the register was a matter of aesthetics. Plus, it meant you would receive a free hard candy. During special campaigns, you might also get a lottery ticket for a drawing, which could net you a piece of rare gear if you were lucky.

"Oh, right... Is it possible to get some *botamochi* to go?" Nayuta asked.

As she stared at the glossy dark fur of the black cat behind the register, her thoughts had drifted back to the message at that little roadside shrine. It had probably been a prompt for an offering.

The cat, itself as round as a *botamochi*, turned to a creepy-looking window shaped like a cat's mouth to the side of the counter and brought out some *botamochi* wrapped in bamboo leaves. Nayuta took the treats, which consisted of a core of glutinous rice packed in sweet dark bean paste, and put them into her item bag through her menu.

"What's that? A little afternoon snack?" asked Koyomi.

“No, it’s an offering. I might need it for a quest.”

The *nekomata* in its *happi* coat waved goodbye to them, showing off its toe pads as the group left the shop.

The old monk bowed his head again as they walked. “I’m very sorry to have interrupted your conversation back there...”

“Oh, no, don’t mention it,” Koyomi said, eternally chipper. “Besides, you’d have a hard time finding this place on your first try!”

Nayuta, who was not blessed with Koyomi’s conversational charm, added quietly, “Searching for Yoiyami Street was a tutorial quest for the 108 Apparitions event. After it was unlocked, the street was divided into rental spaces for player shops. I’m guessing the agency you’re looking for is one of them.”

“Aha, I see... The person who told me about it said, ‘It might be hard to find, but I can have an acquaintance show you there tomorrow.’ However, I assumed that if I just went on my own, I could figure it out. I was naïve, clearly. I’m very glad I was able to meet some nice folks willing to help me out.”

Koyomi cackled. “Right? Nayu’s so helpful. If I were a man, I’d have married her already. Actually, I think I’d prefer to be the bride... Come on, Nayu—marry me already! Take care of me and pay for all my needs... I don’t wanna go to work on Monday... I’m sick of being buried on the train because I’m so short...”

She purposely made her voice smaller and smaller as she spoke.

Nayuta, who was used to this by now, petted the other girl’s head like she would a child’s. “You know you’re talking to a student, right? Be a good adult and go to your job like you’re supposed to.”

“Yeah, but...the men at my job are all either married or really old, there are no cute girls or boys there... I’ve done my best for twelve months, but I’ve lost the will to go on... Plus, the end of the year is insanely busy, and you’re the only person who brings me any relief, Nayu... Will you marry me already? I bet you would look amazing in a wedding dress.”

Koyomi was babbling nonsense, and Nayuta took it all in stride.

“I’ll consider it,” she said, “if you make a salary of over ten million yen a year.”

“Really?! I know you’re lying, but just hearing it has given me enough energy to get through another week! Life’s not worth living without a dream or some hope for the future! Even if that dream is a fantasy with no chance of happening!”

“...I actually like that attitude of yours, Koyomi. Though sometimes it makes me a little sad.”

“Oh really? I think that’s love. Yep, no doubt about it. First love, in fact.”

The elderly monk finally burst into laughter at their odd-couple routine. “Oops, pardon me... It’s my first time in an online game, and I didn’t know how things worked... But I think I understand why my grandson was so enamored with it now. Interacting with other people is part of the fun, I suppose.”

Koyomi whirled around like a puppy dog. “Awww, so you started the game to play with your grandson?”

“Well, not exactly...but...perhaps you’re right,” said the old man cryptically. “It’s a rather complex situation, and for certain reasons, I need to ask this detective for help.”

Nayuta kept silent, not wanting to pry into the man’s private life when they’d just met. If he wanted to tell them, he would, and she wasn’t going to pressure him. Yanagi gave the pair a little bow of apology.

The women led the elderly monk around the side and to the back of the Monster Cat Teahouse. The sky was dark, but even those parts of town without visible lights still glowed with a fuzzy illumination, so there was no problem seeing where you were going.

Ayakashi Alley was modeled on the urban areas surrounding the castle in Edo period Tokyo. The word *alley* referred to a narrow path extending off a main road, but in the case of Ayakashi Alley, it was meant to conjure up images of an entire town removed from the real world.

The area was so large, in fact, that the term *alley* did it very little justice. It included such creepy landmarks and locations as the Sakura Hanging Tree, the Kappa’s Canal, and the Tunnel to Hell.

The capital city of *Asuka Empire*, Kiyomihara, was based on Asuka Kiyomihara Palace, as well as Heijo-kyo and Heian-kyo, each of which had served as Japan's capital in the 700s. The city was filled with Buddhist architecture and graceful, stately noble residences. Ayakashi Alley, by contrast, was a place for commoners, with a run-down, creepy vibe enhancing the mood.

Regardless of the actual time of day, it was always night in Ayakashi Alley. At the moment, it was early afternoon on Saturday. Still, darkness hung overhead, and the sun would never rise to break it.

Faces appeared in stains and markings on wooden fences, sometimes even changing expression. It was common, too, for pale hands to reach up out of the muck underfoot. The massive castle visible in the distance never seemed to get any closer, and every now and then, a monstrous oni face was visible in the sky.

There were so many different apparitions incorporated into the area that if, by chance, a "real" unexplained phenomenon were to occur, no one would even notice.

The trio briefly greeted an eerie, faceless *noppera-bo*, then came to a stop at a small shrine located in the gap between one run-down old mansion and another. To either side of the torii gate was a beckoning lucky cat, instead of the usual lion-dog or fox statue.

This place was known as the cat-god shrine, and it was dedicated to a rather sketchy-sounding deity called Kedamahaku Neko no Mitama no Kami, or "Soul of the Hairball-Vomiting Cat." Next to the offering box someone had placed a fragrant *taiyaki*, a fish-shaped pastry stuffed with piping hot sweet bean paste.

"Are we taking a detour...?" Yanagi asked uncertainly.

"Nope, this is our destination!" said Koyomi, grinning impishly.

After passing through the torii, they bowed twice to the shrine, clapped twice, then bowed twice again—and when they turned around, the area beyond the torii was a wide, straight road that hadn't been there when they'd walked through a moment ago.

A plethora of orange paper lanterns lined the road, and under them was a chaotic mass of stalls selling all sorts of wares and experiences: colorful glass

wind chimes, *oden* hot pots, *takoyaki*, cotton candy, ramen, yo-yo fishing...

And through this miscellany, a swarm of customers streamed back and forth like a heat haze.

It wasn't just stalls, either; there were also proper stores built on either side of the road with their first floors reserved for business—a scene reminiscent of Japan in the early twentieth century. The overall effect was eerie and lively all at once, the street bustling with a chaotic energy all its own.

Yanagi was stunned by the instantaneous shift in their environs. “Wh-what is this...?”

“The interior of the shrine is a teleport point. Performing two bows, two claps, and then two more bows serves as the switch. You do the same thing on your way out.”

Ordinarily, the proper etiquette at a Shinto shrine is two bows, two claps, one bow. In the case of the cat-god, it was two-two-two for “mew-mew-mew.”

The trio started walking down Yoiyami Street, soaking in the festival atmosphere. The players around them came in a variety of jobs—samurai, ninja, *onmyoji* sorcerer—but none of them seemed particularly out of the ordinary. The shops on either side, however, featured weird, eye-catching decorations and eerily dressed shopkeepers.

Some wore masks meant to look like ogres or foxes, while others were actual foxes or tanuki; these were the cute ones. Others were creepy *yokai* like *tenome* with eyes on their hands, female *jorogumo* with spider parts, fallen warriors with exposed entrails, shadow-people dressed all in black, and others guaranteed to make little children burst into tears.

There was also an oddly adorable little *keukegen*, covered in fur, which bounced over to Koyomi and pulled on her hand. Nearby was a shop sign that read KEUKE-KEN RAMEN.

Koyomi smiled awkwardly at the creature and pulled her hand away. “Sorry, not today. We’re busy right now. But soon!”

“...Are you a regular?”

“Yeah. There’s always hair in the broth...or fur, I guess?”

There was always a catch. All of the shops on Yoiyami Street were *wrong* in some way or another. Any regular patrons, then, had to be a little off themselves.

“So we’re looking for a detective agency, huh...? Let’s see, what’s this? ‘Evil-repelling charms sold h’re’?” Koyomi said, reading a sign as slowly as a child learning her letters.

“Even the writing uses *ye olde* spelling,” remarked Nayuta.

Yanagi, meanwhile, had fallen silent—the chaos of the place had overwhelmed him, and he glanced around in wonder.

“Oh, they sell foot massages here,” said Koyomi.

“What’s the point of a virtual foot massage?” Nayuta replied, incredulous.

“Ooh, a horror staple: human meat buns.”

“In very poor taste, if you ask me.”

“‘*Chocolat de framboise.*’”

“Why the heck is that here...?”

“‘Private Viewing Booths.’”

“...I’m surprised the devs allowed that.”

“Wait, I read that wrong! It says ‘Private Vulpine Booths.’”

“Now I’m kind of curious.”

“‘Puppy-Style Bear Stew.’”

“...Isn’t there a kind of soba like that?”

“‘Kitty-Style Soba.’”

“And those shops are side by side? Weird.”

“‘Three-Leaf Detective Agency.’”

“What would anyone be investigating around here... Oh!”

“‘The Cat-God Worship Research Society.’”

“Koyomi, you went too far. This is it,” said Nayuta, grabbing the back of Koyomi’s collar like a cat’s scruff.

The aged wooden sign hung over an entrance just barely wide enough for a single person to slip through. The agency itself seemed to be on the second floor of the building. It was pitch black ahead, only the steep wooden stairs visible.

Yanagi smiled with relief. “Ah, it seems this is the place. Thank you both very much. I certainly couldn’t have found it on my own.”

“...Hmm. There’s a sign out,” said Koyomi, “but...”

“...Are you sure this is the place?” asked Nayuta. She and Koyomi could see a dead body hanging from the rafters through the second-floor window. “...That’s another display in very poor taste.”

“I’m sure that’s just decoration to maintain the feel of the area...”

There was no guarantee that the inside of the room would match what they saw through the window. The details of the exteriors were generally decided and implemented by the developers in order to maintain Yoiyami Street’s intended atmosphere. But if the resident of a space arranged the inside in a way that met the developers’ visual standards, they would allow it to be viewed through the windows as is. As a result, you couldn’t tell if what you were seeing was accurate to the inside until you saw it for yourself.

“This looks sketchy as hell...,” said Koyomi, fretting. “Hey, Nayu, doesn’t this seem like the sort of place a secret quest would spawn? Detective agency or no, I’m a little worried about letting this helpless old man go in on his own.”

Nayuta had to agree. “Um...Mr. Yanagi? If you don’t mind me asking, are you still level-1?”

“I believe so. I logged in for the first time today, and I decided to put off the tutorial until later.”

Nayuta and Koyomi shared a look. If that was true, it was impressive he’d even managed to reach the Monster Cat Teahouse.

“...If you don’t mind, would you like us to accompany you in there?”

The old monk's face broke into a grin. "Oh, goodness, look what I've gotten you into... Your kindness is too much for this old man." He clasped his hands together and bowed deeply. It was clear that he'd been quite intimidated by the thought of going in alone.

Nayuta strode into the building and up the dark staircase, the walls on either side lined with wooden slats. From the rear, Koyomi marveled at her steadfast courage.

"This is where Nayu truly shines," she said. "She's so dashing. I can't help falling for her..."

"Being in the back doesn't mean you're more likely to survive. What do you think a rear guard is for?"

"I'm not talking about survivability... I just mean, like, dark places are scary! Don't you agree? And speaking of risking your life, warrior priestess is a frontline job, so you'd normally be wearing tough metal armor. It'd be one thing if you had an arts-focused job like exorcist, of course. But you're the only warrior priestess I've seen with monster cleavage right out in the open like that..."

"...It's not out in the open; I have an undershirt on. Now, please stop spewing lewd comments. And as for my chest size...that was just a character setup mistake."

When a player created their account, their character automatically reflected data from the AmuSphere's scan of their body. Nayuta could have worn a binder on top to slim down her figure, but she hadn't been thinking that far ahead. She'd also been scanned during the summer, so she was wearing lighter clothing, which allowed the device a more accurate look at her figure. She hadn't realized her mistake for several days, until the stares became unavoidably apparent.

She was considering whether to delete her account and try again when she got lucky and scored a June Breeze *Kosode*, a rare robe with a high evasion bonus, at which point she was too far in to start over.

"Yes, I know you're wearing an undershirt...", muttered Koyomi, "but that kind of skintight, fire-resistant sportswear top is basically lingerie. I mean, the

way it accentuates your outline is outrageous.”

“You’re making a big deal out of nothing. Besides, heat-and lightning-resistant inner wear is standard issue for ninjas like you, right? If you want to prioritize speed and agility, this is what you have to work with.”

Koyomi prodded Nayuta in the back. “And there’s your problem! If you wanted speed, why didn’t you just pick ninja? They have the highest job bonus for mobility and decent attack power, so they’re really popular and easy to play. Warrior priestess is a job for people who think ninjas don’t have enough armor. You know that, right?”

Nayuta had a reason for her choice; she just felt a little ashamed of it. As they climbed the steps, she murmured, “I just thought...the *hakama* was cute...”

Koyomi hung her head. “I’m sorry... I take back what I said about you being dashing. You’re *adorable*. That’s so girlish of you... And here I am focused on stats and efficiency. Can I even call myself a girl...?”

“No... I was raised to be athletic, so I don’t think I’m very girly...”

“Oh, please. You’re super feminine. I mean, the way you shake and jiggle in combat... It’s like *ba-boing, ba-boing*... Sometimes I wonder if you’ve got your own special physics simulator.”

“Please, Koyomi, stop staring at me with those glassy eyes and making depraved comments. I don’t know how to respond.”

It appeared Koyomi had some real-world trauma when it came to this subject.

As they spoke, Nayuta reached the top of the stairs and opened the wooden door blocking their way. Faint orange light spilled down the steps.

The space beyond the doorway was much larger than they had imagined. The ceiling was unusually high, enough to cause a slight but noticeable shift in the airflow and echo.

Right across from the doorway sat a huge black cat. It was much, much larger than an ordinary cat. Even sitting, it was at least ten feet tall. This combined with the extra-high ceiling made its presence positively oppressive.

Of course, it was not a real cat. Its body, which was only twice the size of its

head, was in a Zen meditation position, with its front paws folded and its back paws in the lotus position. In other words, it was a decoration—similar to a Buddha statue.

The space in which it was installed was more like the main building of a temple or shrine than the upstairs of some storefront in a shopping district. It felt as though they had been warped yet again.

The cat's gold-painted eyes held neither benevolence, nor the strength to dispel worldly desires, nor the will to bring salvation to all living things. Instead, they were filled only with a catlike cunning.

The holy light depicted behind its back was in the shape of a paw print, the base of the statue was a cat food can, and the lanterns hung around it were made to look like balls of yarn. The attention to detail was quite thorough.

Nayuta and Koyomi could only stare in wonder at the bizarre cat-Buddha statue.

"...Uh, what is this?" Nayuta asked, stopping cold in front of the piece.

"Wow... Blessings be upon us," said Koyomi, promptly putting her hands together in prayer. Yanagi, meanwhile, found a sign standing in the darkness.

"On the right is the Cat-God Worship Research Society, and on the left is the Three-Leaf Detective Agency... It seems they share the upstairs here. I suppose this cat statue is supposed to decorate the entryway..."

There were doors on the left and right. The right door was decorated with a carving of a cat with wide-open, gleaming eyes. The left had only a small wooden placard that read OPEN FOR BUSINESS. The decoration on the door to the right was so ridiculously cute it had surpassed innocence and begun to look sinister.

Nayuta lowered her head, closed her eyes, took a deep breath, then knocked on the door to the left.

"It's unlocked. Come right in," said a young man's voice from within. It was surprisingly clear and resonant.

Detectives can be divided into two basic categories.

The first type are realists who take jobs for the money and treat their work like any other career.

The second type are romantics, who chose their line of work out of admiration for the detectives they read about in fiction.

It's easy to tell them apart. The former don't look like detectives—they make their identity known only for promotional and business purposes. The rest of the time, they melt into the bustle of the city, quickly and accurately getting to the bottom of adultery and background investigations.

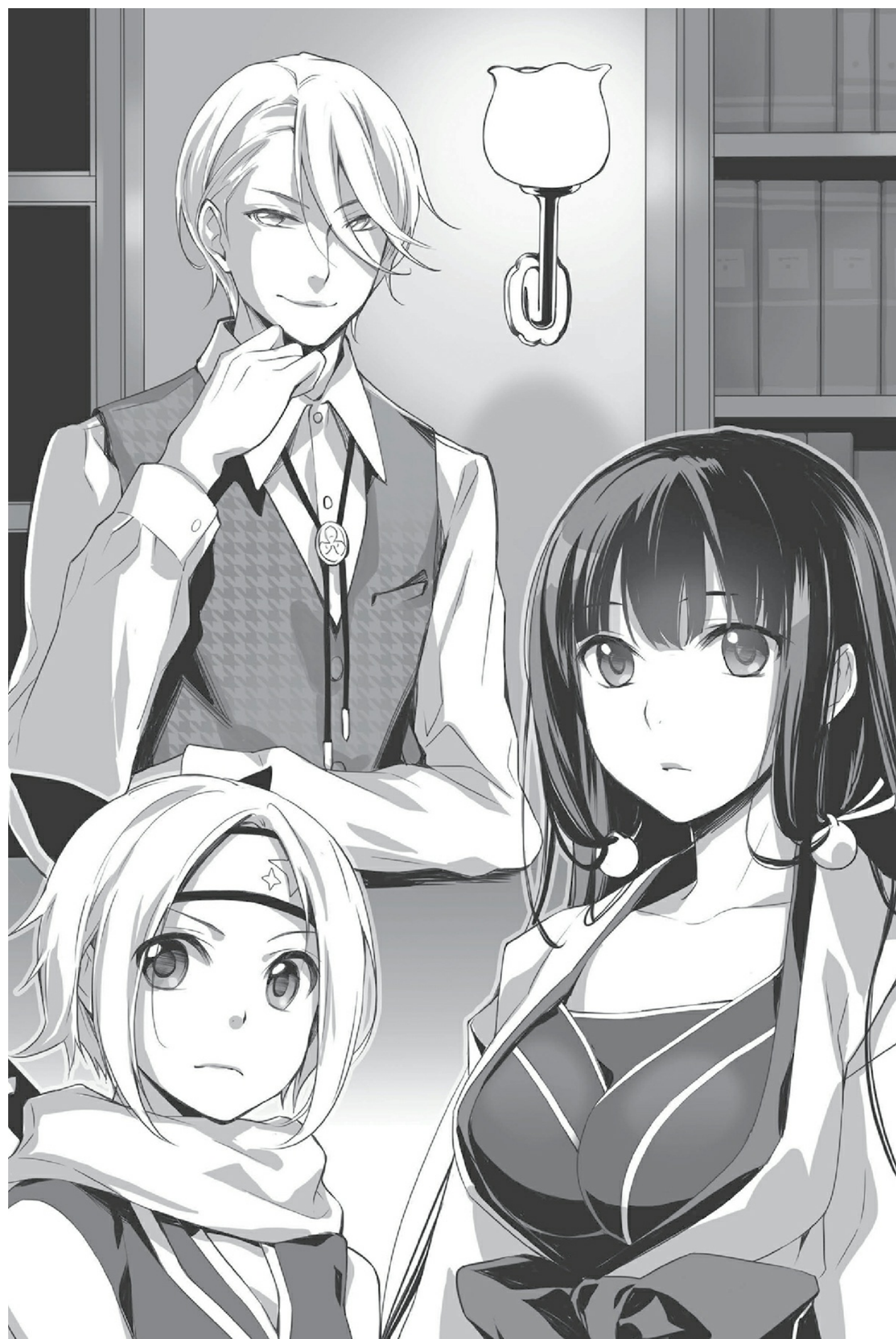
The latter start from the look, donning a finely tailored suit or patterned kimono and carrying around a custom-ordered cane or a favorite pipe—the prop doesn't matter, as long as it makes them look like a detective. Their appearance guarantees to the layman that they are what they claim to be, and it is this image that they use to sell their services.

And sure enough, the owner of the Three-Leaf Detective Agency was absolutely, undoubtedly the latter.

The button-up shirt, bolo tie, and vest were one thing—there was no official job class in the game called detective, but it was possible to buy Western-style clothes such as these in Kiyomihara for fashion purposes—but when it came to the invernness coat and deerstalker hat hung up on the wall, the intent was obvious. No matter how commonplace these items might be, put together like this, they were obviously an attempt to imitate the world's most famous detective.

There was also a bookshelf packed tight with books, a glass case containing implements for chemical experiments, an aging skeletal model, and a vintage gramophone—no expense had been spared to create the appropriate atmosphere.

Of course, this being a game, the books were only decorations and probably blank on the inside. It wasn't even clear if you could remove individual books from the shelf. There was no point to conducting chemical experiments here either, and the music playing through the gramophone was just a live radio stream of a horse race.



According to the broadcast, the top finisher in Saturday's sixth race was the popular Paw Kaiser. Satisfied with this result, the young detective happily turned off the gramophone-shaped radio.

Sitting behind a mahogany desk that gleamed like hard candy under the lamplight, the owner of the agency offered them a graceful smile.

"Welcome to my humble establishment. I am Klever the detective. Please don't be alarmed by the cat-Buddha statue next door. The Cat-God Worship Research Society placed it there without my permission. Unfortunately, they are rather...eccentric."

Klever's voice was as clear and crisp as an actor's. He was thin, but his features were pleasant. The way his eyes narrowed as he evaluated his visitors was somehow foxlike.

Wasn't there a monster fox like him in The Fox's Wedding Parade...? Nayuta wondered, recalling a quest she'd done with Koyomi a few days earlier.

The shape-shifting fox they'd met in that quest hadn't been dressed in Western clothes, but he, too, had taken the form of a rather sexy young man with slender features and narrow eyes. Koyomi, who tended to be drawn in by good looks, had been fascinated by him. But he hadn't been Nayuta's type, and once the fox was revealed as an enemy, she'd vanquished him in no time and gotten a big combo bonus to boot.

After that, Koyomi had asked her with a straight face, "Do you just hate handsome men or something?" But Nayuta didn't have any baggage like that.

Klever the detective continued smoothly, "Well, Mr. Yanagi, our go-between sent me a message a little earlier about your request, and I think I've got the gist of it. They are traveling at the moment and were very sorry that they couldn't full-dive in to show you the way... If you had gotten in touch with me directly, I would have gone to Kiyomihara to meet you."

Yanagi, who had taken a seat on an antique sofa, hung his head and smiled awkwardly. "Well, I thought I would stretch my legs and get a look at the game for myself. I just didn't count on getting lost at my age. I'd never have found my way without the help of these young ladies."

“Well, everyone deserves help when they need it!” said Koyomi, smirking and puffing out her chest. “Oh... But I was also curious about the detective and concerned the whole thing might be a scam. I was even ready to turn you over to the actual police if it came to that.”

The detective chuckled at her brazenly rude suggestion. “A scam? You don’t think much of me, do you? But I understand your skepticism. As a matter of fact, the developers accepted my business application under the category of tourism rather than as a private detective. You know how RPGs often advertise a place as a pub, but it’s actually more of a temp agency on the inside? It’s like that.”

Nayuta was puzzled. A detective in an online game was odd enough, but a tourism business didn’t make much sense, either.

“Tourism...? In a VRMMORPG?”

“Is that surprising to you? I’m fairly popular among English-speaking players. It takes time and money to travel to Japan for sightseeing, you know. It’s much easier and cheaper to get your fix in a Japanese-themed online game. And the AmuSphere is very good at delivering what people want. Good food, hot spring baths, ninja acrobatics, cherry blossoms—they’re all fairly close to the real thing. You can even experience that rarest of real-life events: a trek up Mount Fuji on a clear day without foot traffic. And as an interpreter and guide, I accompany my clients on their preferred quests, or just show them around the best spots in the game.”

A black *nekomata* appeared out of nowhere, walking on two legs, and set down cups of black tea for the guests. Apparently, Klever had the same type of business-use bot as the Monster Cat Teahouse.

Klever scooped some cubes of sugar into his tea as he continued his self-introduction. “But not all of my clients are from other countries. I do receive requests from domestic business-related parties as well, though not many. People who don’t play games but are looking into possible product placement or crossover promotion and would like to scout things out first, for example.”

He glanced at a corner of the office, where he’d hung up a poster promoting a famous beverage company that had announced a tie-in with the 108

Apparitions event.

“For clients like that, I can analyze the in-game market and trends and offer business advice. In that sense, I’m more of a consultant than a tour guide or a detective, but...basically, I serve as a scapegoat that company representatives can point to in order to escape responsibility. If the project is a bust, they can blame it on me, an outsider, and retain their standing within the company.”

Koyomi, who worked an office job, made a face. “Eugh... Not even trying to sugarcoat it...”

The detective chuckled. “I simply mean that some of my clients approach me with that plan in the back of their minds. Of course, if the project seems likely to fail, I won’t accept their business in the first place. So...now that I’ve explained the nature of my work, let’s move on to the matter of Mr. Yanagi’s request,” he said formally, turning to the man on the couch. Yanagi nodded gravely. “According to the message from our go-between, you wish to ‘complete a particular newly added quest within a week’—but if you’ll pardon me, I’d like to confirm the payment amount first. I think that idiot may have mistakenly added a few zeroes.”

Yanagi quickly shook his head in a panic. “No, I’m fairly certain it’s correct. It should be a two-hundred-thousand deposit, then two hundred thousand per person per day, with one million paid upon successful completion within a week...”

Nayuta could scarcely believe her ears. Koyomi’s cheek twitched subtly.

“...Sorry, what?” asked Koyomi. “Is that in-game currency? You’re not talking about real money, are you?”

The detective sighed. “I only make deals in yen, dollars, or euros. Mr. Yanagi, pardon me, but—are you serious? Of course, the content of your request will affect the price, but since I’m not undertaking any of the risks real detectives face, I keep my rates fairly low. Helping someone complete a quest is usually about ten thousand yen per person per day, with a completion reward of no more than fifty thousand or so. And if you’re talking about one of the major quests like the Seven Mysteries, just paying me more money isn’t likely to get you better results... But you wanted help with Ghost Orchestra, right? Nobody’s

beaten that one yet, but if the official announcement is to be believed, it shouldn't be that hard."

Nayuta's shoulders twitched. *Wait...Ghost Orchestra?* That was the very quest she'd been attempting earlier.

Because only about two or three new quests were unveiled each week, it was common for people to attempt the same quest at the same time. But Nayuta couldn't begin to guess what Yanagi was after, hiring a detective at an astronomical price to complete a quest whose rewards were still unknown.

Among that week's quests, players were focused primarily on The Werewolf's Forest, which had a rare reward already announced. Virtually all players were putting off Ghost Orchestra until later, since even the way to activate it was still unclear.

Yanagi bowed deeply. "I sincerely hope you will consider helping me. It might be a high amount to pay, but there are circumstances that make it very important that I clear it within the next week..."

"What kind of circumstances are those?!" Koyomi exclaimed shrilly. "Nobody goes around paying over a million yen to beat some quest in a game!"

Klever held up his hand to calm her. "Miss, the rules of my business state that a client does not need to reveal anything they wish to keep to themselves—and if that discretion has anything to do with the price offered, then there is no need to pry. I will merely perform my job honestly in a manner that befits such an offer."

"Yeah, that sounds cool and all..., " said Koyomi. "But isn't that just a fancy way of saying you've been blinded by money?" She was merciless, but Klever merely brushed it off with a slight smile.

"I won't deny it. Money is a useful yardstick with which to measure a person's sincerity and intent. And if this elderly gentleman is willing to spend such an amount to have his wish fulfilled, who are you girls to deny him that?"

"...On the contrary, I'd like to remind you of another little saying: 'If it sounds too good to be true, it usually is'... Why are you in such a rush, Grandpa? The quest isn't going anywhere—you've got plenty of time to work at it. And

besides, if you asked, *we'd* help you for free. You don't need to pay this sketchy detective."

Nayuta, who had been listening, finally spoke up. "I was just attempting Ghost Orchestra myself. I have a hint as to how to activate it, so if all goes well, we might be able to wrap it up within a few days."

Before the elderly monk could reply, the detective said, "Oh, I see. Actually, that's perfect. The truth is, Mr. Yanagi, there is a major problem with my accepting your request, and it's also the reason my schedule is so wide open right now. Normally, my assistant helps handle the battle part of my duties, but they won't be able to log in for another ten days due to personal reasons. I was planning to hire a temporary bodyguard if necessary, but if these young ladies are willing to help, that would solve the problem."

Koyomi abruptly stood up. "Oh! You're trying to rope us into this because you don't want to let your golden goose get away, huh?!"

"Please allow me to finish. I'm not *that* desperate for money. Mr. Yanagi, let's hold off on signing the contract until Monday. Spend this weekend attempting the quest with these ladies first. I'll accompany you for fact-finding purposes, but I won't require any payment. And if it's such an easy quest that it can be beaten in just two days, then it's not worth accepting such a high amount. And if it can't be finished in two days, then we can look into officially signing that contract on Monday. Once it's signed, I'll spend five full days starting on Monday completely dedicated to finishing your quest for you." The detective fixed Nayuta and Koyomi with a cold look. "That's my compromise. I'm assuming you have school or work starting Monday, yes? You won't be able to help Mr. Yanagi after that anyway. That's the main reason he'd want to hire a detective like me. Once he pays me, I'll be laser-focused on this job twenty-four hours a day if need be. He requires someone who'll do anything to complete that quest for him—and that someone is me."

Koyomi groaned. She couldn't deny that he had a point. His determination and motivation were laudable, of course, but openly promising to be on it "twenty-four hours a day" seemed a bit much.

"Grrr... W-we just have to beat it over the weekend, right?! We can do that!

Easy-peasy! We'll speedrun this sucker! Bring it on!"

"...I don't see a problem with that," said Nayuta. "Mr. Yanagi, do you mind if we help with your request, too?" She spoke more politely and calmly than Koyomi, but their intent was more or less the same.

Yanagi looked uncertain, however. "Well, that would be very much appreciated, of course... But are you sure? I mean, you've only just met me..."

Nayuta nodded meekly. "As I said, I'm also working on that quest. Even if you hadn't come along, I was planning to complete it in the near future."

There was no way to know why the old man wanted to beat Ghost Orchestra so badly. But he seemed like a good person, and considering how earnest he was acting, it was clear that the task was very important to him.

Klever reached for the inverness coat and deerstalker hat hanging on the wall. "Now that everything's settled, let's get moving. Nayuta, Koyomi—we're still strangers, but I look forward to working with you. Mr. Yanagi, would you please set up the party?"

Each of them opened a player menu window and registered for the party. It took Yanagi longer than the others, but Koyomi was there to advise him, and soon they were all set.

Ghost Orchestra was a linked fate quest, meaning that groups had to be in a party to challenge it together.

Yanagi's level-1, of course. Though the detective seems like a veteran...

Nayuta glanced at Klever's name in the status window, then checked his stats out of curiosity.

She froze.

"...Huh...? Wh-what is this...?" she gasped. The numbers she was seeing were simply unheard of. "Um... Mr. Detective, what does this mean...?"

"What's up, Nayu? What are you... *Wuah?!'*" Koyomi squawked from beside Nayuta as she, too, saw the detective's stats.

Klever met their reactions with a knowing smile. His stats *were* a little strange.

Nayuta was a fairly advanced player, but Klever was five levels higher than she was. And yet almost all of his stats were still in the single digits. In other words, they were basically the same as a level-1 player's.

But there was one stat among them that had been built up to nearly a thousand.

"Um... Did you put all of your points into luck...?" asked Nayuta.

"Wha... Whoaaaa... Dang... Uh, is he for real...? Forget a wind-weasel, this guy couldn't even beat a regular weasel..."

Weasels were weakling starter monsters, a challenge for only the least experienced players. Their higher forms, wind-weasels, were aimed at mid-level players, while the top enemy in their category, curse-weasels, were best left to advanced players. All of them, however, looked rather cute, and served as the game's informal mascots.

A veteran player who'd built his character in such a way that he couldn't even beat a helpless enemy like a weasel almost seemed like an elaborate practical joke.

Each time a player leveled up in *Asuka Empire*, they could freely distribute the stat points they'd earned among various properties like strength, intelligence, and agility. When it came to battle, the quality of one's equipment had the largest effect, but because most weapons and armor required certain stat levels to equip, you couldn't even use them if you hadn't invested enough points in the right places.

In other words, because he hadn't properly balanced his stats, Klever the detective's equipment was sure to be garbage.

Despite Nayuta and Koyomi's flabbergasted stares, Klever gracefully donned his rather fine-looking coat and picked up a stylish cane that appeared to have zero attack power.

"So...shall we go, ladies? As you may have noticed, I specialize in using my mind. I'll leave the fighting to you, so I hope you'll give it your all." With that, the lucky detective spun gracefully on his heel.

Nayuta and Koyomi shared a silent look.

Somewhere out in Yoiyami Street, a crow bot squawked as if to mock them and their hopeless endeavor.

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The Ghost Orchestra map was an endless procession of rice paddies where the boundaries linked back around in an endless loop. Because reaching one end meant coming out on the other, there was no way in or out of the map except via teleportation.

The warp also acted as a save point for your in-quest progress, meaning that if you used an item to leave, you would lose anything you'd done since your last save. In addition, if the party wiped, you would lose all progress, even what had been saved. If that happened, you would have to start the quest over from the beginning.

"...And with that in mind, Mr. Yanagi," explained Klever as they walked down the midnight path through the paddies, "our job is to run around and keep out of the enemy's range when it appears, in order to increase our chances of survival. If these young ladies, our combatants, should fall in battle, we need to abandon them and find a way to escape. That way, our party can continue without losing our progress."

"I see... That sounds rather cruel..."

"It's still a far sight better than having to start over from scratch. In fact, it's so important that in more difficult quests, some parties will bring in backup members whose sole purpose is to maintain their progress."

Koyomi's shoulders slumped. "He's completely right, of course...", she whispered. "But this just doesn't sit right with me..."

Nayuta agreed, but given the time limit of one week, they really needed to avoid having their progress reset. If it happened near the start, that was one thing, but failing right at the end of a quest took a huge psychological toll.

"Well," said Nayuta, "imagine if we had come with Mr. Yanagi alone—we would be doing all the fighting either way. And the detective seems like he might have some helpful items, at least..."

This perspective was intended only to ease Koyomi's distress, and not to let the detective off the hook for his lack of responsibility.

"Even so, his stats are ridiculous. He can barely equip anything... I can't believe he calls himself a guide with a build like that," Koyomi grumbled.

Klever replied coolly, "A good luck stat is actually crucial for a guide. I told you my assistant handles the combat, didn't I? There are tons of players who focus on strength, and it's not hard to hire one. But there are very few players who specialize in luck. I had to boost that all on my own."

"Of course there aren't. There's no need to..."

"It's to boost item drop rates."

Koyomi's words caught in her throat.

"My presence alone will lift the party's rare item drop rate to three times its usual level," he continued. "The limit on the raw percentage increase is ten percent, so I can't boost it higher than that...but if a certain item has a one percent drop chance, that will become three percent. It also affects the treasure room spawn rate on randomly generated maps. Plus, the chances of encountering sights like geysers, certain types of clouds, and rainbows are affected by the party's luck. In fact, there's no stat more important for an in-game guide."

Everything he'd just said was correct. But it still didn't sit right.

"So you're like a spirit who brings people good luck..." said Nayuta. "I understand your reasoning, but was it really necessary to take it to such an extreme? Surely you could have put eighty percent into luck and saved the remaining twenty percent for other stats."

"I don't have the leeway for that. I told you that I triple the item drop rate, but that's only at my current level. I believe I can push it even higher. If I can somehow get it up to ten times the normal rate...then I might be able to go into a different kind of business." The detective chuckled gleefully to himself.

"Well...let's hope they don't change the stat balance on you," offered Nayuta, who didn't know how seriously to take the man's comments.

When they reached a small roadside shrine along the path, she came to a stop.

“This is it,” she said. “After Koyomi sent me a message earlier, I was heading back to the teleport spot when I noticed this shrine. It wasn’t here when I first showed up, so I think the offering box up the road might be the switch that activates the Ghost Orchestra event.”

The detective peered with interest at the little shrine. “Ah, I see. Well, it certainly seems like there’s more to this place than meets the eye. Is this meant to be a crying child?” he asked, indicating the stone statue under the shrine’s roof.

Yanagi put his hands together to pray. “Its expression is so pained, especially for a Jizo statue or a traveler’s god... I feel sorry for it.”

Nayuta opened her player menu window to select an item. “I found a note in front of this statue that said, ‘I want to eat *botamochi*.’ So I bought some *botamochi* to go from the Monster Cat Teahouse earlier. I’ll try placing them down here.”

She set the bamboo-leaf-wrapped *botamochi* in front of the statue. As the four of them watched, the expression on the statue’s face changed slightly.

It still looked upset, but it had stopped crying, at least. With that, the offered *botamochi* dissipated like mist.

“...Ooh, does that mean we’ve made it to the next stage?” Koyomi wondered, looking around. In the distance, they could hear the sound of festival music.

Lighthearted taiko drums, a high-pitched flute, a graceful koto—all of them combined to create a single lonely melody. The song wasn’t familiar, but it produced a kind of melancholy nostalgia in the listener.

Yanagi furrowed his brow. “I can hear...festival music.”

Klever twirled his walking stick. “According to the introductory text in the update, the point of this quest is to find the source of the ghost orchestra. Whether achieving that completes the quest, or there’s more to do afterward—perhaps even a boss to fight—is unknown. But the fact that no one has beaten it yet suggests it’s a tricky one.”

“Hmm. Do you think maybe a few people have cleared it and just aren’t saying anything...?” asked Nayuta.

“It’s true that people sometimes keep quiet about strategies. But the 108 Apparitions event includes a counter on the official site that lists the number of completions for each quest. It only updates once a day, so I don’t know if things have changed, but as of this morning, the number for this quest was still zero. It’s only the third day since it was uploaded, of course, but that makes it clear that this isn’t the sort of puzzle that can be brute-forced.”

As the music drew closer, Klever pointed his cane at the spot in front of the statue. The *botamochi* was gone, and a new piece of paper had appeared.

Nayuta carefully bent down to pick it up. On its surface was a single line of brush-drawn script.

I want to eat kuzumochi.

“Oh no... So that’s how it’s gonna be,” Koyomi groaned.

Klever’s shoulders shook with acerbic mirth. “Ahh, so this is why no one has finished yet. Fetch quests always take tons of time. Between searching for the requested items and all that traveling back and forth, it probably seems easier to simply wait for someone else to put up a guide.”

Nayuta was just as dismayed as the others. A single errand was an acceptable hassle, but the thought of having to repeat it was already making her feel exhausted.

“Then shall we return to town?” Yanagi asked, already turning around. Klever fixed the man with his foxlike gaze.

“No. First, we’ll examine this shrine. There’s no way that such a simplistic and repetitive quest would have met the standards of the development team. At the very least, it would have been adjusted before implementation. This demand is either an attempt to mislead us...or perhaps some kind of riddle.”

He peered into the shrine, while Nayuta leaned toward it from the opposite direction.

The structure was small enough that they could lift it up if they wanted to.

There wasn't all that much to examine.

"Are you sure you want to help us with this, Detective?" Koyomi teased. "You're not getting paid right now. Wouldn't you prefer us to drag our feet a little?"

Without taking his eyes off the shrine, Klever grinned coldly. "Do you really think Mr. Yanagi would hire the kind of cheat who would sabotage you like that? What's more, if I am to have the temerity to label myself a detective, I cannot approach a mystery with anything less than my full effort." His tone was jocular, but Nayuta sensed a certain intensity behind his words.

Despite his looks, he seems more diligent than I thought...

She'd initially pegged him for a jokester due to his overblown costume, but the calm and reasoned way he spoke made it clear that his silliness was nothing more than a smokescreen.

The detective felt around inside the little shrine and grinned. "Ah—try looking above the statue's head, Nayuta."

She did as he suggested, peering up at the underside of the shrine's canopy. Pasted there was a sheet of paper with the character for *cloud*.

"...Oh, this is one of those papers people place over sacred alcoves, right?"

"Exactly. It's considered blasphemous to have anything above the head of a god, so a paper meant to represent the sky, heaven, clouds, and so on are placed there as a substitute. I believe we can take this as a hint that substitutes are allowed at this shrine."

In the detective's hand was a brush stand. It had been hidden behind the statue, apparently.

"Nayuta," he continued, "would you turn the paper over and spread it out?"

Intuiting his intention, she spread the paper on her palm. Klever scrawled the characters for *kuzumochi*, a type of cake made with kudzu powder.

The others watched as Nayuta folded up the paper and placed it before the statue as an offering. Even Koyomi seemed a little perplexed.

"Um, Nayu, are you sure that's going to work...?"

“I’m not. But there’s no harm in trying it,” she replied.

As they spoke, the offered paper vanished, replaced by a new one featuring the next request.

I want to eat habutae mochi.

The stone statue’s childlike face had stopped crying completely, but it still seemed a bit grumpy.

Koyomi clapped her hands. “Wow, it worked! I think...? But it wants more mochi... I’m pretty sure they sell this kind at the fancy sweets shop back in Kiyomihara.”

“I don’t think we need to actually buy any, however,” said Klever. “Let’s continue with our current strategy.” He drew another set of characters and handed it to Nayuta to present to the shrine.

Yanagi frowned a little. “Oh... I do believe the festival music is getting closer.”

“That probably means we’re making progress. I suspect this is the method for activating the quest. Once you know how to do it, it takes only a few moments. But anyone who doesn’t figure it out will wind up making a lot of troublesome trips to town and back.”

“Oh, but if you leave someone in town and send messages back and forth, you could have them search for the right item while you’re going back to get it,” Koyomi suggested, as the statue made its next request.

I want to eat koori mochi.

“...I take that back. I have no idea where you’d find this one...”

“It’s a local delicacy somewhere, isn’t it? I’m not even sure what it is,” Nayuta commented. She imagined many challengers would give up when they reached this request.

Yanagi chuckled to himself. “It’s mochi that’s been frozen and dried—a kind of preserved food for colder regions. You soak it in hot water before eating it. *Koori mochi* is also an ingredient in some other sweets.”

Nayuta was impressed by Yanagi’s smooth recall of this esoteric information. *Just what is this guy’s story anyway?*

In online games, it was considered bad manners to pry into another player's personal background unless you already knew each other fairly well. But so much about this Yanagi character provoked her curiosity, including his reason for hiring Klever. Based on what he had just said, she thought he might be a scholar or a chef of some kind.

Koori mochi might have been hard to get, but there was no need to go to the trouble of tracking down any of these random items, and Klever granted the statue's wish with a simple flick of his ink brush.

I want to eat koban mochi.

"The mochi series continues..." remarked Koyomi. "Is this another traditional sweet?"

"Oh yes. I've heard of these," Yanagi said without missing a beat. "There's no fixed definition other than that they're always the shape of an old koban coin; each maker has their own special version. Some have red bean paste inside, some use mugwort, others mix in beans... There are all sorts. There's even a kind of tree called a *kobanmochi*."

I want to eat nikki mochi.

"...Another sweet—this one's cinnamon flavored," Klever murmured. "I don't think any stores in *Asuka Empire* carry it, but you can probably make it with the Cooking skill." The look in his eyes was almost dangerous.

The sound of the festival music was even closer than before. Koyomi looked around nervously.

"...Um, this isn't going to continue forever, is it? Like, as an endless loop...?"

"No, I think it should finish quite soon. Let's continue."

The offered paper vanished once again, replaced by the next request.

I want to eat isobe mochi.

That was simply mochi wrapped in nori and flavored with soy sauce. This one, at least, couldn't be called a sweet.

"...This one seems a lot simpler, all of a sudden," said Nayuta, reading the paper. "I saw those at the stalls on Yoiyami Street."

She checked the statue's face. It was no longer crying, as it had been, but neither was it smiling. It now had no expression at all—it was as blank as a Noh mask. While that wasn't exactly out of place for a stone statue, it was a little creepy.

Meanwhile, the festival music had gotten so close that it seemed to be only steps away. They couldn't see any instruments or players, but the sound itself was coming from very close by.

Fweee-tootle, dun-dun-dun, shalang-shalang. The music was lively, but it failed to lift the listeners' spirits. If anything, it was sending shivers up their spines.

I can't see anyone...but are we surrounded? Nayuta tensed her limbs, ready to fight at a moment's notice.

The instruments were practically screaming. There was a rustling sound like whispers right by her ears, but she couldn't tell what the voices were saying.

Koyomi, who was always the first to chicken out, clung to Nayuta's waist.

"Th-this seems kinda bad, doesn't it...? I just know a ghost is gonna pop out! I can feel someone blowing right into my ear!"

"Stay calm," Klever whispered. "The quest hasn't even begun."

What they were doing now was merely the process to activate the quest. In the 108 Apparitions event, no enemies would appear until you'd finished that process. And when you met the requirement, the game would alert you with the tolling of a large, low-pitched bell. Until that moment, you had nothing to fear.

Klever wrote *isobe mochi* on the paper and presented it to the shrine.

The paper vanished, and a new one appeared.

This one did not ask for mochi.

Ruri and hari shine when lit. Even on a moonlit night with no need for a lantern, one sometimes wants the light on this side.

This message was written in much smoother and more practiced handwriting, and even had the pronunciation of each character written above to aid in

reading.

Koyomi murmured uncertainly, “So we’re done with the mochi series, I guess... I know I’ve heard of *ruri* before, but what is *hari*?”

“...Koyomi...,” said Nayuta. “*Ruri* is lapis lazuli, a blue gemstone, and *hari* refers to quartz. In the distant past, both terms were used to refer to glass.”

“In Buddhism, there are said to be seven precious treasures: gold, silver, lapis lazuli, quartz, shell, coral, and agate—though they vary depending on the school,” added Klever.

Koyomi blinked several times in surprise. Despite the others’ explanations, she was still lost.

“Shell? Like a turtle shell?”

“No,” said Nayuta. “In this case, *shell* refers to seashells. Koyomi, did you pay any attention in your classic literature class at all?”

Koyomi pursed her lips and pouted. She was still clinging to Nayuta’s waist. “H-how am I supposed to remember minor details like that? You and the detective are way weirder for knowing so much! I’m *normal*!”

“I would think you’d know what quartz is,” said Klever. “But that’s beside the point. This first part is referring to an old saying. ‘*Ruri and hari shine when lit*’ means that superior individuals will stand out when given the spotlight. In this case, I assume it’s referring to this shrine rather than a person. ‘*The light on this side*’ is a term in some regions that refers to the flames lit for the dead during Obon. And that paper with the character for *cloud* is only used when there’s another floor above. In other words, this shrine has a hidden ‘second floor.’ When we combine all these hints...”

Klever took a lantern meant for use in dungeons out of his item list and set it down on top of the shrine’s little roof, squinting against the brightness.

The group watched and waited.

Festival drums boomed so loud around them that their bodies vibrated. They covered their ears at the sound.

The light from the lantern became wind that brushed the rice stalks. Along its

path golden lines emerged, painting a massive 3D structure.

In no time at all, the lines covered an entire paddy, and a moment later, they began to fill with color.

Above and to the sides of the little shrine appeared an enormous golden castle.

In front of it was a wide set of stone stairs and a mammoth gate. Steep stone walls spread out to either side as far as the eye could see. The castle resting atop these features was so tall that its uppermost portion was swallowed up by darkness.

“Eeeep!” Koyomi shrieked, burying her face in Nayuta’s clothing.

When they lowered their gazes again, they found themselves surrounded by the festival music players. The musicians, wearing ancient Heian hunting robes and pointed *eboshi* caps, were translucent. Their faces were absent of life, their coloring pale and faded, and they had no presence at all.

Yet the noise they made was so intense it began to distort, as though they were using the instruments to express their otherworldly hatred and contempt.

They walked up the stone steps on either side of the little roadside shrine, ignoring the group, and proceeded in an orderly line into the castle. Above the sprightly notes of their music, the group could hear an eerie, low sound like a temple bell on New Year’s Eve. It rang only once.

That was the signal that the quest had begun. One hundred and eight tolls for 108 apparitions.

The group was stunned by what had just unfolded before them.

Klever turned and announced, “We have finally started the quest. Let us pay this castle a visit, shall we?” He spoke as casually as if they were dropping in on an old friend. His eerily beautiful, foxy features curved into a slender smile.

Nayuta looked down, closed her eyes for a moment, and nodded.

The Ghost Orchestra quest had finally begun.

In no time, the ghostly festival players had vanished into the castle, leaving the area shrouded in silence. But the rustic atmosphere of the place had been obliterated by the sudden overwhelming presence of the castle before them.

The little shrine, which hadn't moved an inch, was now hemmed in by the stone steps to either side and the structure above it, but the expressionless child statue seemed arrogant and imposing, like it was the master of this giant castle.

Still wrapped around Nayuta's waist, Koyomi stammered, "Wh-what was that...? Those ghosts... They just walked into the castle..."

It was a wonder to Nayuta that a girl who was so easily scared was so desperate to participate in the 108 Apparitions event. Maybe she was simply curious, but this seemed like taking it a little too far.

The detective was the first to start up the stairs. "We'll find out more if we proceed. I must admit...this quest is right in my wheelhouse. Whoever designed it has good taste."

"What...? *This* is your style?" Koyomi asked skeptically. He favored her with an exaggerated, showman's smile.

"Something you can't solve through brute force alone—but that a bit of thinking will unlock. At my age, solving a clever puzzle is much more enjoyable as a bit of mental calisthenics than the satisfaction of slogging through a battle with a powerful foe."

Nayuta followed him upward. "You don't seem that old to me," she noted. "Are you sure you're not just saying that because your fighting stats are so poor that you can't have much fun doing anything else?"

He laughed until his shoulders shook. She could tell the humor was genuine.

"A very brutal observation," he said bombastically as he reached the top of the stairs. "You may be correct about that. I suppose I've forgotten how to enjoy the game as intended."

Yanagi looked up at the huge gate before them and exhaled with wonder. "This is truly extravagant. It looks more like the Yomeimon Gate at Toshogu Shrine in Nikko than what I'd expect to see on a castle."

While the gate led directly into the castle interior, rather than onto a courtyard, its silhouette and size did indeed resemble those of the famous Yomeimon Gate almost to a tee.

Koyomi trotted up to it. “Oh, no wonder it looked so familiar! I went to Nikko on an elementary school field trip... This is the one with the ‘see no evil, speak no evil, hear no evil’ monkeys, right?”

“A field trip... I see,” said Yanagi. Beneath his woven monk’s hat, his expression stiffened—but he lowered his head to hide it before anyone other than Nayuta could notice.

Klever, meanwhile, was carefully assessing their surroundings. “I had assumed a few guards would emerge by now...”

A clammy breeze brushed past Nayuta’s cheek. In 108 Apparitions, such a breeze was often the precursor to an enemy encounter.

Koyomi drew her ninja blade, and Klever stepped in front of Yanagi. At the very least, he intended to help shield his client from harm.

“Nayu, something’s coming from inside!”

“Ready!”

Nayuta burst forward, her robe whipping around her, before the enemy could close the gap. If the girls were alone, they could have waited to see how the enemy would present itself, but they had two people to protect now. If their foe had a wide area attack and closed in first, it could easily liquidate the two weaker targets.

As Nayuta passed through the gate into the castle interior, rows of torches on either side of her burst into flame, casting their light on the approaching enemy.

It was a small child wearing a white fox mask.

Nayuta came to an abrupt stop, confused. She’d been expecting a more typical gate guard, like a squadron of armored samurai, a giant spider, or some vicious ogre.

The child in the fox mask was dressed in a worn-out patterned kimono. He

was barefoot and held no weapon. The way he stood there, all alone and forlorn, made him look like a lost child missing his parents.

This is a linked fate quest...meaning we won't meet any players not in the party. This child is either an NPC or an enemy...

Intent on determining which, Nayuta asked, "Who are you?"

The child in the fox mask beckoned to her without saying a word. Uncertain of how to proceed, Nayuta looked back over her shoulder.

"It looks like we're being summoned inside, Detective..."

But when she turned around, she saw no sign of her companions. Nor did she see the gate she'd just entered—only a stone-paved path leading away into the darkness.

A warp zone...?!

She had been the first to go inside, and it seemed the castle had transported her to a different area.

Out of pure reflex, she checked her menu window—sure enough, the communication function had been locked. She could resign from the quest or log out, but if everyone in the party left, they would lose all their progress.



Nayuta quickly steeled herself for action.

This was nothing to lose her cool over. It was probably going to be a kind of haunted house attraction—spooky, perhaps, but ultimately harmless.

She was worried about the others, but aside from Yanagi, who was still level-1, they were experienced players.

Oh, but the detective won't be able to hold his own. With his stats, a wild rabbit could kill him. Ultimately, however, she was optimistic. If they were split up inside the castle, then the game was unlikely to pit them against any superpowered enemies a single player couldn't defeat.

While quests designed to inflict panic, like Vanquishing the Folding-Screen Tiger, were a little different, it was extremely unlikely that any of them would encounter a boss-level monster before reuniting with the rest of their party.

In reality, being isolated like this would be terrifying, but no matter how realistic it seemed, this was still a game designed to entertain.

And unlike in SAO, you don't die here.

The child with the fox mask came over to tug on Nayuta's sleeve.

"...Will you play with me, miss?" A young, muffled voice came from behind the mask.

Nayuta shook her head. "I'm sorry. I've gotten separated from my group. I need to meet up with them so that I can finish this quest."

The child was an NPC. You needed to be relatively clear when conversing with these characters in order to meet certain event requirements, but there was no need to go all out with the role-playing aspect.

The child looked up at Nayuta. "You won't play with me...?"

"...What game do you want to play?"

"Hide-and-seek."

The child turned around and ran away.

...I see. So I'm supposed to search for the child and catch them...

Already, the child had vanished into the darkness farther down the hallway. Nayuta took a moment to look around and get her bearings.

The walls on either side were made of stacked stones. Torches placed at intervals along them cast some light, but not enough to see very far.

The ground was stone as well, with the occasional bloodstain. She listened, focusing hard, and heard the faint sound of a taiko drum beating in the distance. Perhaps advancing the quest would cause it to get louder again.

“All right.”

She was ready to move forward. Nayuta cast her gaze down the gloomy passage. She closed her eyes and took a breath, bringing air into her core and slowly releasing it. Then, with careful but determined steps, she strode toward the darkness.

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Yanagi was completely baffled.

He was all alone in the castle with no idea what had happened.

Nayuta, the warrior priestess, had vanished without warning, and when Koyomi rushed after her, she had disappeared, too. Then the detective clicked his tongue in irritation, and just like that, Yanagi was alone.

He wasn't afraid, per se, but he was unsure of what to do. On the way here, Klever had given him a few pieces of advice: If he got lost, he should use the communication function in the menu. But if communications were disabled during a story event, he should decide for himself if he would continue searching, give up and return to town, or simply log out.

Right now, the communication function was locked. But there were no enemies around, and escape didn't seem necessary.

Yanagi looked around. He was in a huge, open space—it was abnormally large, in fact.

The floor beneath his feet was tatami, but there wasn't a single pillar in sight, much less a wall. And yet a wood-paneled ceiling ran parallel with the floor as

far as he could see.

The place was dimly lit, but he couldn't make out any sources of light. The space seemed to spread out endlessly in all directions without any landmarks.

All alone, in this impossible space, Yanagi was at a loss.

"...Well, no use standing here. I guess I'll start walking..." he grumbled to himself, making his way across the tatami in his cloth gaiters.

Thankfully, because it was a game, he could see clearly without the visual impairments common to the elderly. His back and knees didn't hurt, either. He was tired, but only as he had been when young; he didn't feel any weakness due to his age.

Of course, his reflexes were not as quick as they had been, but simply being able to walk and feel light on his feet was such a delight that it left him feeling giddy and radiant despite the eerie environment.

"...So this is what it's like in a full-dive VRMMORPG..." Yanagi muttered as he walked. "How interesting."

In this virtual world, even those without full use of their bodies could move freely, to say nothing of elderly people suffering the typical effects of old age. Of course, it was just a game—a simulated experience—but when you had to live with physical limitations, a virtual realm where you could forget about all that was a true godsend.

You could go where you liked, eat what you wanted, and do whatever struck your fancy—a freedom that able-bodied people often took for granted.

Yanagi trekked through the vast room with no destination in mind. He made his way directly along the seam of the tatami until eventually, a small human figure came into view.

It was a child wearing a white fox mask. He seemed to melt into existence right out of the darkness.

Yanagi came to a stop.

For a moment, he didn't breathe, but not out of shock. A part of him had been hoping this would happen.

“...Oh... Ohhh...,” he moaned. He sounded close to tears, though none fell.

The child beckoned Yanagi with a bloodless, ashen hand.

The old man strode toward it on unsteady feet and tried to grab the child’s shoulder. His outstretched hand was trembling, his measured breathing now in disarray. But just before Yanagi’s hand made contact, the child turned and ran off.

“Ah... No, wait!” he cried, hurrying to catch up.

In his ears was the distant sound of festival music, coming from who knew where.

The strength left his legs, and his vision blurred and twisted.

“...Wha...?”

He felt dizziness overtake him and stopped, barely saving himself from a fall by propping himself up with his staff. In the darkness a fair distance away, the child—a boy—turned back and removed his fox mask.

The face that emerged was one that Yanagi recognized.

The boy was too far away to see in any detail, but there was no way Yanagi would mistake that face.

“...Kiyofumi...?” he called out, following on shaking feet.

The fox-masked child rushed off into the infinite space ahead. Even after his figure vanished into the darkness, Yanagi continued to chase after him.

§

Klever found himself inside the castle’s tower.

His superlative luck had kicked in, even in this strange situation. Below him, he could see waves of grain, shining silver in the moonlight—and in the distance, mountain slopes painted with delicate snow, a sky full of stars, and the gleaming orb of the moon. The sight was breathtaking.

It seemed odd to encounter such stunning beauty in a horror-themed quest. The designer must have really wanted to include it.

Considering the scenery we saw from the ground, this looks like a completely different area.

The view from the tower was most likely specially designed for this vantage point. Even if he were to use a grappling hook to descend to the ground, he might not be able to return to the original map.

That said, the point of this mission was not to escape, but to search, so there was no reason for him to leave. And besides, he didn't have a grappling hook.

Being forcibly separated from the group was a surprise, but even if they were all defeated, they could still retry the quest. Unlike in *SAO*, a game over here was not permanent.

A game over doesn't mean death.

Klever exhaled deeply. Every time he remembered that fact, he felt like a depressing, heavy bitterness was about to crush him.

He was one of the people who had been trapped in that game. He didn't want to remember what had happened inside, but he didn't want to forget it, either.

Ten thousand people had been unable to escape from the world of that VRMMORPG, and over four thousand of them had perished. Including the families of the victims, the nightmarish crime had ruined or twisted the lives of tens, if not hundreds, of thousands of people.

That incident was also connected to Klever's current activities as a detective in *Asuka Empire*.

I'll never let that happen again... But that's not what I should be focusing on now.

He redirected his thoughts before they could get any further off track and began to look around the tower.

It was dim, but not so dark that he couldn't see where he was going. A number of lanterns hung from the ceiling, and the paneled floor shone an amber brown.

Klever observed his surroundings, listening carefully. It was then that he picked up the sounds of festival music coming from somewhere in the distance.

The detective felt momentarily dizzy. His vision lurched, and the strength left his body in a strange and unnatural way.

What was that...? It doesn't seem like a status effect...

He would know right away if it were poison or paralysis, but he felt no discomfort. As he gently shook his head, he saw a dark figure shift in one corner of the room.

Klever stopped moving and squinted. The space had been empty just moments earlier, but now there was *someone* there.

This kind of thing was a horror staple—exactly what you'd expect in this scenario. But there was something strange about the figure in the darkness, standing with its back to Klever.

The man's silhouette looked exactly like that of someone he knew.

The figure was dressed in a suit of thick and heavy European-style plate mail, a rare sight in *Asuka Empire* with its traditional Japanese aesthetic. He stood in the corner without moving, as though he didn't know where to go.

Klever was rooted to the spot; he couldn't bring himself to approach.

The man in the plate mail slowly turned.

His face was hazy and shrouded in darkness, but there was enough detail there to convince Klever that this was no passing resemblance—no simple coincidence. This man and the man Klever remembered were identical.

Why...why is he here...?

It was someone who absolutely didn't belong in this place.

Klever was alarmed, but he didn't lose his composure. He remained calm, although that calm was a kind of paralysis, an inability to process what he was seeing.

Was he still playing the game, or had he fallen asleep and started dreaming? He found he was no longer sure.

A clump of black blood squirted out of the young man's mouth, followed by more blood flooding from the seams in his armor at the neck, shoulder, and

torso. It was like darkness itself was seeping out of his body.

Klever maintained his composure.

No matter what happened, he was determined not to lose it.

He didn't believe in ghosts. If he saw something resembling one, he could be sure it was a fake someone else had created or merely an illusion his own brain had cooked up.

Yes, a hallucination... It's just a trick of the mind. There's no way it's him. And yet...

He could never forget the image of that young man. There was no way he would mistake it.

Still, Klever maintained his composure.

Because of that, he was able to keep thinking. Even in a situation he didn't understand, when his senses were paralyzed, he did not succumb to panic, and he was able to generate a number of conjectures to explain what was happening.

One of those possibilities was particularly unsavory.

Could this quest be...? That's not good. If the developers realize it...!

Klever noticed blood pooling around the young man's feet, creating an expanding black circle. The pool became a bottomless swamp that proceeded to swallow up the man's form, and soon his body sank beneath the floor.

Klever started toward the spot, only to be interrupted by someone pulling on him from behind. He spun around and met the gaze of a child in a patterned kimono wearing a fox mask.

It was the same boy he'd seen for just a moment before entering the castle. Now that child was just inches away, holding the hem of Klever's coat.

Klever's attention was diverted for only a moment before he turned back toward the sinking young man.

...He's gone...?

The man had vanished.

At the rate he had been sinking, he should still be visible. The blood was gone, too. He had simply disappeared the instant Klever looked away.

Of course, in a virtual setting, this was nothing mysterious or special.

Klever stared at the spot on the floor where the young man had been and said to the boy in the fox mask, “I must finish this quest with Mr. Yanagi as quickly as I possibly can. Guide me to my companions. You are not our enemy, are you?”

If he were, he would have attacked Klever from behind long ago.

The fox-masked child tilted his head in apparent confusion. He was not a ghost, of course. Just an AI—one that was playing the role of a guide within the quest.

The child released Klever’s coat without a word and glided across the floor toward one end of the tower. In his path was a staircase leading down.

The stairs were so steep they seemed more like a ladder. The boy ignored them altogether and leaped down to the lower floor without a sound. Klever followed.

The boy might have been leading him into a trap, of course, but if getting past that trap was a requirement to finish this area, that would only prove the boy was acting as a guide.

Though if I get tangled up in a fight, even with some puny enemy, while I’m all by myself, I won’t stand a chance...

That was the one point of concern for Klever, whose stats aside from luck were all extremely low.

And right on cue, something writhed along the ceiling of the tower’s lower story.

Klever looked up from the bottom of the steep set of stairs to see a woman dressed like a beautiful courtesan, the lower half of her body that of a spider. She hung upside down from the ceiling, sharp fangs jutting from her wide mouth as she leered menacingly.

“...A jorogumo...”

Klever tapped at the floor with the end of his cane, a tic of his that came out

whenever he was thinking.

This was not a fearsome opponent for an experienced player. But it was not something he could handle, given his stats.

He couldn't follow the boy in the fox mask without first defeating the spider-woman, but that was certain to be a tall order. Furthermore, his only means of escape was to climb back up into the tower, which led to a dead end.

So there's nothing else I can do.

The detective, resigned, tapped himself on the forehead and took his first hesitant, desperate step toward a virtual death that would allow him infinite chances to retry.

§

As soon as Nayuta managed to leave the castle, she received three messages in her inbox all at once.

Sorry, Nayu! I tried, but I lost... See you tomorrow at the detective's place!

I apologize. I lost as well. Mr. Yanagi seems worn out, so I suggest you log out for today.

My apologies. I was not any help, either...

It seemed that all three of them had been forced to retreat. That meant that only Nayuta had safely escaped the castle with her progress preserved.

While participating in 108 Apparitions, any player who lost all their HP was automatically logged out of the game and unable to return for six hours. They also suffered the usual penalty—losing a single inventory item at random—but as long as they had a *sarubobo* charm, it would disappear instead, eliminating that concern.

These charms, designed to look like monkey (*saru*) babies, were a tradition of the Hida region. Their name was also a pun on the verb *saru*, meaning “to send away” or “to leave,” referring to their ability to avert disaster.

Given the event's horror theme, sudden and unexpected defeat was a frequent occurrence. The *sarubobo* was a fail-safe item, something unique to

the event that had no use elsewhere in *Asuka Empire*. As long as you had one, there was little harm in losing a quest, aside from the mandatory six-hour cooldown period.

Unable to meet back up with her companions, Nayuta decided to go ahead and log off. She saved her event progress at the teleportation point, restocked some consumable items at the general store, then returned to her bedroom.

When she lifted her head off the bed, she found that it was dark outside the window. Her mother's voice chided her through the door.

"Yurina, are you still playing that game? If you can hear me, the bath's been drawn, so go and take your turn!"

"...All right, I'm coming," replied Yurina Kushiinada. This was Nayuta's real name.

Shifting from the old-fashioned world of the game to the modern day left her briefly disoriented.

Her room was mostly plain. Only a large, poorly made black cat plushie sitting on her bed hinted that the space belonged to a high school girl.

There was a bookshelf on the wall stuffed with books—mostly novels—and a computer on her desk. The general color scheme consisted of flat whites and blacks, and there was very little clutter. She kept her room tidy, but it was so colorless, it could easily be mistaken for a boy's room.

Her brother and father were playing shogi in the living area. Her brother had the advantage, it seemed; her mild-mannered father had an uncharacteristic furrow in his brow, and he grunted and groaned over the board.

"Are you off work today?" she asked her brother.

"...If I weren't, do you think I'd be at home playing shogi with Dad?" he replied sardonically. Yurina giggled.

Their mother looked over from across the kitchen island. "Don't you think he ought to be out on a date, instead of cooped up here playing shogi? Your father would probably have a stroke if you brought home a boyfriend, Yurina, but I bet he'd love to see your brother with a nice girl."

Her bachelor brother pretended not to hear. At last, their father made his next move. Then he looked up and said, “Yurina, just to be sure...you don’t have anyone like that in your life yet...right?”

She didn’t even need to answer. Her brother laughed. “If she did, she wouldn’t be spending a valuable Saturday afternoon playing video games, would she? That’s check, Dad.”

“No...! You’re cheating! Ugh... I’ll have to trade my rook for your knight...”

It seemed like the game was winding down.

Yurina sat on the couch with a tablet to check her favorite website, MMO Today, before she took her bath. It was a major news site for VRMMORPG-related topics and had a reputation for fast and accurate reporting. It featured walkthroughs and strategic help as well as information on movements in the industry and ads for the latest games. But for the last few days, the lead articles had been about editor in chief Thinker’s travels in Canada.

While there, he was visiting local software developers and conducting interviews with some of the most important up-and-coming game creators. But while the content itself was completely serious, the presence of his new wife Yuriel in the corners of most of the photographs gave rise to a lot of teasing that it was just a highly publicized honeymoon.

Yurina was just starting to read the day’s updates when a news banner appeared at the top of the page.

Bug reported in new 108 Apparitions quest in Asuka Empire

New quest...? Could that mean...

The newest quests—those that had been uploaded that week—were The Werewolf’s Forest and Ghost Orchestra. Feeling a sudden sense of foreboding, Yurina clicked on the article link.

It was exactly as she’d feared.



“...Some players are complaining about a new quest titled Ghost Orchestra... The quest is being temporarily removed for testing... It has yet to be announced when it will return...”

She reread the short article several times, stunned. Because it was just a preliminary report, there was no elaboration on what the complaints were about.

Oh no... Mr. Yanagi said he needed to finish the quest within a week...

Content had been temporarily removed before. Some quests were simply deleted forever, and often the ones that needed to be fixed were down for a month or more.

At this point, the chances of finishing within a week seemed slim.

In search of more information, Yurina moved over to her favorite 108 Apparitions strategy forum. Sure enough, there was already a thread about the removal of the Ghost Orchestra quest.

She began to pore over the replies, aware that there would likely be a lot of rumors and speculation of dubious origin.

While most people simply seemed bewildered by the news, a number of posts caught Yurina’s eye.

Apparently there was a real ghost in the game...

Yurina—Nayuta pursed her lips.

She was already aware that such posts were more than idle chatter. She herself had seen a ghost that should not have existed within the game data.

However, she did not believe that what she’d seen was a “real” ghost. There was almost certainly a reason, some kind of trick or mechanism at play. Unfortunately, it was highly likely that the trick or mechanism involved was something the developers couldn’t simply overlook.

With her back turned to her father and brother’s laid-back game of shogi, Nayuta silently, unconsciously, balled her delicate hands into fists.

Monster Cat Teahouse

A popular teahouse serving handmade sweets that opened right at the unveiling of Ayakashi Alley. The store's appearance is relaxed and comfy, but the enormous cat eyes painted on the hanging curtain in the doorway are rather eerie.

The staff working at the teahouse are all *nekomata*, except for the younger trainees whose tails haven't yet forked into two. Because they get paid less than the older staff, they are much more likely to hop onto your lap and purr if you give them a nice tip. Their dedication is impressive: they will often remain on the customer's lap for over thirty minutes without budging. If you try to push them off, they'll scratch you.

Orders here often get mixed up, but from the cats' perspective, it doesn't matter what humans eat, so complaining to them is pointless. They probably can't tell humans apart, anyway.

Among regular customers, simple sweets like *mamekan* and *warabi mochi* are most popular, but don't miss the paw pad *manju*, which can be ordered to go. These steamed buns fashioned to look like a cat's paw are stuffed with tuna and sweet bean paste, providing a unique mixture of sweetness and fishiness with a rich, oily finish.

People say that once you try one, you'll never want another. But they are a favorite of cat-type *yokai*, and throwing one during the Vanquishing the Folding-Screen Tiger quest will temporarily distract the tiger. If you buy ten at once, the staff will allow you the delightful privilege of touching their toe beans.

Kenke-ken Ramen

Near the entrance of Yoiyami Street, this standout ramen shop is a relative newcomer at just one hundred years in business. One must be around for several thousand to be considered a historic business in the *yokai* world.

For the first sixty years or so, the shop had no customers at all, until word of mouth spread among the local *yokai*. Once Yoiyami Street opened up, humans began to visit, too. According to the owner, "We've had fewer dine-and-dashes since then."

Concerns were raised about the body hair found in all the bowls of ramen, but once it was revealed that the hairs belonged not to the cook but to his trio of beautiful daughters, who help out at the shop, the clientele only expanded.

The slightly ditzy eldest sister, known for her long black hair, works the register and greets customers.

The defiant and rebellious middle sister only helps out in the kitchen when it's crowded.

And the friendly, vivacious, and hardworking little sister walks around outside and pulls in customers.

All of them are popular with the regulars. At first, new customers would say, "I couldn't tell them apart," and, "They have the same figure as the cook, so I thought they were all male," but ever since the regulars brainwashed...er, thoroughly pointed out the error of their ways, the sisters have become the idols of the Yoiyami Street market area.

That said, the shop's ramen is not very good.

The page is decorated with several clusters of stylized, light gray flowers. One cluster is in the top right corner, another is in the middle left, and a third is in the bottom left. The flowers have five petals and some have small circles in the center.

Chapter 2

The Fox's Visit

Cats are gods.

Gods are fearsome beings beyond human understanding, and objects of worship.

There is a saying about gods: “Even the head of a sardine can be holy with enough devotion.” In other words, as long as someone believes, anything can become a god.

“And their contention is...why not cats?” said Klever with obvious distaste. The fox-featured detective was pointing through the wall at his next-door neighbors. Nayuta and Koyomi turned to look.

Renting the office next to the Three-Leaf Detective Agency was a suspicious organization called the Cat-God Worship Research Society. They were a mysterious, sketchy group, but they didn’t seem to be doing any harm.

Koyomi, a *nekomata* bot resting on her lap, rubbed at its chin and smiled weakly. “If you think about it, even the characters for *god* and *cat* look a bit alike... And the way cats seem unconcerned with human affairs and treat us like their servants, offering nothing in return despite all the tribute we pay them. Well, you can see the similarities...”

Nayuta sighed. This remark was very like the other girl.

“You ought to watch what you say, Koyomi. Religious people are going to have a bone to pick with you.”

“Yeah...and those same religious people cheated my grandpa out of his land and fortune. That’s why I’m a boring office secretary... If I had that inheritance, I’d never have to work again!”

Nayuta wasn’t unsympathetic, but neither was she totally supportive of this prospective life of leisure. She gave Koyomi’s head a little pat, half sympathy and half exasperation.

“That’s a real shame, Koyomi. Anyway...the people next door aren’t worshipping cats as a joke, are they? If it’s a real religion, then they must have some kind of holy teaching...”

Klever had his elbows propped up on his work desk. He smiled slightly and

shrugged. “They do. ‘The cat is a holy beast.’ ‘Worship the cat.’ ‘Give it not too many treats.’ ‘Prepare for it the scratching post.’ ‘Pay heed to its nutritional balance.’ ‘Forget not its yearly shots.’ ‘Make neat its litter box’... I think that’s all of them.”

“Starting from the third one, those are just regular cat ownership requirements.”

The group had reconvened at the detective’s office early Sunday morning, and were wasting their time with idle chatter. Three of them were present—Klever, the silver-haired, foxlike detective; Koyomi, the baby-faced ninja who was actually an adult with a regular job; and Nayuta, the warrior priestess who had rejected weapons and armor in favor of speed and agility.

None of them looked particularly hale and hearty at the moment. Despite the time, the view through the windows was dark. Ayakashi Alley was under a perpetual blanket of night from which the sun would never rise. And when it came to the trio’s mental state, they too were feeling anything but sunny.

The sudden removal of the Ghost Orchestra quest had them stuck. They’d agreed to meet up at the detective’s office, but his client, Yanagi, had yet to arrive.

Koyomi and the *nekomata* bot yawned at the same time.

“*Fwahhh...* Hey, Nayu, I want to eat something sweet... Wanna go to the Monster Cat Teahouse? Let’s send Mr. Yanagi a message and have him meet us there.”

Eating something sweet did not seem likely to produce any good ideas—but it might help with the stress.

“Okay. Are you coming with us, Detective?”

“To the Monster Cat Teahouse, yes...? All right, I suppose I shall send the message to Mr. Yanagi.” Klever got to his feet and opened his player menu.

Nayuta and Koyomi were the first to leave the office. As on the previous day, the nearly ten-foot-tall black cat-Buddha statue loomed outside the door.

It might have been their imagination, but it seemed the angle of one of its

front paws was slightly different that day. They passed it by, pretending not to notice, and left the building for Yoiyami Street. From there, they headed back to the main section of Ayakashi Alley.

While it was always night in the game, in the real world it was a weekend morning, so there were a lot of people around. Numerous long arms hung down from the overcast night sky, writhing like jellyfish tentacles.

“...Is there any meaning to those things besides just being creepy to look at?” asked Koyomi.

“Who knows? I suppose we’re all just grasping at clouds to find the answer,” the detective said, snorting to himself.

It was clearly meant as a joke, but Nayuta found his explanation oddly convincing. In the end, this town was full of things that didn’t quite make sense, wriggling and writhing in their own baffling way everywhere you looked. Such things added a kind of richness and variety to the world. But at the same time, they could be seen as gaudy and pointless.

The fact that meaningless things were allowed to exist here, just as they were, made this place surprisingly comforting to a lot of people. It was supposed to be horror themed, but it was also infused with a strange sense of vitality.

When they reached the Monster Cat Teahouse, customers were streaming in and out. Each person became as hazy as a ghost for the few moments they spent passing through the doorway. Once through, their bodies flickered out of existence, and when leaving, they seemed to materialize back in place. The shop’s entryway worked like a teleportation gate, moving players to multiple identical versions of the teahouse, so it was never packed on the inside.

Indeed, Nayuta’s group wound up in a version of the interior with no other customers present. The *nekomata* who greeted them led them to a random table and was rewarded with scratches under the chin from Koyomi.

“It’s still early, so I’d like something refreshing and light,” she said. “I think I’ll go with the *mamekan*! What about you, Nayu? The usual?”

“Yes. *Mamekan*.”

Koyomi’s order often changed depending on her mood, but about three-

quarters of the time, Nayuta just got the *mamekan*. The dish was simple, containing only red peas, agar jelly, and black syrup. The jelly had a nice texture, however, and the sweetness of the syrup was just right. The red peas were specially prepared for this establishment and differed from what you could get elsewhere. They burst pleasantly when you bit into them and had a subtly sweet flavor like vanilla beans—unlike any red peas you could find in the real world.

While it might disappoint those customers who wanted a more authentic *mamekan*, the teahouse was popular specifically for its strange blending of traditional and nontraditional flavors.

Nayuta and Koyomi sat side by side, with the detective across from them. “I will have the same,” he said. “Three orders of *mamekan*, please.”

The Munchkin in its *happi* coat bobbed its head, wrote down their orders, and trotted off to the kitchen in the back.

“Do you come here often, Detective?” Koyomi asked.

He gave her a noncommittal nod. “It’s a regular sightseeing spot. Folks from overseas enjoy it quite a lot. I’ve never actually had the *mamekan* here, though I’ve ordered it several times.”

That was a strange thing to say.

“Oh, did they switch your order with someone else’s? Koyomi and I originally met because our *mamekan* and *warabi mochi* orders got mixed up.”

“Er... Well, not exactly...,” Klever started to explain, but the *nekomata* was already coming back with a tray containing two ceramic bowls piled high with *mamekan*, as well as another unfamiliar dessert.

This third item consisted of a boat-shaped glass container filled with yellow columns, a massive amount of whipped cream, and an extravagant selection of fruit pieces, all drenched in caramel and chocolate sauce. It was ostentatiously un-Japanese.

“...Uh...what? What is *that*?” Koyomi was utterly baffled.

The *nekomata* proceeded to set a dish in front of each guest. Klever’s item

was a deluxe custard pudding à la mode. They had ordered three bowls of *mamekan*. Nayuta couldn't begin to guess how this mix-up had occurred.

“...It was three *mamekan*, right?” she asked the *nekomata*.

The Munchkin tilted its head in confusion, then climbed a nearby cat tower and curled up to nap on the top platform. It did not intend to take back the pudding, apparently.

Klever rubbed the spot between his brows with a finger. “My overdeveloped luck stat causes me to be served special items not listed on the menu. I’m not a fan of whipped cream...and this is the third time they’ve served me this pudding dish. You two can share it, if you like.”

He pushed the boat-shaped receptacle toward the girls. In this respect, his luck seemed more bad than good.

The sight of the extremely fancy dessert, a rarity in the austere Monster Cat Teahouse, put childish sparkles in Koyomi’s eyes.

“Ooh, really? Yay, I can’t wait!” She stuck her spoon into the custard, making sure to get a healthy dose of whipped cream before stuffing it into her mouth and smiling in delight. “Yum! How is this so good?! It’s even better than Itsumaden pudding, the top dish at Do Rota Bo Parlor! Nayu, Nayu, you’ve *got* to try this!”



Nayuta, unable to resist the spoon being shoved into her face, opened her mouth and swallowed a bite of pudding. It had a smooth texture without being too sweet, and the rich flavor of the custard was only amplified by the bittersweet taste of the caramel. It was really quite delicious.

But Nayuta still preferred the texture and simple, understated sweetness of the agar jelly.

That said, she pitied Klever for having been denied the taste of *mamekan* all this time. She pushed her still-untouched bowl toward him.

“Here, Detective,” she said. “You can have mine instead.”

Klever narrowed his eyes. “But you ordered this. Are you sure?”

“I can have it anytime I want. Please, I insist.”

Koyomi leaned against Nayuta and said sweetly, “In that case, Nayu, do you want to split the pudding *and* my *mamekan*? That way we can get a taste of both. All right, it’s settled!” She held a piece of watermelon up to Nayuta’s lips. The other girl chomped down on it like an animal being fed before turning to the detective.

“So, Mr. Klever, about what happens next...”

“Already?” Koyomi muttered. “Can’t we enjoy a little escapism first...?”

Unfortunately, that wasn’t an option. Yanagi had stipulated that they must complete Ghost Orchestra within a week. Now that the quest had been taken down, there was nothing they could do about it. Even the major gaming news site MMO Today still had no updates, and there had been no word from the developers.

“When a quest gets retracted, it takes a minimum of two weeks for it to be fixed and reuploaded—and it’s usually closer to a full month,” said Nayuta. “Unfortunately, Mr. Yanagi’s request has become impossible to fulfill.”

They had to face the truth. No amount of struggle would change the fact that the quest was now completely inaccessible.

Klever’s foxlike features twisted as he chuckled. “Yes, it’s quite a quandary. I hadn’t anticipated this possibility. For now, let’s wait for word from Mr. Yanagi.

Either he'll rescind his request or delay the time frame until we can attempt it again... Or perhaps he'll tell us what his real goal is, so we can address it directly."

Koyomi was currently stuffing her cheeks full of melon like a hamster. "His real goal? It's not to complete the quest?"

Klever looked down. "You were skeptical, too, weren't you? Who offers over a million yen to complete a simple quest? You're right to be suspicious. There has to be something in Mr. Yanagi's life that makes finishing the quest as soon as possible worth all that money. And depending on the details, there might be a way to give him what he's really after without bothering with the quest. That's what I mean."

Koyomi, who had cocked her head quizzically, now tilted it in the opposite direction. "Umm... Why do you think he wants to complete that quest anyway?"

The detective lifted a spoonful of *mamekan* to his mouth.

"Mmm, this *is* quite good... To tell you the truth, I have a hunch. But it has to do with a private matter, and it would be irresponsible of me to speculate without confirmation. You should probably ask him yourself. In the end, it's up to him whether he wants to share that information with a bunch of strangers like us."

From Klever's tone of voice, it was clear that he wasn't just holding out on them to look cool—his concern was genuine.

Nayuta didn't feel right intruding on the man's privacy, either. Everyone had their own challenges in life. Koyomi, however, still seemed skeptical as she chewed on a juicy piece of watermelon.

"I still don't get it, but that means we're not giving up, right?"

"I intend to keep trying, but ultimately it's the client who decides." Klever opened his player menu; he'd received a message. "But speak of the devil—it's from Mr. Yanagi...or... No. It's..." He squinted slightly, his gaze severe.

"What is it? Has he canceled his request...?" Nayuta asked, leaning forward. When she got closer, the detective pulled away from her.

“It’s from Mr. Yanagi’s family,” he said. “He is feeling unwell and can’t log in, so he won’t be able to meet us... However, if possible, they would like me to come and see him in person. There is no name attached to the message, but based on the content, I believe it is from his wife.”

This message hadn’t originated from inside the game, but had been forwarded from the detective’s regular e-mail.

Nayuta immediately turned to Koyomi. “If he’s not well enough to log in...did something happen to him?”

“If it’s from his wife...d-does that mean that the complaints to the developer about the quest came from his family? Like, ‘Your game made our grandpa feel sick!’ or something...?”

An elderly person falling ill right after playing a game and their family sending complaints to the staff seemed a likely scenario, whether it was true in this case or not.

But Klever promptly shook his head. “No, it’s not that. I got confirmation last night about the complaints sent to the game staff. Another party succeeded in infiltrating the castle a bit before we did. One of the members claimed they saw a ghost that shouldn’t have existed in the game and was so alarmed they fell unconscious and were forcefully logged out by the AmuSphere as a safety precaution. Their family was nearby and called an ambulance, and the hospital later contacted the developers about the incident. That’s why they took the quest down, to check that everything was safe. The person who passed out was a college student in their twenties.”

This came as a shock to Nayuta. The announcement from the company hadn’t included any of those details. There had been no news reports on the subject, either, and the rumors online merely said that there had been a real ghost sighting.

“Where did you hear all of that...?” she asked.

But the detective just shrugged. “I have my sources. I am a detective, after all. And the real reason the quest was taken down wasn’t the complaint itself, but that the incident made them realize they’d overlooked something during testing. The ghost wasn’t part of the intended scenario.”

“An unplanned ghost, huh?” Koyomi said, groaning. “I was going to bring this up when Mr. Yanagi got here, but I guess I might as well ask now: What did you see when you were teleported away?”

Klever nodded breezily. “I was sent to the castle’s tower, where I saw a friend who’d died—a man I’d grown up with. After that, a child in a fox mask appeared. I asked him to lead the way, but then we were attacked by a *jorogumo*, and though I put up a good fight, I fell just short of victory.”

“...Knowing your stats,” said Nayuta, “I doubt you put up much of a fight at all. Am I right?” Klever merely flashed her a faint smile in reply.

Nayuta went next. “At first, I wound up in a corridor that looked like the one we saw from the entrance, except it went on and on in both directions. The kid in the fox mask appeared and said we should play hide-and-seek. I explored what looked like a dungeon, as well as a passageway beneath an old dry well, and found a few things that might be key items, then noticed an exit nearby and decided to head out.”

Koyomi and Klever stared at her like she was some fantastical creature.

“Castle dungeon...”

“Old dry well...”

“Yes. There was a ghostly figure that looked familiar, but I only caught a brief glimpse of them, and it didn’t leave much of an impression on me. There were a number of traps, but they were mostly jump scares and didn’t inflict any damage. It’s annoying that the quest split us up like that, but I don’t think it should be too difficult to complete.”

Koyomi’s shoulders trembled. The detective pressed at the corners of his eyes in exasperation.

“...Yeah, um... That’s not what I meant...”

“You explored those areas completely on your own?” asked the detective. “You make it sound like nothing, but I’m amazed you got through all of that without giving up. For one thing, who decides to just climb down a well?”

Their reactions baffled Nayuta. If anything, having no companions to protect

made everything easier. It had been like a pleasant stroll for her.

“The enemies weren’t even that hard. I beat two *onigumo* spiders and five skeletal samurai. I didn’t count the ghostly soldiers and bats, but there couldn’t have been more than ten of each. I also saw a snake-woman with golden scales, but I think she was a special rare encounter, because she fled when she saw me.”

She’d had a decent run, though it wasn’t anything worth bragging about.

Koyomi rubbed her friend’s back lightly. “Nayu...if you were scared, you don’t have to hide it. You can tell me anything, okay? In fact, even if you’re not scared, you could just shout, ‘Eek! This is so scary!’ and fool most men out there. At this point, you could even say, ‘I’m scared of my own beauty’ or ‘Steamed buns are terrifying,’ and that would be enough.”

Koyomi was scolding her like she was a child, but her advice was, as usual, a little off.

“But in here, you can’t possibly get hurt or wind up in some horrible accident... I mean, if I was in a real castle dungeon or jumping down a real well, of course I’d be frightened. Anyway, what kind of ghost did *you* see, Koyomi?”

Despite having just shoved another spoonful of cream into her mouth, Koyomi made a face like she was about to cry.

“I got sent to this really huge outdoor bath...and then some half-fish man snuck up and knocked me out. But just before that, through the steam, I saw...” She sniffled. “My poor brine shrimp Rin, who died two months ago... She was dancing in a *yukata*.”

“.....I’m sorry, could you repeat that?” asked the detective. His tone was quite serious; he clearly believed he’d misheard her.

Koyomi looked down sadly. “My brine shrimp...you know, the ones that come out of those little dried eggs you put in salt water. They’re too small to see at first, but if you raise them right, they grow to be about a centimeter long. They’re similar to water fleas, but if the eggs are freeze dried, they can last in storage for years...”

Klever pressed his fingers to his eyes. “You mean the things they feed to

tropical fish...? I'm aware of them. Hundreds of those things could fit in the bowl of a single spoon, and you had an individual shrimp that you named and kept as a pet...?"

Koyomi nodded, a far-off look in her eyes. "She was a little gross blown up to the size of a human... But I was happy to see her looking healthy again..."

Nayuta had no idea how to react. Her friend made it sound like a heartwarming story, but she just couldn't see it that way.

"Um... Do you find them cute?" she asked.

"Nope. Not in the slightest," the other girl admitted.

It was a strange hobby, but Koyomi had always been a bit eccentric.

The detective recovered from this revelation and straightened his posture. "At any rate, this settles it. The 'ghosts' that appear in that quest are people—or pets, as the case may be—that each player knows and who died in the real world. In other words, they come from the individual's memory and are not part of the game's data. True ghosts, in a sense. I've never heard of anything like this happening in a quest before."

"...But ghosts don't exist," Nayuta said firmly.

The detective shot her a teasing smile. "Indeed. But ghosts and NPCs in a VRMMORPG have something in common, in the sense that they do not possess a real form. There is a theory that all ghostly, paranormal phenomena are actually illusions conjured by the electrical signals of the brain, like a kind of misfire in our minds. I think it's quite possible that these ghosts are merely illusions created by our memories, being shown to us by our brains."

This made sense to Nayuta. Her own theory was quite similar to the detective's. The fact that the ghost had been someone she knew suggested that the game was making real-time use of each player's memory to generate an element within the virtual world.

Koyomi glanced up from the pudding she was devouring and murmured, "Hmm...? Huh? Wait a minute...isn't that pretty bad? You know, like...a violation of human rights or privacy laws or whatever...? Isn't that kind of a big problem?"

The detective sighed heavily. “Yes. It’s akin to spying on someone’s private memories. Lawmakers can’t keep up with the market, so it’s currently a legal gray zone. But if it turns out that’s what’s really happening, then *Asuka Empire* would be violating its own self-imposed ethics guidelines. That’s probably the main reason they took the quest down so quickly. On the other hand, there’s a more fundamental question at play: Is it even possible to read an individual’s memories and reflect them inside the game in real time?”

“...Are you saying it’s technically impossible?” Nayuta asked.

She engaged with *The Seed* for fun and had an amateur knowledge of VRMMORPG development. She’d wanted to submit to the 108 Apparitions contest the previous year, but she’d gotten stuck partway through designing her quest and ultimately given up on completing it.

As far as she knew, there were no examples of someone succeeding at such a feat.

Klever’s slender, foxlike eyes narrowed. “I won’t say it’s impossible. A genius like Akihiko Kayaba could probably manage it, and there might be some function with that capability hidden inside *The Seed*. That thing is like a Pandora’s box with the lid not yet fully lifted. Regardless...right now, it seems very unlikely that someone has managed to make a quest that caused an indeterminate number of players to have their memories read and reflected in the game in unique, novel ways. And they would have had to do so without the developers detecting it, mind you. It just doesn’t seem possible. I suspect that the mechanism at work here is something much simpler...and therefore much trickier to deal with.”

Partway through Klever’s speech, Koyomi’s eyes started spinning and losing focus. She wasn’t very good at following complex topics.

Nayuta kindly placed her hands over her friend’s ears and said, “Using a VRMMORPG to spy on someone’s memories is basically interrogation tech, isn’t it? For instance, could someone be using this quest as a sort of test case for gathering that kind of data...?”

Klever closed his eyes. “An interesting idea, but I think we can rule that one out. There’s nothing to gain from exposing dangerous technology like that to

public scrutiny. And if, on the other hand, you were trying to start a debate or warn people about the possibility of such activity, there are more visible ways to do so. We won't know the details until we look further into the matter—and right now, I'm more worried about Mr. Yanagi. I'm told he's being seen to at Yokohama Kohoku General Hospital. His wife seems to have some questions for me as well, so I'll go and pay him a visit there. In fact, I'm going to log out right now."

He scarfed down the last of his *mamekan* and stood up.

Yokohama...Kohoku General Hospital? Nayuta recognized that name.

Before she could even speak, her hand shot out and grabbed the detective's arm. Though startled by her own actions, she stared up the man, undaunted.

"Um... May I go to visit him, too? That hospital is actually very close to my home. I can get there by train in less than thirty minutes."

It was one of the biggest hospitals in the area—in the entire country, in fact. It was known for having one of the first test units of the Medicuboid, a medical-use full-dive system, and it admitted many patients with rare and incurable diseases.

Nayuta herself had stayed there before, when she was injured in a traffic accident. She hadn't had the chance to use the Medicuboid, of course, but you could rent AmuSpheres from the hospital, and many patients used them to while away the time as they recovered. Perhaps that was what Yanagi had been doing.

Klever was silent for a while before breaking eye contact with her. "If you're just curious, I don't think it's a good idea... You understand, I'm sure. That hospital has many patients in terminal care, and I have a feeling my client is one of them."

Nayuta gasped.

A week's deadline to finish the quest.

The outrageous reward.

A family member having to contact people on his behalf.

You didn't have to be a detective to put those clues together and come up with the likely answer.

"Oh... So that's why he was in such a hurry..." Koyomi said, distraught.

Nayuta narrowed her eyes at the detective. "That's all the more reason for me to go. I want to ask Mr. Yanagi directly if there's anything I can still do to help him."

Klever responded immediately. "Very well," he said. "Then you should join me. We'll meet at the ticket gate of the train station closest to the hospital. Visiting hours probably start in the afternoon, so come at twelve."

Nayuta was stunned. "I...didn't expect you to agree so quickly. I figured you'd bring up some kind of confidentiality rule and try to talk me out of it..."

Klever turned, the hem of his coat swaying with the motion, and said, "Mr. Yanagi and I don't yet have a contract, so there's no problem there—although that's just a technicality. But you two are valuable companions, and I want to do what I can to accommodate your requests. You're helping me, after all, and it's possible you might do so again in the future."

Koyomi sniffled a little. "Waaaah," she sobbed. "I want to go, too...but..."

"Where are you logging in from?"

".....Osaka."

That was a little too far. She could get to the hospital and back in a day, but the round trip would cost about 30,000 yen. Nayuta reached out and squeezed Koyomi's hand.

"Actually, I think it's better if you stay and wait. Maybe he'll log in all of a sudden and want something from us. And it would take you the whole day just to visit him, right?"

Koyomi frowned but ultimately agreed. "Plus, I have work tomorrow... Say hello to Mr. Yanagi for me, will you, Nayu? And Detective," she said, smiling but with murder in her eyes, "if you make a pass at Nayu in real life, I'll kill you. I'll destroy your social life, too. I'll go straight to the police and report you for harassing a teenage girl, so be on your best behavior. And I'm not exaggerating

to be funny, either. I'm from Shimane, so don't expect some Osakan comedy routine. I'm gonna put the screws to you so hard no one will be laughing."

Klever put a hand to his head, looking exhausted. "I hadn't considered that possibility," he said. "I'm sorry, but can I rescind my offer? I feel like I'm walking into some kind of trap."

"I'll be waiting at the station gate at noon," Nayuta said. "I don't mind if you're a little late, but if you leave me waiting, I'll tell Koyomi you played with my heart."

Klever rolled his eyes and looked up at the ceiling in resignation. "Very well... I suppose I'm trapped already. But let's at least share some identifying features. I'll be in a gray suit, waiting with my back to the wall and looking at my phone. My hair is black, but otherwise my features are more or less the same as in the game. You should be able to recognize me. You can send me a text message when you arrive."

"I...haven't decided what I'll wear, but I doubt I'll stand out much. As for something recognizable, all I can think of is to bring a paperback..."

Koyomi stared directly at Nayuta's chest. "You don't think you'll stand out...?"

"If you say one more word, Koyomi, I may have to reconsider our friendship."

The other girl's lips pressed together into a straight line. Then she turned back to her custard pudding à la mode and began to shovel more of it into her mouth. She might have a hard time with complex topics, but she *was* clever enough to know when to let up.

The two of them had met once in the real world. It had happened the previous month, when Koyomi accompanied her boss on a business trip to Tokyo. She had half a day to herself, so the two had agreed to meet up at a sweets shop.

Koyomi had admitted that, up until then, she'd assumed Nayuta's chest was purposely exaggerated in the game. The instant she realized it was real, she suddenly turned serious and started giving Nayuta life advice like "Be careful of strange, overly friendly men," and "You should probably assume anyone trying to speak to you has bad intentions."

As a matter of fact, Nayuta was already on the more guarded side. Even if their purpose was to visit an elderly man in the hospital, the thought of meeting up in person with this detective she barely knew gave her considerable pause. But she'd already come this far, and as a player, she didn't want to give up on the quest just yet.

That said, the biggest reason for her actions was something else.

I guess it's because of that ghost I saw...

She, too, had seen a ghost closely resembling someone dear to her who had passed away. A person who should not have existed within the game.

Just as she'd told the others, she'd only gotten a glimpse, and she hadn't been afraid. She'd never believed it could be a real ghost, after all.

But while she hadn't felt any fear, the sight had brought back a familiar feeling of loneliness, so powerful it was almost scary in its own right. What she was searching for now was a direction to follow, some kind of guidepost to help her forget that loneliness. If she did nothing and let herself stew in that gloomy feeling, she was going to end up sinking into darkness.

Klever said he needed to look into something and left the teahouse first. Koyomi paused, spoon in hand, and sighed. "I hope Mr. Yanagi's all right... Maybe it's weird to say this about someone you just met a day ago, but...I hope he gets better."

"I agree."

Nayuta had the sense that their wish was unlikely to be granted. That was why Yanagi had been so determined to finish the quest within a week.

But if it's been taken down, then there's nothing we can do...

She was concerned about his condition in the hospital. If he could hang on long enough, the developers might be able to fix the quest and restore it to the game in time.

Nayuta stared at the detective's empty bowl of *mamekan*. A thought occurred to her: If possible, she wanted Yanagi to have the chance to taste it, too.

It was noon on Sunday when Nayuta passed through the station's ticket gate into the crowd and immediately spotted the detective.

The handsome young man dressed in a suit was standing against the wall, completely absorbed in his phone.

There was no way she could mistake him. His hair was black instead of silver, but otherwise his appearance and manner were exactly the same as in the game. In fact, his image was quite striking, and female passersby kept stopping briefly, distracted.

It wasn't just that he was attractive, either. The young man reminded her of a trickster *yokai*—sly yet alluring. The way he blended into his surroundings made him stand out even more. While he was dressed like a typical businessman, he was almost too immaculate to seem human, which gave him an alien aspect he was unable to fully hide. It was as if he were a fox pretending to be human and not quite succeeding.

It wasn't just women who were entranced by him, either; children openly stared in wonder. Nayuta thought he must look like a fantastical creature to them.

...That must make things hard for him, as a detective, she thought. If he tried to tail someone, they would spot him in an instant.

Before she called out to him, Nayuta gave herself a quick once-over. Her brown sweater and long black skirt were quite plain, but that was simply how she always dressed, rather than a conscious attempt at sobriety to suit the mood of their hospital visit. She always tried to cover up as much skin as possible while outdoors.

Koyomi had teased her, saying that, paradoxically, such behavior was even *more* exciting to men. But the truth was that wearing flashy clothes made her uneasy. Her facial expressions tended to be stiff and didn't suit that sort of fashion. Plus, she was a homebody who didn't get out much and had little opportunity to dress up.

She ran her hands through her hair to fix it up a bit, then walked over to Klever.

“It’s nice to meet you, Detective. I’m Nayuta,” she said, her voice barely above a whisper. Then she bowed.

Klever looked up from his phone. He stared at her curiously for a moment before responding.

“...I’m surprised. You look almost exactly the same as in the game.”

“...Not as similar as you, I think. I could have recognized you without any help.”

Her clothes were completely different from those worn by Nayuta the warrior priestess. But Klever was dressed in a suit—very similar to what he wore in-game.

The detective peered at her intently, not bothering to hide his interest. “Are you...from a rich family, perhaps?”

“No, my family is perfectly ordinary. Why do you ask?”

“You have very good posture. You speak well, and you don’t seem frivolous or shallow. Your demeanor isn’t very typical of a high school girl.”

It was hard to tell if he was complimenting her or interrogating her.

“I don’t know if this is relevant, but my mother was a police officer, and both my father and brother are on the force.” She figured telling the truth here would act as something of a deterrent.

“...Ah, that would explain it,” he said. “So that’s your story.” At that point, he turned and started off toward the hospital.

The sidewalk was narrow, fenced in with guardrails, and they were forced to walk single file when anyone met them from the other direction. Nayuta wound up several steps behind the detective for most of the trip.

“Since your parents and brother all joined the force, do you expect to do the same?”

“No. I intend to go to a normal college and get an ordinary office job. Police work seems difficult, and I’m not one for physical activity.”

To be blunt, her chest was too big. Running was difficult for her, and even

gym class was an ordeal these days. Her desire to be as light and agile as possible in the game world was a reflection of the stress she felt in her everyday life.

Klever, who had no idea about any of this, came to his own, slightly off, conclusion.

“A wise choice. Some people are suited for such work and others aren’t. It’d be one thing if you were used to athletic culture and its strict hierarchies, but I imagine a quiet girl like you would find it difficult.”

“...You seem well informed. Do you know any police officers?”

“A fair number. It’s part of my work. Oh, not as a detective, mind you.”

He reached into his suit pocket and pulled out a business card. Nayuta took it and learned Klever’s real name for the first time.

“‘Clovers Network Security Corporation...President and Representative Director, Kaisei Kurei’... You’re the president?”

The fact that he was a company president at such a young age was even fishier than his detective job.

Recognizing the cold skepticism in her gaze, Klever hastened to explain himself.

“It’s just a title. The company was a start-up security business I founded with some friends, but I was the best talker of the group, so I wound up as president.”

“Ahh... And is your company in good hands, given that its president spends his time playing games...?”

She knew she was probably crossing a line with this question, but she couldn’t help it. The original plan had been for Klever to start working on Yanagi’s request the following day, virtually around the clock.

“It’s not a problem. Profits from both my detective and tourism businesses are calculated as income for the company. In short, this is part of my job. I’ve gained quite a few clients through the game. If anything, quitting my side job would lose us clients and hurt our business. You really can’t discount good old

word of mouth.”

So the tour guide business was part of his regular work activities, helping to drum up new customers.

“In short,” he continued, “I see Mr. Yanagi and his family as valuable potential customers. Have you figured out any clues to his identity yet?”

Nayuta shook her head. “All I know is that if his offer was serious, he must be rich. And based on his knowledge of mochi, I figured he was a chef or an academic, or perhaps a teacher. I doubt any of those are true, though.”

Klever turned around and narrowed his eyes at her. They’d reached a red light, and Nayuta had caught up with him.

“What’s your reasoning?”

“Just so you know, my hunches are never right. But if I had to say, it’s his way of speaking. He’s very humble, yet precise and refined. He seems to come from a good background. He speaks like an expert, I suppose. And not in the sense of an entrepreneur out to make his own fortune, but like the second or third person to inherit a family business... If we were in some historical drama, I’d guess he was the retired head of a big merchant family.”

The detective exhaled in disbelief. “Not only is that more than a hunch, your instinct is spot on and your analysis excellent. He is indeed the retired head of a famous old company—he’s the chairman of Yanagiya Ryuuzendou.”

Nayuta couldn’t believe her ears. Klever brought up the Yanagiya homepage on his phone and showed it to her. The man in the photo alongside the chairman’s message was indeed quite similar to Yanagi’s character in the game.

Yanagiya Ryuuzendou was one of the major powers in the Japanese traditional sweets industry. It had subleased retail space inside department stores all over the country.

Its trademark product was Yanagi mochi, a dessert with the scent and flavor of fresh fruit kneaded into the mochi itself. The company sold apple, yuzu, peach, tangerine, and grape mochi as well as seasonal flavors like cherry, watermelon, persimmon, and chestnut.

Yanagi mochi came packed eight to a box with a variety of flavors at a reasonable price. It was a beloved product with many devoted fans. Because it was such a classic souvenir, Nayuta herself had eaten the mochi many times.

The walk signal turned green, and they crossed the street. There were no other pedestrians nearby, but the detective talked in a hushed whisper all the same.

“Teiichi Yanagi is the current chairman of Yanagiya Ryuuzendou and the fifth to inherit the position. That’s Mr. Yanagi’s real identity. When he was younger, he worked directly with the company’s products as a craftsman. He was head of their confectionary school until just a few years ago. Strictly speaking, he’s neither a cook nor a teacher, but considering he’s more or less worked as both, your instincts were frighteningly accurate. Maybe it’s your police blood.”

“It was just a guess,” said Nayuta, turning to look up at the man from the side. “And when did *you* figure it out?”

The hospital was now visible in the distance.

The detective grinned innocently. “Oh, I knew from the start. The moment my contact warned me to be very courteous, I verified my client’s identity. But...I haven’t yet heard why he’s so intent on the Ghost Orchestra quest. That’s what I’m hoping to find out now.”

“...But you have a guess already, don’t you?”

Klever exhaled. “Yes. You seem like you do, too, but you don’t need to say it. I think we’ll hear the explanation from them today.”

Nayuta nodded and fell silent.

“Incidentally,” continued the detective, “Mr. Yanagi’s condition didn’t worsen directly after he logged out, but rather after he saw the report about the quest’s removal. It must have come as quite a shock to him.”

Nayuta could easily imagine how disappointed he must’ve been.

A few minutes later, they arrived at the entrance to Yokohama Kohoku General Hospital. Since it was a Sunday, there were no outpatients visiting the clinic, but there were a number of visitors going in through the front gate.

As they followed the others, Nayuta took another furtive glance at Klever's face in profile. While he gave off the impression of an otherworldly fox, he was only human.

And yet his cool, dispassionate eyes seemed somehow hollow, like empty husks.

§

Yanagi's hospital room was extremely small.

It contained a single full-electric hospital bed and three stackable stools for visitors to sit on, but no other furniture to speak of. The wall separating his room from the neighboring one was so thin it was practically a partition.

Based on what she'd learned along the way, Nayuta had been expecting a private room for VIPs, so when she saw his actual accommodations, she was slightly taken aback. The sky outside the window was blue with scattered clouds, but the only other things to look at were nearby buildings and roads. It wasn't much of a view.

Either the fancier rooms were already taken, or Yanagi preferred more humble surroundings. Nayuta suspected it was the latter.

Once inside, they saw Yanagi in a drug-induced sleep, and a beaming elderly woman.

"Oh my goodness... To think my husband was able to make such young and attractive friends at his age... I'm a little jealous. Hello, I'm his wife, Suzuka Yanagi."

The kimono-clad old woman smiled pleasantly at them both and briefly sized them up. "Um...pardon me, but are you two...a couple?"

Thankfully, the detective calmly defused this bomb before it could cause any damage. "No, she's a student who came to Mr. Yanagi's aid when he needed directions and stuck around to help him with the game. She and I met for the first time yesterday."

Suzuka's look of bewilderment was almost childlike in its simplicity. "Oh really? I just assumed, because you look so good together—please pardon me. I

suppose there are regulations about that sort of thing, and you have to keep up appearances, yes?”

It seemed she still wasn't convinced. Then, with the practiced charm of someone used to working in service, Suzuka fixed Nayuta with a bright smile.

“My dear, you look so lovely... Was my husband going around picking up girls in that game of his? He never, ever cheated on me until this year. Why, I'm shocked!”

Her jokes were so forward that Nayuta didn't feel comfortable playing along. “No, nothing like that. We saw Mr. Yanagi was lost, so we reached out to help. After that, we decided to keep doing what we could to assist him...”

Suzuka giggled. “That's just like him. For whatever reason, he always manages to get help from others when he needs it most... Not to toot my husband's horn, but I wonder if it's a reflection of his good character. Of course, his greatest fortune was to marry such a wonderful wife, wouldn't you say?”

Behind all the cheek and charm, it was clear the two made a lovely couple. Suzuka happily proceeded to offer some unsolicited advice.

“You should choose your life partner carefully, my dear. But not *too* carefully. Good first impressions are rare, you see. And of course, no one is perfect. If a man is handsome enough, you'll be able to overlook a few flaws, which is why gentlemen like this detective here are in such high demand. You might seem far apart in age now, but by sixty or seventy that won't mean a thing. I'm over a dozen years younger than my husband, in fact—”

“Pardon me for cutting you off, but I must repeat that we are *not* in a relationship. I'd rather not have the police after me,” insisted the detective, though he suspected it was futile. Smarting because she'd seized the reins of the conversation so quickly, he was increasingly desperate to get to the actual reason for their visit. “If you don't mind me asking, how is Mr. Yanagi's condition? A companion of ours in the game was also quite concerned about him,” he said, using Koyomi to move the conversation along.



Yanagi was asleep in the bed with an IV in his arm. He looked much more haggard than he had in the game, and his body appeared somehow shriveled.

Suzuka reached over and rubbed her husband's gnarled hand with a smile. "He's fine. They've got him under with the drugs, but he should wake up soon. I'm sorry to have brought you here so suddenly. I probably should have gone to visit you, but I wanted to be at his side, and I don't know anything about these games. It's a vee-arr...en-en-oh...?"

"VRMMORPG," the detective quietly corrected her. "Virtual reality massively multiplayer online game. Basically, it's a game you play over the Internet, set in a space that seems just like real life, where many different people can play and interact at the same time. I run a makeshift tour guide business there."

After such games were repeatedly singled out for criticism by the media during the SAO Incident, the abbreviation had gained mainstream recognition. But it had yet to reach some pockets of society in which people didn't watch TV talk shows and the like.

Suzuka frowned. "This all sounds very complicated... I'm sorry, I just don't understand it. But I can tell you that he was very grateful to you all. He was actually quite energized last night, and that continued until he saw the news about the game being shut down this morning. I'm really sorry that we've caused you all to worry. I feel very bad about it."

Her gentle face held both resignation and sadness as she bowed to them.

She must know that her husband's death is close at hand, and she's made peace with it. Nayuta closed her eyes and took in a slow breath. The conversation they were about to have was bound to be heavy.

Silence settled in for a moment, and then the detective spoke up.

"...May I ask just one question? Why is Mr. Yanagi so fixated on this particular quest?"

"Quest...?" Suzuka seemed baffled. She clearly had no understanding of in-game lingo.

"Pardon me. When I say 'quest,' I mean the Ghost Orchestra we spoke of.

Considering the reward he offered, I feel there must be some pressing reason for all this.”

Suzuka looked away. “What did he tell you?”

“Nothing. But...I have my suspicions,” Klever admitted. He considered whether to elaborate, then said, even more softly, “I hate to ask about such a private matter, but could you confirm some things for me? Was Ghost Orchestra created by a member of your family—most likely your grandchild? And sadly, has that person already passed away...?”

His quiet voice was full of certainty. Nayuta had reached the same conclusion herself.

The 108 Apparitions event in *Asuka Empire* was mostly comprised of quests submitted by the game’s players. Naturally, all of those submissions came from people, and those people had families.

Being close to death, Yanagi wanted to see through the quest that his grandchild had worked so hard to create before passing on himself. That very human emotion—his love for his family—had driven him to pick up a VRMMORPG for the first time in his long life.

The fact that he’d hire a detective he’d never met to help him meant he could no longer ask the quest’s designer.

And then there had been Yanagi’s demeanor within the game: melancholy, quiet, helpless.

Suzuka brought her handkerchief up to her mouth. “You’ve guessed correctly. Last December, our grandson, Kiyofumi, passed away. He was still just a teenager... He hadn’t even lived a quarter as long as we have... But he’d struggled with illness for a long, long time. It kept him out of school, and in the end, he succumbed...”

Nayuta was speechless. She was too young, too inexperienced to know what to say to a grandmother who’d lost her grandchild.

Her suspicions had begun at the castle gate, when Koyomi had mentioned that it reminded her of Nikko, where she’d gone on an elementary school field trip. When he heard this, Yanagi had seemed shaken. Nayuta had thought of a

few possible reasons for his reaction, and one of them had turned out to be the truth. Of course, she wasn't happy to be proven right.

Klever frowned. "I'm sure this is a painful topic, but...would I be correct in assuming your grandson had known his time was coming for a while?"

She nodded slowly. "Yes... Ghost Orchestra was the name of Kiyofumi's first and only creation. He really wanted to leave behind something as evidence that he'd lived. When he heard from the company that they'd accepted his submission, he was so happy. He couldn't wait for the day when everyone would get the chance to play it... But his body just couldn't hold out." Her voice cracked.

Nayuta had to turn away. It was too painful to watch. The detective patted her on the shoulder.

"Come now, don't you cry, too. You must have already realized the reason Mr. Yanagi was keeping this a secret from us."

Nayuta had to admit he was right. Yanagi wanted help completing the quest his grandson had made, but he didn't want to burden his new companions with the depressing truth—or perhaps he wanted to see other people enjoying his grandson's quest without the knowledge of its creation weighing on their minds.

Once you knew the tragic circumstances behind the quest's creation, it was impossible to view it with the same eyes. And even worse, now that Ghost Orchestra had been removed, Yanagi would probably never get another chance to try it.

Nayuta felt the horrible sadness of it all weighing heavily on her conscience. Suzuka had probably wanted to avoid this.

"Detective...I don't really know much about these games. When will they put the quest back up...?" she asked, concern clear in her voice.

Klever's expression was grave, and Nayuta could tell he wasn't acting. "To be perfectly honest, I don't know," he said. "It depends on the developers, but if previous cases are any indication, I believe it will take a month at minimum."

"One month..."

She looked crestfallen. Yanagi wasn't going to last that long. At this point, even the one week he'd initially requested seemed like a stretch.

"...Suzuka, don't make this harder for the detective..."

Yanagi had woken up and was now speaking. Unlike in the game, his voice was so weak it was barely audible.

"Mr. Yanagi," Nayuta said, kneeling down next to the bed.

"I so appreciate...that you've come to visit me. You must be...Nayuta, I suppose...?" Yanagi asked, smiling wanly. She nodded.

"Yes, I'm Nayuta. Koyomi is in Osaka, so she couldn't make it... But she was very, very concerned for you. She hopes that you'll get better soon, so we can try that quest again together." She hoped this would encourage him.

Yanagi bobbed his head weakly and looked away. "I was...having a dream. My late grandson appeared in it... It seemed like he wanted to say something, but I couldn't hear him... I was just wondering what I should do when a fox appeared, and I woke up. In fact, the fox looked much like you, Detective..."

Klever's face broke into a grin. "I'm often told I have foxlike features. Once, when I visited a shrine to the fox god Inari, strangers even stopped to pray to me," he joked. Even Yanagi had to smile at that one.

"...I'm sorry you had to come all this way to see me. I'll make sure that you receive your down payment later, but given the circumstances, I think my request is—"

"Ah, yes, your request. I was going to ask you about that," Klever said, loudly and clearly, suddenly all business. "We didn't sign any contracts yesterday, but I don't think we need to wait for Monday anymore. I ask that you decide right here and now if you wish to officially hire me. The price will be the same as described yesterday, and if you agree to sign, I will proceed with all my ability to fulfill your request within one week, as we discussed. The methods utilized will be at my sole discretion, and—"

"W-wait, Detective...", Nayuta interjected.

The Ghost Orchestra quest had been removed from the game. They couldn't

even play it right now, much less finish it within a week. Klever must be well aware of that.

The detective winked at her. “As I told you this morning, I haven’t given up yet. Mr. Yanagi, if you still have the spirit and desire to play the game, I offer you my full support. Once you’re ready to full-dive again, let’s resume our attempts. I was thinking as soon as tomorrow,” he said casually.

Nayuta felt dizzy. “But, Detective, the quest is—!”

Klever glanced at her but did not address her concern. “Do you have school tomorrow? I suppose it’s too early for spring break.”

“...It’s only a half day. We’ll be receiving our graded final exams and sitting through a supplementary lecture, but that’s it. I should be back home before noon. And I’m not involved in any sports or clubs.”

The detective clapped his hands. “Very good. Then let’s meet at my office at one o’clock. If you’re able, Mr. Yanagi, please do come by. And as for you and your friend, I’ll be preparing formal documents to bring you on as part-timers at my company.”

“...Huh? Um... Wait, what are you talking about?” she asked.

At a loss, she and Yanagi shared a look. To them, Klever’s grinning form looked exactly like that of a wicked fox disguised as a human.

§

Cats are gods.

In ancient Egypt, there was a cat goddess named Bastet.

Foxes are also gods.

The Inari shrines found all over Japan worship Ukanomitama no Kami, a god of agriculture, of whom all foxes are servants.

“So consider this: The second floor of this building has the cat god and Inari side by side. It’s like how Japan combines Shinto and Buddhist practice, only in this case it’s a mix of Catism and Foxism, much to the delight of furries everywhere...!”

“Koyomi, sometimes you spout the most random words I’ve ever heard. What’s a furry?”

“...Umm... Someone whose love covers a wider range than most?”

It was Monday, the day after Nayuta and Klever visited Yanagi’s hospital room. Nayuta and Koyomi were seated on the couch in the Three-Leaf Detective Agency’s office, whiling away the time with particularly idle chatter.

“Just because I look like a fox doesn’t make this an Inari shrine...,” said the detective, who’d just shown up. “Also, I believe I said to meet here at one o’clock. Can anyone tell me what time it is now?”

“Oh, heya, Detective. You know you have a fancy analog clock on the wall, right? And it says...eleven.” Koyomi was enjoying resting her head on Nayuta’s lap, and Klever’s interruption had irritated her.

The detective pressed his fingers to his eyes. “Clearly it was a mistake to set the door to unlock for party members... What about school, Nayuta?”

“I told you it was only in the morning, didn’t I? I live five minutes away from school, so it takes no time at all to commute.”

“...And what about work, Koyomi?”

“Huh? Are you saying your company doesn’t give paid vacation days? Yikes, what a nightmare employer... Be careful not to draw the attention of the labor board, okay?”

He sat down at his desk and sighed heavily. “Yes, I suppose our company doesn’t tend to hand out vacation days on a Monday so close to the end of the fiscal year,” he said sardonically. “In fact, I’m surprised you got approval on such short notice.”

Koyomi’s eyes went glassy. “Fiscal year... Monday... Nayu, the detective is picking on me...”

“Don’t worry, Koyomi, I’m on your side,” Nayuta said, kindly rubbing her friend’s head and glaring at the detective. “I’m grateful that you were so eager to help out that you took off during the busy season.”

Klever cleared his throat awkwardly. “Well... I’m not *ungrateful*, of course. But

surely lying down on my couch isn't very stimulating. Why don't you spend some time elsewhere? It'll be two whole hours before Mr. Yanagi shows up."

Koyomi rubbed her cheek against Nayuta's *hakama* and purred, "Oh, don't mind us. It's just so cozy in here... The scent of tea almost makes it feel like a café. And since there's no one here to see, Nayu will let me rest on her lap all I want."

It wasn't an ideal situation, of course, but since Koyomi was using up valuable paid vacation time, Nayuta felt obliged to meet her halfway. Besides, this was only a virtual body.

The detective tapped his desk with a finger. "I see. And do I count as 'no one,' too?"

Koyomi stared at him for a good long while. "I guess...you're just so shady, you seem more like an NPC."

"Ever since we first met, I've been truly amazed by your ability to say whatever you feel like, regardless of the consequences." Giving up, the detective flipped open the laptop on his desk.

Koyomi's eyes flew open. "Wait... What's with that retro computer? It's totally destroying the atmosphere... Is that thing real?"

"I simply refined the work-tools system into the format of a laptop," he explained as he booted it up. "This is one way to use the virtual office suite's functions. I'm guessing that Kiyofumi Yanagi, the boy who created Ghost Orchestra, did something similar to work on his quest using The Seed's tools from within a virtual space. Even if his body was uncooperative in the real world, no such handicap exists here. Someone who's lost an arm will have both in virtual reality, and one suffers essentially no physical fatigue such as eyestrain, stiff shoulders, or back pain. There's still the problem of brain fatigue and lethargy from lack of exercise, of course... But in terms of giving bedridden people an environment in which to work and be active, VR has transcended the fields of both gaming and medicine. It's revolutionizing the work environment, too."

Koyomi's head flopped to one side. "Um... I haven't really heard of that happening."

“Well, it’s limited mostly to desk work. Workers in the majority of careers still find their existing environments preferable so long as they don’t have any significant physical handicaps. But its use will only expand in the future. Workplace rent will drop, and once you can perform your job just by putting an AmuSphere on your head at home, you won’t have to worry about losing time and money commuting. It’s completely different from the previous generation’s virtual offices, which only involved connecting your computer to the company network. And these benefits can apply to schools as well.”

“Wait... Are you saying I won’t have to ride on a packed train anymore? Oh man... That’s the life... I can’t wait...,” Koyomi babbled blissfully.

“It’s not all good, however.” Klever sighed. “Once things start to change more rapidly, the value of office buildings and real estate in general will crater. Transportation agencies will go into the red as demand drops. Restaurants that rely on office workers and students for business will lose their revenue, and once the need to physically travel to work and school diminishes, various industries such as those producing cosmetics, men’s and women’s business attire, and school uniforms will suffer, too. You can see how this will have ripple effects all across the economy...”

Koyomi’s eyes were glazing over again. But Klever wasn’t finished. He continued seamlessly despite manipulating the computer at the same time.

“And it’s not just offices and schools. The economy exists to satisfy human desires. If people no longer require the real thing, and substitutes can be provided with low-cost data instead of real physical objects, many manufacturing and service industries will be out a lot of money. Yes, this is all inevitable as times continue to change... But I feel certain that there are many, many companies out there with bleak prospects for the future.”

The detective sounded like he was talking about some hypothetical issue that had nothing to do with him. Perhaps it didn’t, but it felt like he was testing them, gauging their reaction to his ideas.

Koyomi rubbed Nayuta’s legs through her *hakama*. “Hmm... But 108 Apparitions has a whole bunch of business sponsors, doesn’t it? Sounds like they’re quite excited about the new technology.”

“Those companies are trying to get into the VR marketplace now, while they still have the chance. They’re testing out various strategies, like selling virtual clothes instead of real ones or making real versions of products within the game, to test the market’s appetite for such things so they can adjust as needed. *Asuka Empire* wants a big, splashy event to bring in more players, and the companies want to study the market and develop new business ideas. It’s the combination of these two interests that made 108 Apparitions possible. Which is why, now that it’s gotten off the ground, they’re especially sensitive to any potential issues. I think that’s one reason why they took down Ghost Orchestra so quickly.”

Nayuta considered these ideas.

Reality and data.

The real world and the virtual world.

As long as humans were living, breathing creatures, some things would always be tied to the real world. The virtual world could not exist without electricity, hardware, and the infrastructure to support it.

Data couldn’t give human bodies the nutrients they needed to survive, so agriculture, the fishing and livestock industries, and all the mechanisms and structures involved in distributing their products were crucial for survival.

But excluding things like those, the pros of moving into the virtual world would likely vastly outweigh the cons.

Physical handicaps could be drastically reduced, if not completely eliminated.

You could drive down empty highways—fly like a bird, swim through the depths like a fish, be as free as a cat.

There would be no waiting in lines. You could enjoy fancy dinners whenever you wanted for cheap, without needing a reservation, or experience an exhilarating night with the partner of your choice—no strings attached. Thrilling adventures and terrifying experiences would no longer carry the fear of death.

Even if all of it was artificial, the experiences would allow you to disconnect from your real-life shortcomings.

The closer VR got to simulating a human's five senses, the more reality lost the fight against the alluring possibilities of the virtual world.

Hundreds of years from now, reality might be completely unnecessary for some people. A few old works of science fiction presented just such a scenario.

In these stories, society was perfectly managed. Simple labor was entirely mechanized—even management of the machines was mechanized—and humanity lived within a pleasurable dream. Even children were conceived with artificial insemination and born in cultivation vats.

In these tales, people lived in dreams from birth until death, right up until the moment some cataclysm sent the whole system crashing down on top of them. Nayuta would not be surprised if such a future was indeed in store for humanity.

Of course, that was only one possibility, and it would be far, far in the future, generations after her own life had ended. But maybe this particular moment in time was a turning point toward that eventuality. Though whether such a future was something to be envied or feared came down to one's personal values.

To take an extreme example, if a pandemic capable of wiping out humanity as a whole were to spread around the globe, and people had to be isolated in shelters for the survival of the species, such a virtual world could provide a pleasant means of salvation.

As Nayuta lost herself in thought, a black cat came from the back of the office carrying cups of tea. The scent brought her out of her musings and back to the present, and she glanced at the detective. Klever noticed her gaze and flashed her a teasing smile.

“What’s the matter, Nayuta? Didn’t get enough sleep?”

“No... I was just daydreaming for a moment. Detective...what do you think about the progress of VR tech? Despite your virtual job here, I get the feeling you’re rather skeptical about it, or at the very least, that you don’t take an idealist view...”

Klever’s eyes narrowed, but not with mirth. He was silent for a moment, thinking.

“I’ll admit that I didn’t expect such a question from you... But if you’re asking if my opinion is positive or negative, I’d say it’s largely positive. That said, I’m not going to delude myself, because there are indeed many dangerous elements to VR. And most importantly, whether I support VR or not, the fact is that the world has already tasted its fruit and won’t be giving it up, even if that fruit is poisoned. It’s simply too appealing. And that’s why, if we’re going to avoid future tragedy, we must consider all of its dangers and do what we can to avoid and minimize them—whether we like it or not.”

It almost felt like Klever was talking to himself. But his answer drew Nayuta’s curiosity.

“May I ask another question? What do you think about Akihiko Kayaba, the researcher who caused the *SAO* Incident and who brought about so much growth in VR?”

Klever’s faint smile froze on his face. This seemed to Nayuta to indicate a big, unexpected shift in mood for the detective. But he was an accomplished actor and soon covered up his alarm with a show of calmness.

“...Why do you ask?”

“I just...don’t understand. He knew more about VR than anyone, so why did he commit such a massive atrocity? He must have known it would ruin the lives of countless people. He was responsible for the deaths of thousands and warped the lives of so many thousands more, including their families and friends. What did he want to *achieve*?”

Klever’s expression turned serious. His foxlike eyes briefly flashed with something akin to madness.

“Whatever the answer...I will never forgive him,” Klever said, his voice clear and firm as he folded his hands on his desk. “I despise him with every fiber of my being. I hate him enough that if he were still alive, I would try to kill him myself. He committed a massacre for the sake of his own twisted ideals, and that makes him no different from any other mass murderer in history who committed horrible atrocities to protect their own power. The fact that he knew what he was doing and did it anyway suggests that he felt very little shame, if any. You sometimes hear about scientists racked by guilt when they see their

findings used to create weapons. But in his case, no one else misapplied his research. He built the trap on his own and intentionally committed mass murder. None of what he did is defensible.”

Nayuta was stunned. Klever had been so aloof about everything else that this reaction seemed out of character.

Koyomi was frozen in her lap, so intimidated by Klever’s intensity that she couldn’t even muster a snappy comeback.

His voice was calm, and he wasn’t shouting, but that only made the menace in his words more powerful. There was undeniable hatred in his eyes—he was like a mystical fox cursing its foe.

“You asked me what I think of Akihiko Kayaba. My answer is simple: He was a conceited, egomaniacal mass murderer who is worthy of nothing but contempt. It is a waste of time and energy trying to figure out what he wanted to do. Any answer would only be a cruel joke to the families and friends of those who died.”

His anger helped Nayuta realize something.

“You...you’re an *SAO* survivor,” she said.

His usual sly smile returned. “You’d make a better detective than me. How did you know? Yes, I was one of the people trapped in that game.”

His anger had the clarity and purpose of one who knew exactly who and what he hated. Klever had probably known Akihiko Kayaba personally—or perhaps he’d known Heathcliff, his character inside *Sword Art Online*.

In that sense, Klever had a slightly different view of Kayaba from Nayuta, who only knew the man by name.

At last, she understood why the smile constantly plastered across the detective’s face had seemed so suspicious to her on their first meeting.

Even when he smiled, he wasn’t smiling. He merely fashioned his features into the shape of a smile, while his actual emotions went unexpressed.

Koyomi finally broke out of her paralysis and rose from Nayuta’s lap. “Wow... I’ve never seen an *SAO* survivor in person before...”

“Please don’t treat me like some exotic animal,” he teased, back to his typical aloof manner. “There are about six thousand of us out there. We’re not that rare, sadly.”

“Man... That means you’ve been through a major ordeal...,” said Koyomi, her face still gloomy. “I’m sorry for calling you sketchy. After something like that, it’s no wonder you don’t trust people anymore...”

“I’m not some kind of misanthrope... For one thing, I got out alive. The people who died had it much worse. The ghost I saw in the quest was a friend who died in Aincrad.”

Nayuta’s heart throbbed painfully.

The detective looked away. “He even showed up in the plate armor he used to wear. I could tell something was off, but...until they know how and why these ghosts that don’t exist in the game data are showing up, the devs can’t reupload the quest. Like I said at the hospital, that’s our angle. Upon my pride as a detective, I will fulfill Mr. Yanagi’s request.” His voice was firm and determined. Nayuta nodded, matching his intensity.

It would take at least one month for the quest to be restored. In other words, one month was the time needed to investigate and correct it.

But who would conduct that investigation?

That was Klever’s way in.

Immediately after the quest was removed, he’d used his personal connections to get Clovers Network Security Corporation a contract to provide test players to assist in the investigation.

It seemed he had a direct connection to the developers, though the details remained a mystery.

“As it happens, the company that runs *Asuka Empire* is a valuable business partner of ours,” Klever had explained the day before, sounding for all the world like a con man revealing his tricks. “I’ve cultivated trust and a body of work with them, though it was Mr. Yanagi’s presence that helped us over the finish line. There’s a person high up in the company whom I’m on good terms with, and he’s a very good egg. When I explained the situation, he helped ram

us through without another word.”

He’d apparently arranged most of this before even visiting the hospital, meaning he’d been negotiating with the game company before he even had confirmation of Yanagi’s grandson’s story.

He was probably desperate to strike before the devs could decide how to start testing. Still, Nayuta was stunned by the speed with which he worked.

In the end, his gambit had paid off, and Nayuta, Koyomi, and Yanagi would be officially hired by Klever’s company to test and investigate Ghost Orchestra.

“I have to say, I’m surprised they’re allowing outsiders like us to handle the testing,” said Nayuta. “I would have assumed they’d take care of that internally.”

The detective nodded. “Naturally, the developers of *Asuka Empire* have their own testing and QA teams. But they’re all busy looking over the newest quests set to come out in the next few weeks. It’s hard for them to react to spontaneous, unforeseen issues like this one. They have another, more reactive QA team to address any problems that pop up, but they’re always dealing with multiple tickets at once, which is why it takes so much time to restore a quest to the game. And because of the cost and security concerns, they don’t like to hire outside consultants. In short, as the representative of a security company that does a lot of business with them, I was just barely able to score us this job by getting down on my hands and knees and begging to be allowed to do it for practically no compensation.”

“You did that? Got down on your hands and knees...?” Koyomi asked quietly.

Klever grimaced, a rare expression from him. “Not physically, but emotionally. I owe the developers a favor now. Of course, this is a good deal for them, too. For one thing, it’ll be our responsibility if anything happens to a player, not theirs. And if it goes well, they can get the quest back up faster. But you’ll have to agree to a confidentiality clause. No telling anyone what we see and hear from here on out. I’m not so worried about Nayuta, but you, Koyomi... You seem like someone with loose lips.”

“What?! I mean, yes, I’m chatty, but I know what not to say! You know, things like Nayu’s measurements, her bra size...”

“If you tell anyone, I won’t let you rest on my lap anymore,” Nayu interjected.

Koyomi’s mouth snapped shut. She clearly hadn’t learned her lesson—she should’ve known that remark would earn her a scolding.

At that point, there was a knock at the door.

“Pardon me,” said a voice. “It’s Yanagi. I know I’m a bit early, but...”

Klever stood up from his desk. They’d agreed to meet at one o’clock, and it wasn’t even noon yet.

“Why is everyone so impatient...? Mr. Yanagi, the girls are already here, too. Please, come in.”

The elderly monk opened the door, tucked his woven straw hat under his arm, and bowed. “I’m very sorry about the worry I caused you the other day. But you’ve helped me get back in the game, so to speak. I hope we’re able to make some progress today.”

Compared to the body in the hospital bed, this Yanagi looked hale, hearty, and full of life.

“Hello, Mr. Yanagi. Um... The doctor didn’t tell you not to do this, did he...?” Nayuta fretted.

Yanagi smiled awkwardly. “Yes, he did. Usually, a virtual environment is a good thing, because it offers the patient a more comfortable setting. But because this is a horror-themed event, he’s worried about my blood pressure and heart rate... But he understands my reasons and agreed to look the other way. It’s an old man’s last wish, after all. My wife supported my decision as well.”

“That’s good to hear,” said Klever. “I don’t know what I’d do if I had to convince your doctor.”

And if Yanagi hadn’t shown up, Klever’s entire scheme would have been pointless. The detective showed the monk to a chair, then laid out three documents on the desk.

“These are part-time work contracts. Digitize and save them... Well, technically, they’re already digitized, but the point is, I’d like your signatures,

just to make it formal. Using your real names, not your character names, if you please.”

Nayuta and Koyomi reached for the papers and looked them over. The contracts contained the normal stuff about disclaimers and hourly rates. Nothing seemed out of the ordinary.

“I wasn’t planning to take any money for doing this...,” said Nayuta.

“I’m sorry, but I cannot register you as playtesters unless you sign. Formally speaking, I told the developers that my company had arranged for some part-time playtesters. They need to know that I have signed contracts so that everything is on the up-and-up.”

“Hmmm.” Koyomi hummed thoughtfully. “My company’s fairly chill, so I don’t think there will be a problem. But just in case...they won’t find out about this, right?”

“As long as you don’t say anything about it.” Klever probably meant that as a joke, but Nayuta thought it sounded pretty accurate.

Yanagi chuckled ruefully. “I’m paying you as your client, Detective—and you’re asking me to accept part of your expenses as a salary? This is a rather strange arrangement.”

“Yes, I’m aware,” the detective said with a little smile. “It is the only situation in which I can ever imagine paying a major businessman like yourself an hourly wage.” He picked up Nayuta’s signed contract, and his eyes paused on the sheet.

“Is there something wrong?” she asked.

The detective stared at the paper and tried to feign a neutral mood. “Nayuta... your...your last name...”

Her signature read *Yurina Kushiinada*.

This was not an uncommon reaction, in Nayuta’s experience.

“Ah, you pronounce those characters ‘Kushiinada.’ I know, it’s not a very common name, is it? It means ‘stalks of rice as plentiful as the tines on a comb,’ and is meant as a wish for good harvests. It also sounds like Princess Kushinada

from mythology, which is a bit ostentatious, don't you think? My father said that one of our ancestors probably changed the characters to add the extra *i* so that it wouldn't be exactly the same."

The detective nodded stiffly. "Yes, it is indeed a very unusual name..."

She realized now that she hadn't given her name to him before. In online games, one's character name *was* one's name. There was no reason to bring up your real-life identity.

"Here's mine, Detective. Thanks!"

Koyomi's contract was signed *Shiori Koyomihara*.

This, too, was a rather obscure family name, but the detective made no further comments. Instead, he grabbed his coat from the rack on the wall and picked up his favorite walking stick. The markedly assured look on his face struck Nayuta as odd, like he was covering up for something.

He definitely had a reaction to my last name..., she thought.

Before she could ask him about it, however, Klever had scooped up the contracts and headed for the door. "Very good. It's early, but we might as well get moving. Of course, if they're not ready for us, we'll just have to come back here..."

"Really? Isn't it better to wait, then?" asked Koyomi. "I don't know where we're going, but won't it be annoying to come all the way back here?"

"It's just next door. Not a hassle at all." He did not turn back. The others hurried to keep up with him.

"Um, Detective, when you say 'next door'..."

"Yes, I mean what I said. This, in particular, must be kept strictly confidential."

The large black cat-Buddha statue they'd gotten quite familiar with over the last few days was still sitting in the entrance hall outside the detective's office. Its gold-painted eyes stared into nothingness, and it had formed peace signs with both of its front paws. Its pose had clearly changed since the day before, but at this point, that was hardly a surprise.

Klever stood in front of the cat statue and used his walking stick to tap the

large bell hanging from the cat's collar.

Clang, clang, clang, it rang out crisply.

Something flashed in of the corner of Nayuta's vision, directly across from the detective's door.

The cat eyes carved in relief on the door to the Cat-God Worship Research Society had started to glow orange.

"The bell on its collar is the switch," Klever explained hastily, peering into the glowing eyes. "If you open the door without ringing it first, you'll only be sent into a duplicate room meant to hide the real thing."

Suddenly, the carving began to speak in a high-pitched voice.

"Retinal pattern in player data confirmed. Please speak for voiceprint confirmation."

"This is Kaisei Kurei. I've got the group together earlier than scheduled. If that's not a problem, please let us in."

A sleepy male voice came through the speaker.

"Mm, all right. Give me a second..."

Instead of opening like a normal door, it shot upward like a shutter being retracted. On the other side was a hallway with white walls, like something in a research lab. It was completely unlike Ayakashi Alley and Yoiyami Street outside.

Everyone except the detective was taken aback by this unexpected sight. Klever, however, simply strode through the doorway like it was nothing.

"Is this the truth behind the Cat-God Worship Research Society...?" asked Nayuta.

Klever nodded casually. "Yes, it might appear to be a suspicious cult to outside observers, but it is actually a virtual base for the developers to monitor and correct cheating and other improper activities within the game. Of course, this isn't the main monitoring system, but there are some errors and potential improvements that are much easier to spot from the inside, and this is where they collect rumors traveling through the player base. I've been told to keep it

secret to the extent that I can. I only inform my staff members, and, just for today, that includes all of you.”

Koyomi stared down the hallway in stunned fascination. The walls were made of a material that looked like reinforced plastic, its pristine finish gleaming in the light.

“...Whoaaaaa... It’s like a spaceship or something...”

“You’re right,” said Nayuta. “A xenomorph or battle android could come out from around a corner at any moment.” Hearing this, Koyomi clung to Nayuta’s arm, though the other girl hadn’t meant to scare her—that was just her honest observation.

The detective chuckled to himself. “Perhaps your interests align with those of the staff here. This place’s security system sends creatures and robots of that exact sort after intruders. They’re set to be impossible to beat, so no ordinary players can get through. Of course, the door itself won’t even open unless you’re accompanied by someone with clearance. Multiple layers are the key to any good security system.”

Yanagi followed them down the hallway. “My, my...,” he said with wonder in his voice. “I’d heard this game offered an old-fashioned, traditional setting, yet this is something else entirely...”



“This is a virtual office space for staff members,” said Klever, “so the game’s players are never meant to see it. In other words...this area was designed to suit the administrators’ tastes.”

A question occurred to Nayuta. “If your office is next door... Did they move in after you? Or did you rent out this space because you knew they were here?”

It seemed a little too convenient to be pure coincidence. Depending on the detective’s answer, it might provide a crucial hint regarding the nature of his relationship with the developers—or at least how close a connection it was.

Klever smiled faintly. “That’s a very specific question. As a matter of fact...it happened almost simultaneously. They are a valuable client of mine. And I am a convenient errand-runner for them. I am a humble individual taking advantage of their generosity—or, as the traditional saying goes, I am the fox who borrows the might of the tiger.”

It was hard to tell if he was joking or telling the truth, but it was clear that he and the devs had a close working relationship.

The white hallway turned out to be much shorter than Nayuta had imagined. After turning a corner, they promptly reached a much larger area that left her staring in wonder.

It was a bright, perfectly modern office space, completely unlike anything else in Ayakashi Alley.

The room was the size of a school gym, divided into spacious cubicles. There was a beautiful blue sky displayed on the glass-tiled ceiling, and ten or so workers sat underneath it at personal computer consoles.

They wore a variety of outfits—some were dressed like ninjas, others like samurai, warrior-monks, or courtesans—all of them suited to the setting of *Asuka Empire*. They could walk outside and fit right in.

And here, too, were a profusion of cat bots, milling around and operating according to AI. It was hard to tell at first if they were assisting the workers or there for show. There were at least thirty cats in the office.

The space also featured clear, stagelike areas in each of its four corners, upon

which were displayed huge 3D models of boss monsters from the game. The workers were probably examining the monsters' appearances and movement, since they kept progressing the displays frame by frame, then stopping them and rewinding. They did this countless times.

A stunned Koyomi grabbed Nayuta by the arm. "I think I've seen something like this before... It was a futuristic lab in a sci-fi movie! And then...there was a zombie outbreak, and everyone panicked!"

"That's how it looks to me, too...," said Nayuta. "But in this case, it's more like a game development office, right?"

"Nope, there's no development happening here," said a small, middle-aged man with a bit of a stoop. He'd appeared next to them, seemingly out of nowhere, and was dressed in a Shinto priest's robes. But behind his round glasses, his eyes looked sleepy, and he didn't have an ounce of the kind of dignity you might expect in a priest.

He slipped seamlessly into their conversation and began casually explaining. "What we're doing here is just investigating, adjusting, and testing for errors. Sometimes we deal with emergencies, too, but it mostly comes down to mopping up and handling minor issues. The main development office is a totally different department."

His voice sounded flat and exhausted.

"Since it's a virtual office," he continued, "they tried to at least make it look fancy, but this is a total dead-end department. You won't find anything special here— Oh, hey, Kurei. Haven't seen you in a while." The bent-backed man raised a hand to wave at Klever.

The detective offered him a smooth, elegant bow. "How pleasant to see you again, Mr. Torao. How is your back doing?"

The middle-aged man laughed like a senior citizen. "Not great. Thankfully, I don't have to worry about the pain here. I suppose this old fellow is Mr. Yanagi, and the girls are your part-timers?" Torao stared closely at Koyomi. "Are you sure this is a good idea, Kurei? The government doesn't look kindly on employing middle schoolers."

“...Hey, watch it, mister,” said Koyomi. “I’ll put you on blast to the fan community, and I don’t care if I have to make stuff up, either.” She smiled at him pleasantly. She liked to act childish and spoiled around Nayuta, but with strangers, nothing made her snap faster than being treated like a kid.

Torao shivered and apologetically lowered his head, which was covered in white-flecked hair. “My bad, my bad. You look around my daughter’s age, so I just assumed. Uh... I’m Torao, the chief of 108 Apparitions’ error-testing team, part of the development and systems management division. On the side, I also serve as a priest of the cat-god religion...” A striped tabby cat trotted up to his side and gave him some kind of document. “Ah, thank you. You’re earlier than we expected, but who knows how many hours this will take, so better early than late. I have some things to explain first, so let’s get started. Follow me.”

“Certainly. I truly appreciate your help,” Yanagi said, bowing deeply.

Torao grimaced awkwardly. “Er, no, please... The honor is all mine. I’m not used to dealing with VIPs, so my apologies if I accidentally offend you. I’ve been holed up in the tech department ever since I joined the company, you see.” As one might expect, he was a little more polite toward the senior executive.

“Mr. Torao is practically one of the patron saints of *Asuka Empire*,” the detective added helpfully. “He claims this is a dead-end department, but it’s more like a refuge. Whenever another department runs into a problem, they come crying to this place for help.”

Torao snorted. “All right, enough empty flattery... When it comes down to it, I’m just the janitor who has to clean up everyone else’s messes.”

He guided them to an empty area in one corner of the space and sighed.

“But...this 108 Apparitions event is really keeping us on our toes. We’ve gotten plenty of quest submissions including viruses and back doors. We’re pretty sure we stopped them all at the selection stage, but you can’t blame the execs for being nervous that we might’ve missed one. Please, sit.”

They did as he said, taking seats around a white table meant for meetings.

“And was there one that slipped through?” asked Nayuta. “The whole ghost thing caught you by surprise, didn’t it?”

“Yes, young lady, that’s right. I wasn’t involved in the selection process, so I don’t know the finer details, but it’s become such a big deal precisely because it blindsided us. However—” Torao scratched his head nervously. “Aw, hell. It’s gonna sound like I’m bragging, but our selection team really knew what they were doing. If the quest were actually reading the players’ memories, it’d put a huge amount of strain on both the people and the system. I don’t know what the future holds, but I’m not even sure such a thing is possible with today’s tech. And if there were hints that something that crazy was happening, I think we’d have noticed it...”

Klever seemed to pick up on the vague way Torao was speaking.

“So you haven’t started investigating it yet?” he asked.

“Are you kidding me? That job was just dumped on us this morning, thanks to your backroom deals. I have some understanding of the issue, but we’ve barely even begun to look for the problem area.”

Torao pushed his eyebrows up with his fingers. If he was trying to intimidate them, the sleepiness in his face completely ruined the effect.

Yanagi’s head drooped apologetically. “I’m so sorry that my grandson’s creation has caused so much trouble... I feel terrible.”

While he wanted to be proud of his grandson’s talent and accomplishments, he also felt guilty about what was happening as a result. Nayuta sensed this inner conflict in his relative silence, but she was hesitant to speak up, lest she say something thoughtless.

Torao seemed to finally recognize what an awkward position Yanagi was in, and he hurriedly added, “Oh, no, no, no. It’s not your grandson’s fault... Well, I mean, it *is* his submission, but it’s our fault for not realizing that something was amiss. User-submitted quests built with The Seed are difficult to analyze, see... And since we didn’t create it ourselves, we can’t always grasp the finer details. Those of us behind the scenes would’ve liked a little more time to prepare for this event, but the business side of the company needed it to happen in a certain time frame... Not that any of that excuses what happened.” He ended his speech with a helpless shrug.

Klever picked up where he’d left off. “As a matter of fact, The Seed itself—the

VRMMORPG creation tool—is kind of a black box. It’s easy enough for a total amateur to use, but we still don’t know the full extent of its capabilities. I’ve tinkered with it myself, and it felt as if I was using a computer program from the future. With our current tool set, we can’t expect a perfect analysis of any quest programmed with The Seed without considerably more time.”

Torao smiled in a way that made it look more like he was crying. “Ha-ha... But none of that means anything when you’re in the hot seat like me. And so we’ll be asking you to perform the initial tests in our sorry stead. Let me give you a few warnings first.” He glanced down at the document in his hands. “First of all, the Ghost Orchestra quest you’ll be heading into is currently on an isolated test server that’s not connected to the public version of *Asuka Empire*. For that reason, you won’t be able to teleport back into town. If your health falls to zero, you’ll come back to this office, with no other penalties. Also, just so you know, we’ll be using copies of your player data. That means any changes that happen inside the quest won’t be reflected back in the regular game.”

Koyomi looked perplexed. “I don’t get it... Can you make it simpler? Like, so an elementary schooler would understand.”

While she hated to be treated like a child, sometimes that was exactly what she needed.

Torao rubbed a spot on his forehead between his brows. “All right... Just the basics. We’ll use copies of your player data for the test. That means any items or experience points you gain won’t carry over to the characters you’re using right now. You won’t get to keep the quest reward. All you can do is play through the quest, nothing else.”

Nayuta nodded to show she understood. They were playtesting, so all that was to be expected.

“On the other hand, any consumable items you use during the test won’t be lost. Well, you’ll lose them temporarily. But when you return here, your inventory will have all the same items it does now. Nothing lost, nothing gained—does that make sense?”

At last, Koyomi seemed to get it. “Oh, okay... Well, the point is to let Mr. Yanagi play the quest, so none of that other stuff matters. And doesn’t this

mean we can use all our most valuable one-use items without losing them...? That actually sounds kinda awesome!”

Klever grinned. “A laudable mindset. Yes, you can use whatever items you want, which should make completing the quest even easier. Oh, and Mr. Torao, about Yanagi’s—”

“Yes, that should be no problem. We can adjust it however you want.”

Yanagi looked at them in confusion. “What was that about me?”

“Well, it’s a bit of a stretch to expect you to beat the quest at level-1...,” Klever explained. “If there were time, I’d have you play some other quests first to earn some quick experience points. But since this test is for ‘work purposes,’ we’ve put together a character data file that looks identical to yours but has been balanced appropriately. In short—you won’t die from taking a single hit anymore.”

Torao added, “Of course, for testing purposes, we could make it so that none of the enemies’ attacks hit you... But at that point it wouldn’t be a game anymore—it’d just feel like work. I doubt your grandson would’ve wanted you to experience it that way, so we just upped your level to be a bit below the young ladies’.”

Yanagi bowed deeply to the two men. “My goodness... Your consideration is greatly appreciated. I’m afraid I’m just making everything harder on the rest of you, but if you can look past that...”

Torao hastily got him to straighten back up. “Oh, no, no, no. This is for our own purposes. Letting you play the quest at level-1—something that will hardly ever happen—would make for bad test data. Please understand, this benefits everyone.”

Nayuta was relieved to see how much thought the detective and Torao had put into this. She and Koyomi would have a considerably easier time knowing that Yanagi wasn’t constantly one hit away from death. It would make battles a lot more manageable.

Then Torao turned to Klever—someone with even more unusual stats. “Now, as for you—you seem to suffer from a similar issue despite your high level...”

“Oh, I’ll keep my current stats. There shouldn’t be an issue.”

“...I figured you’d say that,” said Torao with irritation, “so I didn’t make any special arrangements.”

Unlike Yanagi, who was a total beginner, Klever could be freely ignored. He’d made his own bed and he should be more than capable of lying in it. Still, Nayuta was a little concerned for him.

“Are you sure?” she asked. “If anyone’s stats are too unbalanced to make for a proper playtest, I’d think it would be the detective’s...”

Torao shrugged. “Well, I guess he can serve as an example of a player with very high luck... In Mr. Yanagi’s case, we already know he’ll just keep wiping without making any progress, but this guy can probably find a way to squeeze through the danger. Of course, if his luck runs out, that’ll be it... But that’s fine, because I can tease him about it later.”

The Shinto priest, too, was one of those people whose jokes were impossible to distinguish from serious comments.

In this case, however, losing the detective wasn’t a major problem. The real goal was for Yanagi to experience the quest.

A tiger-striped tabby came up to Torao and tugged on the end of his *hakama*. He took the memo it offered him and rubbed the stubble under his chin as he considered it.

“All right, looks like our test area is ready. Time for you to get out there.”

He brought up a console in the air and entered a few commands. A portal fashioned after a red torii gate appeared to the side of the table.

“The quest progress will be inherited straight from your personal data. The castle’s already been summoned, so you won’t need to leave any offerings at the shrine. But you’ll probably still be separated inside the castle. Apparently, only players who have found a certain item will be able to meet back up. Miss Nayuta’s already got it, but the rest of you dropped out and still need to find it.”

Nayuta opened her menu to check her inventory. There were a number of items she’d picked up inside the quest two days ago. Of those, she picked out

three that seemed likely to relate to finding her companions.

“I have a Paper Cat, a Spring Haze Flute, and a Stone of Repetition,” she said. “Which one do you think it is?”

Torao’s eyes narrowed. “Ah, it’d be the flute. Since the quest is called Ghost Orchestra, the items for coming back together are all instruments. If you got the flute, then the others will get a hand drum, a taiko, a koto, a reed flute, a sho mouth organ, a gong, a shamisen, or some other instrument. You’ll usually find them in wicker storage hampers and the like while exploring. There’s no need to defeat enemies to make them drop, so you should be able to manage, Kurei.”

Suddenly, Koyomi’s eyes began to wander. “Ghost Orchestra...instruments... I can already imagine a game over where you equip a cursed instrument and wind up joining the ghost players...”

Torao shrugged. “If anything, it’s the opposite. Those instruments were originally holy tools stored in the village. Then one day a monster stole them and used their power to take control of the villagers’ souls and force them to play for it. Your job is to get back the instruments and vanquish the monsters prowling the castle—but because Kurei activated the quest right off the bat, you skipped a number of prologue events that would’ve explained everything. In the main building of the temple and the magistrate’s mansion, you’d have found a diary with hints for activating the quest and a description of the village’s tragic affliction...”

Nayuta groaned. The detective studiously avoided her gaze. She’d explored the shrine, but she didn’t even know where to find the temple. And though she’d found a mansion that was probably the magistrate’s, she’d decided to save it for later and passed right by.

“I totally missed all that... I’m surprised the quest let us keep going anyway.”

Torao scratched his head awkwardly. “Making it mandatory to find the diary would work for us just fine... But if you do that, it pretty much spells out the whole quest before you get to the castle. I think the designer wanted to avoid that, and I understand why. Not knowing what’s happening is kind of the spice of horror. There’s an old saying that goes, ‘The truth of the ghost was a tuft of dried grass.’ Once you understand the logic or the background behind strange

events, they stop being scary. Of course, a playtest has different requirements.”

Koyomi cackled. “I know what you mean. Some quests just don’t make sense. You finish them and get the reward, but the story never really clicks until you read the full synopsis afterward.”

Klever put on a deliberate smile and pointed the tip of his walking stick at the gate.

“Personally, I think that allows you more room to use your imagination and provides a more meaningful experience. Now...let’s get to the task at hand. Our goal is much clearer than last time. First, we’ll search for the instruments, then meet back up and prepare to defeat the boss. Is everyone ready?”

He started to walk through the torii gate, but Koyomi quickly reached out and grabbed his sleeve. “Whoa, whoa, not so fast! There’s one more thing we need to talk about first. You saw the kid in the fox mask, right? He seemed like he was guiding us—is he really trustworthy? What if he turns out to be the final boss?”

“That NPC’s probably an ally,” the detective said confidently. “I don’t know for certain, but I believe he himself is a hint and one of the keys to finishing the quest. Isn’t that right, Mr. Torao?”

Torao, however, looked mystified. “A boy in a fox mask...?”

“Yes. The child who appears right after you enter the castle,” said Nayuta. “He wears a fox mask and a patterned kimono.”

Torao squinted in confusion. In a flat, suspicious voice, he muttered, “There are no NPCs in Ghost Orchestra that guide the player. What on earth are you people talking about...?”

His consternation soon infected the others, and a cold silence fell over the group. Without realizing what she was doing, Nayuta balled her hands into fists and sucked in a deep breath.

From somewhere in the distance, almost like static, she heard the lonely, plaintive sound of festival music.

Clover's Regret Principal Characters

ROUGH SKETCHES & PROFILES

Nayuta

-Yurina Kushiinada-

An experienced warrior priestess. Unusually, however, her stats are heavily skewed toward agility, and her equipment is mostly chosen to increase evasion. For that reason, her constitution and defense are much lower than the average warrior priestess's.

To maintain her high speed, she has chosen hand-to-hand gauntlets as her main weapon, meaning she can only attack targets she can reach with her hands and feet.

She inevitably wound up with lots of hand-to-hand combat skills, and she's very tough against foes who are vulnerable to that style of fighting. However, she is susceptible to area attacks like poison mist that are hard to avoid, easily falling to attacks other players can withstand.

She uses up a lot of stamina moving around, so she prefers to hit enemies with a bunch of powerful skills right away in an attempt to end fights as quickly as possible.

She possesses a rare piece of armor called the June Breeze *Kosode*, and while it is only moderately above average in terms of protection, its stat bonus increases as the wearer becomes more powerful. It's a popular item because it remains useful for a long time and saves on equipment costs in the long run.



Koyomi

-Shiori Koyomihara-

Plays a ninja—a job with overall high stats that can adapt to any situation. On the other hand, ninjas are something of a jack-of-all-trades, master of none. For this reason, a player's decision to focus on attack power, agility, or special ninja skills can have a major effect on their character's development.

Koyomi has chosen to prioritize agility to take advantage of her innately quick reflexes, which makes her combat style similar to Nayuta's. They are unable to compensate for each other's weaknesses, so they instead attempt to use their strengths to quickly eliminate foes before trouble can arise.

In contrast to Nayuta's empty-handed style, Koyomi fights with a shinobi blade, making her basic attack stronger. Martial arts skills like Nayuta's, however, are easier to blend with elemental damage, making them more effective against powerful enemies with clear weaknesses, like bosses. In these cases, Koyomi acts as a decoy while Nayuta does most of the damage.



Her secret weapon is her optimistic, straightforward, and bubbly nature. VRMMORPGs require players to interact with strangers, which makes her excellent ability to communicate and get along with others her strongest asset.

Klever

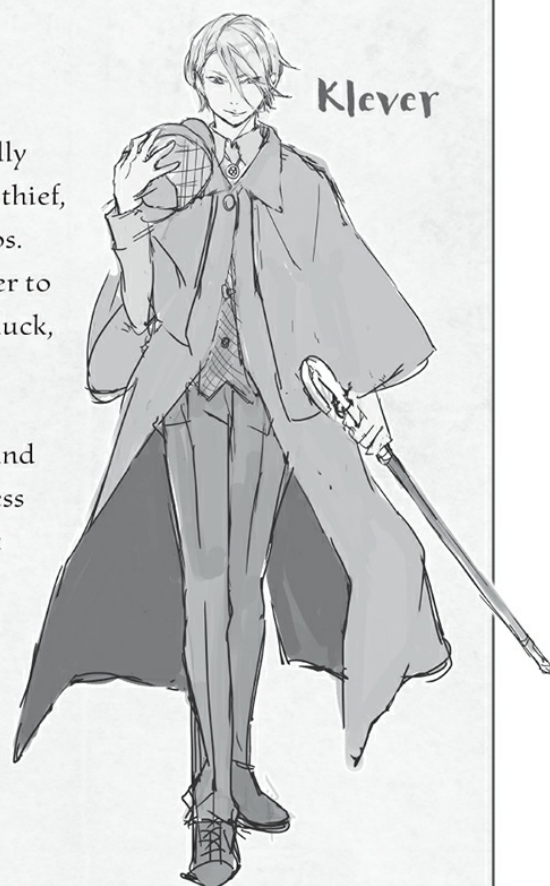
-Kaisei Kurei-

Claims to be playing a detective in the game, but no such job officially exists. There are only three starter jobs in *Asuka Empire*: swordsman, thief, and ascetic. From there, players advance into various specialized jobs.

One needs to meet certain minimum requirements to change over to a more advanced job, but because Klever put all his stat points into luck, he is unable to do so.

Ironically, because of his stats, he is technically a thief—the polar opposite of a detective. While he does have some lockpicking skills and the like, the fact that he still holds a starter job means that his success rate is low—or at least, it would be, if not for his outrageous luck stat boosting his chances to an acceptable margin. In many senses, he is a unique individual.

Naturally, he loses quite often, and a single blow from any monster is usually enough to force him into retreat. Just having him in the party boosts encounters with rare enemies and rare drops, however, making him a tricky addition to any team. He's useless in combat, but useful to have around.



Yanagi

-Teiichi Yanagi-

Despite his advanced age, this brand-new monk created his character only a few days ago. His job falls under the ascetic category, members of which can be monks or priests depending on appearance. This job is the same as that of nun or priestess, with exactly the same abilities.

Because of his low level, it would seem wise for Yanagi to gain some experience before attempting more difficult quests, but he doesn't have time for that.

In *Asuka Empire*, a character must have the proper stats both to change jobs and to equip better weapons and armor, so a low-level character is unable to use more powerful gear. Because the stat benefits from equipment are considerable, it is difficult to fight well without both leveling up and equipping better gear.

Since Yanagi didn't know any of this when he jumped into the game, his coming across Klever, Nayuta, and Koyomi was a stroke of good fortune, indeed.



Do Rota Bo Parlor

The finest Western-sweets shop in Ayakashi Alley. There's a location in the capital, Kiyomihara, as well, but only at the original store can one sample a full-course meal courtesy of Gibback D. Field (a *dorotabo yokai* from Aota Prefecture).

Mr. Field is a pâtissier with a deep reverence for Asian culture, and his menu features many creative (if nonsensical) uses of Japanese characters.

The full-course option is Furu Kousu (Ancient Plow Master), the hors d'oeuvres option is Oudoburu (Aged Yellow Soil), and the main dish à la carte is Mein Disshu (Hell's Shadow Mud Protection). Rumor states that he was once a rabble-rousing local delinquent.

Mr. Field is quite opinionated when it comes to chocolates, but the item that truly made his shop famous is its awe-inspiring Itsumaden pudding.

It uses many fresh eggs from the mythical Itsumade bird, whipped into a pudding with a rich and enchanting flavor. According to the chef, this creamy, custardy dessert's surprising secret is simple caramel sauce. This "edible mud," designed to make one yearn for home, comes from the chef's own Aota Prefecture. It's his dedication and attention to detail that make this place so special.



Private Vulpine Booths

I hope you'll forgive me for introducing an extraculinary establishment in this issue of *Gourmet Guide*, but I trust you'll soon understand why.

Such a place might sound sketchy at first, but it merely refers to a private room with a fox. It's a brand-new kind of business that gives customers access to booths where they can watch rental videos as a fox companion provides them with life advice.

The fox's advice can be hit or miss, but now and again they say a few words that cut straight to the heart of life. "Fried tofu tastes best when it's fresh." "*Inari* sushi is all about the balance of sugar, soy sauce, and vinegar," and so on. If you're so inclined, you can read deeply into each word, and seeing how easily people get worked up over nonsensical advice is itself a valuable experience.

The shop also provides all-you-can-eat *Inari* sushi (rice stuffed inside a pocket of fried tofu) as a snack, and it's delicious. It's self-serve, and you can take as much into your booth as you want. The flavors on offer include sesame, plum *shiso*, *sudachi*, matsutake, mandarin, human, rat, and shrimp. Unfortunately, some flavors are almost always out of stock these days. But every once in a while, a drunken customer will go on a rampage in the shop and turn up missing, and that usually means a certain flavor will be back in stock the following day. Keep this tip in mind if you want to sample them all.



A decorative arrangement of light gray cherry blossom silhouettes. Some blossoms are clustered together, while others are scattered individually. They are positioned around the chapter title boxes, with some appearing to float above and others below the text.

Chapter 3

Ghost Orchestra

To the sickly boy, the computer his grandfather had bought him was a window into an all-new world.

Before, his entire life had been contained inside a single hospital room. Through this open window, however, he was able to connect with a much larger community.

There were many, many people waiting beyond the window, even if he couldn't see them. He couldn't reach them, no matter how he tried, and he couldn't go through the window by himself. However, simply being able to see that outside world was a huge change in the boy's life.

Within a few years, VR had made huge strides, and suddenly the boy's window became a door.

The world he'd yearned for, but believed would never be within his grasp, now opened up before him, and he could experience it with all five of his senses.

While before, he'd only been able to see and hear the virtual world, the micro-signals being sent to his brain now included smell, touch, and taste, and they could even provide him the sensation of moving his limbs freely.

And that was how he met companions who lived in similar conditions.

§

In the distance, they could hear the sound of festival music.

The flutes were high and sprightly, the drums nimble, and the koto strings graceful, all attuned with one another in a frenzy of activity. The music was lonely and desperate, as if trying to say that life was fleeting and should be lived to its fullest.

Now they knew the music's source. While the musicians remained unseen, the party knew their souls were trapped in the massive castle standing before them.

Or at least, that was how the script envisioned it.

Nayuta the warrior priestess stood before the entrance of the castle,

throwing concerned glances at her partner, who clung to her waist and trembled like a frightened forest animal.

“...Are you sure you’re all right, Koyomi? Your knees are knocking, your face is pale, your eyes are wandering, and I’m guessing your real body is breaking out in a cold sweat right about now...”

In a tremulous voice, Koyomi the ninja replied, “Of course I’m not all right... Why did that guy have to freak us out like that just before we went in...? So what if he didn’t know what we were talking about? He should’ve just said, ‘Oh yeah, the boy in the fox mask, I know who you mean,’ and left it! That’s what a mature adult would’ve done...”

This, of course, was unreasonable. The way Koyomi was shaking in fear, combined with her baby face, made her look quite pitiable.

Just before they’d started the playtest, the man in charge, Torao, had given Nayuta’s party one last message.

There are no NPCs in Ghost Orchestra that guide the player.

But in that case, who—or what—was the child in the fox mask who had greeted them when they first reached this point in the quest?

Koyomi, who was always the easiest to scare, was already convinced they were in the middle of some spooky story. She could have given up on the test and waited back in the office, but she’d come in anyway, and Nayuta was proud of her.

Klever, the fox-faced detective, sighed in exasperation. “Is this really worth getting so worked up about...? It’s true that I’d expected the development team to know about the child, but it’s much too early to assume he’s some kind of ghost. Use your common sense—we probably just encountered a hidden character that the dev team doesn’t know about. This is a user-submitted quest, and they don’t know all the details. It’s entirely possible they just missed him.”

“Grrr...,” Koyomi growled at the detective like a little puppy. “D-don’t try to cheer me up, ’cause you suck at it! Look at Nayu, she’s got that look on her face that says, ‘Oh dear, the detective’s lying his ass off again!’”

In truth, Koyomi was completely off the mark. If anything, Nayuta was irritated at *her*. She patted the other girl on the head in a patronizing manner and spoke in as gentle a tone as she could muster.

“I’m not making that kind of face at all. In fact, I agree with the detective. I don’t know what the requirements are to encounter this hidden character, but it could be a random chance with a low probability. Maybe the detective’s absurdly high luck brought him out. Or maybe we fulfilled some hidden requirements without realizing it. In any case, I think the development team just missed him.”

On this point, Nayuta’s feelings were exceedingly practical and rational. Perhaps it would be more interesting if the boy was a real ghost, but that was very unlikely.

The detective rapped the ground with the tip of his walking stick. “To elaborate on my theory, I think the boy might be more than a simple NPC—some kind of independent AI, perhaps. That would make him smart enough to hide from the developers and show himself only to chosen players. I think that’s the most likely answer given what we know.”

Koyomi glared at him skeptically. “Really...? You’re not lying? I’m not going to go home and look in the mirror and see that kid standing behind me...?”

“Are you sure you’re really up for 108 Apparitions? In general, I mean. On second thought, maybe you’re exactly the audience they’re targeting...”

In a sense, Nayuta envied the way Koyomi was so genuinely scared by haunted houses and the like. It was evidence that she was enjoying the event even more than the devs could have hoped for.

Yanagi, too, seemed concerned about her. “Um, Koyomi... My grandson Kiyofumi was a very kindhearted boy. He wasn’t the sort to play pranks on others, and he was certainly not the kind of boy who would follow women back to their bedrooms and intrude on their privacy...”

If there was any real ghost to be found in this quest, the most likely candidate was the late creator himself, Kiyofumi Yanagi.

Yanagi’s earnest but somewhat misguided reassurance caught Koyomi off

guard.

“...I...I wasn’t expecting an answer like that... I-I’m sorry for treating him like some kind of sicko,” she said apologetically, though she remained glued to Nayuta’s side.

Their conversation provided Klever the opportunity to ask an awkward question.

“Mr. Yanagi, this might come across as rude, but...do you believe the boy in the fox mask is your grandson’s ghost?”

Yanagi took several seconds to respond.

“I...don’t think so. But the thought did occur to me... In any case, it is true that this quest was Kiyofumi’s last contribution to the world. While the child might not be his ghost, it could be a part of him, or a kind of final message... I do believe that the little boy we saw holds a special meaning of some kind.”

But despite his carefully reasoned statement, he was clearly still grappling with his emotional reaction to seeing the boy.

Encountering the ghost of one’s grandchild, in any form, is an unsettling affair. If the experience turns out to be fake, you’re left empty and disappointed, and if it somehow turns out to be real, that means your loved one is a ghost wandering the earth, unable to move on.

“Also, Kiyofumi passed away in his mid-teens... That boy in the fox mask does indeed resemble him, but as a child of seven or eight. I suspect...that Kiyofumi modeled him after his childhood self.”

The detective nodded gravely. “Indeed... I believe your interpretation is almost certainly correct.”

Though he didn’t say anything else, Nayuta had felt certain he’d been about to add the word *unfortunately*.

At last, the group started toward the entrance of the castle. In the center of the short stone steps was the little roadside shrine that had been the key to summoning the castle. The stone statue of a child installed inside was eerily expressionless, and depending on one’s point of view, it might have been even

creepier than a ghost.

They passed the shrine and stood before the impressive entrance modeled after Yomeimon Gate. The darkness beyond was thick and black; once they stepped through, they would each be teleported to a different location within the castle.

If it went the same as it had on their first attempt, Nayuta would be in a basement passageway, Koyomi would wind up in the outdoor bath where the half-fish man lived, Yanagi would be sent to the infinite great hall, and Klever would find himself in the castle's tower.

Aside from Nayuta, none of the others had found the instruments that would bring their group back together. That would be their first task, then they would meet up, and finally they would defeat the boss—preferably all in one day.

“Are you ready, Koyomi?” Nayuta asked gently. Koyomi was the one person who hadn't come entirely mentally prepared. But at last, the other girl took her hands off Nayuta's waist and nodded, despite her tremors.

“I—I think...I'm r-ready...maybe. Nayu, if we manage to meet up again, will you shower me with praise and rewards? I don't think I can go through with this unless I have a goal to work toward...”

“I see... Then let's head inside,” Nayuta said, determined not to give her an affirmative answer. She strode forward with confidence and was the first to step into the darkness.

Desperate not to be left behind, Koyomi rushed after her. Klever and Yanagi then followed the two girls.

All four of them plunged into the dark and were sent to various locations in the castle.

§

When his young grandson asked him about the meaning of life, Yanagi was unable to give a proper answer.

There were many phrases that one might consider textbook answers. “Life is about searching for that meaning” was one. “To work hard and play hard”

another. He could even have explained the biological joy of creating a family and seeing the faces of one's grandchildren.

What's more, he was talking to a child. Under normal circumstances, he could have simply spoken of having hope for the future, and a boy his grandson's age might have found any number of potential meanings for his life.

But Yanagi was unable to answer his grandson's question. He couldn't think of anything to say, and after mulling it over, the best he could do was to smile amiably and admit, "Grandpa doesn't really know, either."

Kiyofumi already knew that he would not survive to adulthood. He hardly ever left the hospital. He was unable to go to school and couldn't play with friends. From a young age, he'd been compelled to ask himself what point there was in a life like his.

Even now that Kiyofumi was dead, Yanagi still didn't know how he should have answered.

It wasn't very long after Kiyofumi's death that Yanagi felt his own time drawing near. But their situations couldn't have been more different. He was dying of natural causes after a long and fulfilling life, while his grandson had passed away before he had even come of age.

I wasn't able to do anything for Kiyofumi, he thought, consumed by regret. That was what occupied his mind as he stood there in his virtual healthy body.

As he had on Saturday, Yanagi found himself in the middle of an endless hall without walls or even supporting pillars. There was nothing but ceiling and floor, like two parallel mirrors.

He recalled what the detective had told him about situations such as this one.

There are a number of potential methods used to escape from a looping, infinite space. You might need to find a hint or a hidden switch, or use a special item, or you might have to defeat an enemy that controls the space... There are prior examples of players needing to wait a certain amount of time or travel a certain distance before the spell is broken. But given the method we used to get past the roadside shrine the other day, it seems that your grandson was a fair and logical developer who gave proper hints to his players. That said, I doubt he

would create a trick that you could get past accidentally, so I suggest you stay in place once you arrive and observe your surroundings.

With that advice in mind, Yanagi looked around him.

There were no pillars and no walls—only ceiling and tatami flooring.

If there were any hidden doors or switches, they could only be behind the ceiling, which was out of reach, or somewhere among the rows of tatami mats underfoot.

Last time, I wandered around until I eventually fell through a trapdoor of some kind...

It wasn't the kind of trap meant to instantly kill a player, but at level-1, Yanagi had very little health, and it had been more than enough to knock him out. This time his data had been modified for playtesting purposes, but it probably wasn't smart to wander around at random.

I don't see anything that stands out about the tatami. As for the ceiling...

When he looked up, he noticed a strange warping effect in the wood grain of the ceiling panels. It reminded him of something Kiyofumi had said to him once.

Before his symptoms grew more serious, Kiyofumi had gone with the family on a vacation to a traditional inn. Back then, the young boy had claimed that he saw a person's face in the knots on the ceiling's wood panels. It wasn't that unusual for a child to say such things, and his parents found it funny, teasing him and saying that it was a ghost—but Yanagi knew what Kiyofumi was really saying.

Kiyofumi's parents were too busy with work to spend much time with their son, so it was the retired grandfather, Yanagi, who knew the boy best.

Kiyofumi was a very rational child. He was not afraid of ghosts; he wanted to know *why* he saw faces in the wood grain.

So Yanagi explained to him, very gently, what he wanted to know: That wood grain is something that appears with the growth of a tree. That most people and wild animals have two eyes and a mouth arranged in an inverted triangle. That therefore, whenever we see three points in an inverted triangle, our minds

strive to see a face in them. He explained that this phenomenon was called pareidolia, and that it was the reason stains on walls and the shadows of leaves could cause people to see ghosts in photographs.

When Kiyofumi absorbed information like this, his eyes always lit up with wonder.

The memory was relevant to Yanagi's current situation, too

A wood-paneled ceiling...wood grain...

The grain on the ceiling panels above was clearly warped in a way that wasn't natural. However, the image it created was not that of a human face. It was triangular, but the angle was particularly acute, with a line extending out of it like a tail.

An arrow...?

It was pointing behind Yanagi.

He turned around and saw a series of arrows along the ceiling. Though he was unfamiliar with the language of games, he understood at once that this was a signpost pointing the way forward.

The arrows in the wood grain on the ceiling were most likely indicating the direction he needed to go to escape this seemingly infinite hall. Once you knew the trick, it was a fairly easy puzzle.

Yanagi smirked to himself and began to follow the arrows.

The fox-masked boy had not appeared yet. If he was an AI designed to hide from the developers, as the detective suspected, then perhaps they would not see him at all during the playtest.

But Yanagi was skeptical of Klever's hypothesis.

Would the Kiyofumi I knew really make such a thing...?

His grandson had great love and respect for *Asuka Empire*. It was hard to imagine that he would design a trick meant to slip past the development team.

The child in the fox mask probably required some very special conditions to be met before he would appear.

Though Kiyofumi hadn't meant to hide him, the developers hadn't noticed him, while Yanagi's party had somehow unknowingly met those conditions.

As he followed the arrows, Yanagi pondered all this with his aged brain.

Was it offering a substitute item at the little shrine? ...No. The developers would have figured that out themselves. It has to be something only I or the detective did... Well, Klever's extremely lucky... But that also seems like something the company would have been able to test for. It has to be something even more special, more unique...

Unique.

Maybe he was onto something there.

In fact, with his rusty mind, there was only one thing he could think of.

Yanagi called out into the vast, empty space stretching out before him.

"Kiyofumi, were you...were you waiting for *me* to arrive...?"

Their party *did* have a special element that only they possessed—they had Yanagi, Kiyofumi's grandfather, as a member.

If that was the requirement for the boy to appear, then of course the developers would have missed him, and there would be zero chance of any other players stumbling across him, either.

The empty space before Yanagi's eyes swirled and twisted like smoke.

§

Nayuta was the first of the group through the gate, and the first to start exploring the castle itself. She was the only one who had already found one of the instruments necessary to meet up with the rest of the party—in her case, the Spring Haze Flute.

She gave it a little toot. Despite being a total beginner, she was able to produce a pleasant sound. But she didn't know what to do with her fingers, so there was no real melody to it.

If she practiced enough, she might be able to use it like a real instrument, but she didn't have much interest in playing, so she wasn't sure what she'd do with

it after the quest was done.

Her current location, an underground passage bordered by stone walls on either side, was a bit chilly. There were lanterns mounted high up along the corridor, so her immediate area was lit. But the way ahead was still obscured by darkness, and the ceiling above was too high to make out.

Nayuta could see about a hundred feet in front of her. With that much distance, she was unlikely to be caught in an enemy ambush. She'd dealt with situations like this, in which she couldn't see what lay ahead, many times, and they had never really worried her.

Here, it was only a game.

To her, reality was much more frightening.

She strode forward boldly, her straw sandals scraping the ground underfoot. A clanking metallic shuffling came from farther down the stone-lined hallway.

Skeletal samurai...? Sounds like around five to ten of them...

They were easy enemies to detect, thanks to the characteristic sound of their armor. Individually, they weren't very strong, but because they used a variety of weapons and coordinated well, they were much tougher in a group.

Nayuta looked at the floor and took a deep breath.

In time, a group of skeletons dressed in dingy, faded helmets and armor came shuffling out of the darkness before her. Their jaws clacked up and down with delight at the sight of prey.

But before they could even prepare for battle, Nayuta was racing toward them.

She clenched her gauntleted fists, shrieked forcefully, and wordlessly slammed a punch into the face of the lead skeleton. The heavy, powerful blow, infused with sacred power, knocked the pitiful undead's head clean off, helmet and all.

The body turned and reached out in search of its fallen head, but she caught it with a follow-up strike from the left. The punches themselves weren't meant to defeat her opponent. Her fists were accompanied by a secondary surge of

exorcising power—a close-combat skill known as a Purifying Blow.

This was a quick and useful skill for martial artists that worked well against spirits and the like. And better yet, it could be adapted into kicks, headbutts, and any other physical attacks, so long as the target was in range.

Nayuta had already beheaded and disarmed the skeletal samurai, and her follow-up attack disintegrated its bones and armor, which then blew away like sand in the wind.

That's one down.

Like a student speeding through problems in a workbook, Nayuta moved her eyes to her next opponent.

She was facing off against the three in front, attempting to take them one at a time, when the others flanked her. Using her incredible jump clearance, a stat she'd worked hard to improve, she floated upward. Her white sleeves flapped like wings, and air filled her red *hakama*.

With a slender leg, she kicked off one skeletal samurai's helmet, using it as a stepping stone to launch into another brilliant leap. The Eight-Boat Leap, used to strengthen one's jump, was only a starter skill. But its evolved form, Unrivaled Leap, also inflicted kicking damage on an enemy. It wasn't a lot of damage, but bipedal enemies like the skeletal samurai that were easy to knock over were often sent tumbling.

That was exactly what was happening now—the samurai whose head Nayuta had stepped on crashed face-first into the floor. The way Nayuta was dispatching them, even their eerie appearance began to seem somehow comical.

Nayuta leaped over the heads of the other skeletons and silently landed behind them. She was as light as a feather. Such a feat would be impossible in the real world, but here it was eminently achievable.

She spun and leaped, hurling her body all about, dancing wildly, forgetting herself in the moment. The sound of festival music had returned, and she let herself be swept up in its rhythm, neatly evading the samurai's swords and striking back for major damage.

Nayuta kicked off the flat of an enemy's blade and drove her knee into the attacker's chin. Another thrust a spear at her, but it, too, was easily evaded. She twirled past it, closing the distance and using her spin to slam a backhanded fist into the enemy.

A deftly thrown shuriken severed another enemy's bowstring before it could launch its arrow. As the skeleton cast around for help, she thrashed its torso with a devastating kick attack.

In just seconds, the entire band of skeletal samurai had been reduced to almost nothing by the lone girl. Only one remained, and there was a note of desperation in the way it lifted its hexagonal metal club to attack.

The weapon came swinging forward with a gust of wind, but Nayuta merely used the club to launch herself high over her opponent's head, landing behind the samurai.

She drew up close and delivered a soft whisper into the skull's earhole—

“Rest in peace.”

— followed by a hard smash.

The skeletal samurai's remains vanished, leaving only a faint glow and a barely audible echo.

Once she was sure no more enemies were around, Nayuta straightened up. Her breathing had calmed, though the fight hadn't winded her much to begin with, and she was now able to listen more closely to the festival music.

She tried to discern the direction it was coming from, but the sounds were bouncing off the walls, making it impossible to tell.

The story said that the monsters imprisoned the villagers' souls to make them into private musicians, and that we'd need the sacred instruments that had been protecting the village to break the curse...

According to Torao, once inside the quest, the only way for party members to meet up was for them to collect the instruments. Nayuta had found hers last time, but the others still hadn't. She wasn't expecting to meet up with anyone for a while.

In the meantime, she could either fight some more weak monsters, go searching for treasure, or simply find a good place to stop and rest. If she was going to rest, however, she would prefer somewhere other than this empty stone hallway.

Nayuta decided on a direction and started walking, only to quickly sense a presence behind her.

Not again!

She leaped forward to give herself more distance, then spun around.

But what she saw was neither an enemy nor a friend, though she recognized him all the same.

It was a young child, dressed in a patterned kimono and wearing a stylized fox mask. He looked like an actor from a historical drama, but there was no living human inside this costume.

“...So we meet again. Um... Are you Kiyofumi?”

He looked up at Nayuta from behind his fox mask. Without answering her question, he began to speak in a flat, monotonous voice.

“You’re very tough, miss. I didn’t think those skeletal samurai would be so easy to defeat.”

It almost sounded like he was sulking—strange behavior for an AI. Nayuta broke into a smile.

“They weren’t as easy to beat as I made it look. I’m very fast, but I have poor defense, so I like to defeat enemies as quickly as I can. If they’d landed even one good hit on me, I would have turned and fled.”

Because he was clearly younger than she was, she found herself talking to him the way she would to a child.

He’s an artificial intelligence, not a ghost. Nayuta was certain, unlike Koyomi.

Over the past decade or so, AI had advanced by leaps and bounds. Now there were AIs in the virtual world essentially indistinguishable from humans.

AI research and development was happening across all sorts of industries, and

it had become trivial for individual creators to copy these AIs and add them into their own work, even if they knew little about the technology.

Of course, it wasn't as easy to get the really cutting-edge stuff, but the kind of AIs typically used in games were easily available online in all ages and genders, either for free or at a cost.

Kiyofumi Yanagi, the designer of this quest, had probably made use of such data to create this boy who served as his counterpart. As long as the quest included the AI's base personality data, any amount of more finely tuned dialogue could be added on later.

The child in the fox mask stared up at Nayuta, and she stared down at him. The mask prevented their eyes from meeting, but she could tell he was observing her.

"May I call you Kiyofumi, then?" she asked again, just to be sure.

The child shook his head. "Kiyofumi died. I'm just an artificial intelligence he created, so I have a different name."

Huh...? He admitted it...?

She had assumed the boy would simply lie or brush off her question in order to preserve the game's atmosphere—but he'd told her exactly what he was. The boy tugged on her sleeve.

"There's no point in lying about Kiyofumi to people who know who he is," he continued. "And you don't seem scared, even though I'm so close to you."

"...I'm sorry. I think I might be denser than your average person. I just don't get scared by this kind of thing," she said, bowing and feeling a little guilty for some reason. "So, um... If you're not Kiyofumi, then...what *is* your name?"

"It's Clovis. Cool, right?"

For a moment, Nayuta couldn't speak. Ordinarily, she would have agreed, but his name was so similar to the detective's that the latter's sketchy-looking grin flashed through her mind, giving her pause. They both had the face of a fox, too.

"For such a Japanese look...that's a rather foreign-sounding name, isn't it?"

she said, feeling conflicted.

The boy puffed out his chest. “It was Kiyofumi’s character’s name. He got it from a dragon-slaying hero in an older game. I got the name from him—and me and Kiyofumi made this game together.”

Nayuta was confused. “‘Made’? You...helped make this game?”

“Kiyofumi did all of the important stuff, of course... But he gave me instructions and I designed all the secrets and tricks of the map... It was really fun. I was with him the whole time up until he died.” Behind the fox mask, the boy smiled sadly.

Nayuta was at a loss for words. *This boy...made the quest with Kiyofumi? Meaning...it was a collaborative effort...?*

Not only was she stunned by this admission, but she was also shocked that she hadn’t considered such a possibility before.

Thinking about it now, the entire purpose of artificial intelligence was to assist humanity. AIs could manage machines, analyze information, and perform other roles for a person. This boy in the fox mask would have been a very capable and reliable partner to Kiyofumi.

But operating the kind of AI one could easily find online at this level would require a lot of expertise and technical know-how, and it would certainly be much harder than it sounded. In fact, it would probably be even more difficult than building the quest itself.

Maybe Kiyofumi Yanagi’s actual purpose wasn’t to create the quest...but to grow this artificial intelligence through the process of making it.

Though the chances were low, that would mean the quest was nothing more than camouflage to hide the existence of the AI named Clovis.

Nayuta decided to voice her suspicions.

“Are you here...for some particular purpose?” she asked.

The boy looked back at her quizzically. “Are *you* alive for some particular purpose?”

“Huh...?” Nayuta didn’t know how to reply.

It was rare for an AI to respond to a question with another question. Kiyofumi had probably anticipated this very scenario and input a specific response; Nayuta got the nagging feeling that her mind was being read.

The artificial intelligence named Clovis rephrased his question. “Am I not allowed to be here without a particular purpose?”

“I...didn’t mean...” Nayuta trailed off, then crouched down so that she was at eye level with the boy. “You’re right... You don’t need a purpose to exist, though you might find one eventually, or decide on one for yourself... But could you answer one thing for me? Did Kiyofumi ask you...to do something important?”

Behind the mask, the child giggled. “Yeah. He asked me for a favor. But...then he said he didn’t want to bind me to a promise—that I could act on my own and do what I want. So I won’t tell you what the favor was...yet.”

He nimbly hopped backward. Half of his body sank into the stone wall and then, like a ghost, he passed right through.

“Oh! Wait!”

“...See you later, miss. Though if you can’t beat the quest, we probably won’t meet again.”

And just like that, the boy was gone.

The passageway became so quiet, it was like no one had ever been there.

Nayuta placed her hand on the stone wall where the child had vanished and considered what she’d just seen and heard.

So he was an AI the developers missed... Of course he wasn’t a ghost. But that still leaves the other one...

She’d wanted to ask the boy about the ghosts people had seen of their loved ones who shouldn’t have been in the game—the biggest reason the quest had been taken offline.



The detective had seen his late friend, Yanagi had seen his grandson Kiyofumi, and Koyomi had seen a family pet. Nayuta, too, had seen a person she knew to be dead.

If I finish the quest, maybe I'll find out something about the mechanism causing them to appear...

But for now, she wanted to get back together with her party. She stood up, ready for a change of pace.

But just as she started down the passageway again, Nayuta was struck by a sudden dizziness. Her vision swirled for an instant, and she closed her eyes. She'd felt the same sensation last time. With a note of certainty and displeasure, she opened her eyes—and saw someone she would never be able to forget.

Before her stood a pale young man dressed in a police uniform, doing nothing in particular. In life, his gaze had been kind and gentle, but now, with his cap pulled low to shade his expression, she could not make out his eyes.

The festival music sounded strangely distant. A voice escaped her lips.

“...Big...brother...?”

His figure was slightly fuzzy, but she would never mistake him for anyone else.

She had seen her brother on their first run of the quest, too. For a second, she'd thought her eyes were playing tricks on her. Then her mind had simply stopped working.

After that, she'd defeated the enemies in her area in an unthinking daze, and the next thing she knew, she had reached an escape route leading out of the castle.

She remembered exactly what had happened. She'd told the others, “I saw a ghost with a familiar face, but it didn't bother me,” and that was the truth. But that was because her emotional center had completely shut down to avoid processing the experience.

If she didn't think about anything, she wouldn't feel fear or sadness. She might not be able to conquer her troubles, but at least she could paralyze them.

And even now, with her brother right before her eyes, she didn't fall into a confused panic. She used cold, logical thoughts to kill all emotion.

Ghosts...aren't real...

She did not believe in ghosts. If such things existed, she'd be eager to meet one, but this vision of her brother was something different. This *something* was using his guise, but it had no relation to Nayuta.

Her brother's image was visible for only a few seconds before it promptly vanished. Once the momentary dizziness left her, Nayuta sucked in a deep breath, then exhaled slowly until her lungs were completely empty.

Daichi Kushiinada had died while playing *Sword Art Online*.

She didn't know what had happened inside the game. But in reality, her brother had been lying in a hospital bed with the NerveGear on his head one moment, and the next it had fried his brain and killed him.

The family that had prayed so hard for his safe return was stunned and horrified—and she didn't want to remember what happened after that.

Nayuta had killed many, many emotions to protect herself.

When Klever laid bare his hatred for Akihiko Kayaba, Nayuta had been briefly in awe. She had chosen to flee even from hating her brother's murderer.

It sounded enlightened to say you'd cast aside your hatred, but that was not what had happened. For her to let hatred into her heart, she would first have to face and admit to the sadness of losing her brother.

Instead, Nayuta had abandoned those emotions altogether—and now she found herself playing a different VRMMORPG for no particular reason.

She stared at the spot in the darkness where her brother's ghost had been standing and clenched her fists. Her hands felt strong. Strong enough to fight.

I need to meet up with the others—I wonder if they've found their instruments yet, she thought, striding forward in a mental state akin to a sleepwalker's...

...and backhand-smashing the *futakuchi-onna*—a female *yokai* with a monstrous second mouth—who had snuck up behind her, without even turning to look.

Not all lives are of equal value.

Between the life of a stranger and the life of a family member, the latter is generally more valuable.

That may not be true if you're estranged from that family member or if you hate them. But in the absence of such circumstances, it's practically a given that you'll shed tears at the loss of your relative.

On the other hand, hearing about a complete stranger who died in a car accident will never elicit more than a "Poor thing, rest in peace."

After all, such events happen all the time. If you lamented each and every stranger's death, you couldn't live your life. Someone you've never met is always dying somewhere in the world.

In order to feel sadness at someone else's death, it is vital to have information about the deceased. As long as you have that information, you can even shed tears over a fictional character dying in a story.

But a death without information attached doesn't even register. Right this moment, in the corner of a slum somewhere, there might be an abandoned child dying of a drug overdose with no one to mourn them.

It's not a question of right and wrong. That's just how the world works.

In fact, this is a good thing. If you felt sadness over each and every death, you wouldn't be able to smile for a single second in your entire life.

Not all lives are of equal value. The closer someone is to you, the more valuable their life. The farther away they are, the less valuable.

To Klever, the late Kiyofumi Yanagi was a total stranger.

Regarding his death, Klever had thought, *What a shame to die so young*, but he hadn't felt much more than that.

So now that he was faced with the child in the fox mask, his reaction was quite straightforward. Klever did not engage in excessive pity. He knew that it would be rude to do so.

The detective was back in the castle tower, just as before. Outside the window was a brilliant canopy of stars. He looked down at the fox-masked child and shrugged.

“There you are, ghost boy. As it happens, I was hoping to speak with you. Kiyofumi, is it? Or do you have a different name?”

The child merely inclined his head in confusion.

Klever assumed he was a manifestation of the quest’s designer. The late Kiyofumi Yanagi had placed two special tricks in this quest. The first made a deceased person familiar to the player appear as a ghost. The second was an AI in the form of a child with a fox mask that had slipped past the developers’ notice.

Until the safety of these two tricks could be proven, or the quest itself could be reprogrammed to remove them, it would not be restored to the game.

The bigger problem was the former—showing players the images of dead people they knew. The dev team was concerned this might constitute a code violation.

Asuka Empire had an ethical code, and a VRMMORPG accessing the user’s brain, reading memories, and playing them back within the game was a clear violation of that code.

But Klever doubted that Kiyofumi had foreseen such a problem when he was creating his quest. If the detective’s hypothesis was correct, Kiyofumi hadn’t broken any code at all. Instead, he had done something *close*: He’d used a mechanism that could easily be mistaken for a violation but remained in a grey area.

Since there had been no problems during the initial judging, it was easy to guess that the conditions to activate that mechanism were not universal.

The child in the fox mask pointed at Klever. As he made the rude gesture, his movements were somewhat awkward, like those of a puppet.

“...Who are you, mister? I don’t know you. Do you know me?”

“Yes. I never met you in life, but I know who you are. I’m a friend of your

grandfather, Teiichi Yanagi. My name is Klever.” He sat down and held out his hand to shake, but the boy just looked at him curiously.

“Klever... That sounds a bit like my name.”

This came as a surprise to the detective. At first, he didn’t understand what the boy was saying.

“...Aren’t you Kiyofumi? Not literally, but a representation of him, perhaps...”

The boy giggled from behind his fox mask.

“Kiyofumi died. I have a different name,” he said, ignoring the detective’s outstretched hand and hopping backward. “I told it to that lady, but I can’t tell you yet. If you don’t even have an instrument, I can’t tell you anything.”

He started running toward the set of stairs leading down, as if playing a game of tag. And like a quick-footed rabbit, he was gone from the room in an instant.

Klever couldn’t help but smile to himself. “So that’s how you want to play... I suppose it would be too convenient if he simply told me everything. Did you hear that, Mr. Torao? The child showed up again.”

From the clover-shaped tie fastener at his neck came the tired-sounding voice of a middle-aged man.

“Yes, I picked it up, too. So he’s real... This is gonna be a nightmare for the selection team.”

Klever’s entire party was under the precise supervision of the dev team during this playtest. But of the four, only Klever had a direct voice line to Torao.

Yanagi just wanted to play his grandson’s quest, and Nayuta and Koyomi were only there to help. Klever, however, had a specific job to execute: He needed to locate and identify the precise error within the quest.

As the saying went, this might be a game, but it wasn’t something he was playing. For him, this was a valuable source of income and a chance to earn trust, both for himself and for his business.

Torao’s voice came out of the tie fastener once again. *“I don’t get it. Why did that hidden character only show up for you guys? If we didn’t find him in the playtests, then I doubt your luck stat is the reason...”*

Klever considered his answer carefully. “I thought he might be an AI meant to hide from the developers, but this time, he appeared while you were monitoring. So if he’s not trying to hide...then I suspect Mr. Yanagi’s presence is the key. Perhaps it’s not just Mr. Yanagi, but the presence of any player in the party who is a family member or friend of Kiyofumi’s. Perhaps it has a filter that looks for certain information like names, age ranges...and whether they say the name Kiyofumi or react to it,” he suggested.

Torao sighed heavily. He sounded a little gloomy.

“...So you’re saying it’s a kind of final message from the creator meant for his family and friends. We’ll keep looking into it on our end. It’ll probably take more time to figure out the AI stuff—some people are even suggesting different AIs have started sharing knowledge about how to hide from us.”

At this point, ideas like that were still a joke, something akin to an urban legend. But Klever had personally seen the explosive advancement of artificial intelligence within VR over the last few years.

The examples were still few enough to be the exception, but there were AIs popping up here and there who were able to evade monitoring and hold interactive conversations indistinguishable from those between humans.

The majority of human beings are not especially bright in comparison to artificial intelligence and do not possess special qualities that are clearly superior. Ninety-nine percent of people cannot beat an artificial intelligence in shogi or chess. Human beings would have no way to compete with an AI in knowledge competitions like quizzes, and they aren’t as good at driving due to factors like exhaustion and intoxication. Artificial intelligences don’t fall for seduction schemes because they have no sex drive. And because they don’t know fear and understand the rules of politeness, they’re quite skilled at communication. They’re also extremely flexible, because their personalities and attitudes can be altered as easily as changing a setting in a program.

Klever found them utterly terrifying. Troublingly, however, his fear did not lead to hatred. It was like how one might fear predators like bears and tigers without resenting their existence. Klever feared the advancement of artificial intelligence, but he also found it deeply, irresistibly fascinating.

“I’m going to follow the boy, Mr. Torao. Let me know if anything happens with the other three.”

“Sure. Yanagi seems to be doing fine. And the girls are making progress, too, of course. So, uh... You’re actually the most likely player to wipe at the moment.” He sounded concerned and resigned in equal measure. Klever couldn’t help but smirk.

Torao was exactly right, and depending on what happened next, his fears could very well be proven correct. After disconnecting the call, Klever turned toward the stairs leading down from the tower.

Last time, he’d come across the female spider-demon called a *jorogumo* here—several of them, as it turned out—and been defeated. Whether that was a fixed encounter or a random one was yet to be determined, but at least he had a plan this time.

He’d brought a smoke bomb to blind his enemies, a flash bomb to startle them, poison smoke to sap their strength, white lotus incense that lowered enemy encounter rates, and a substitute seal that would create a body double to mislead his attackers. None of these would help him deal more damage, but they would be enough to let him evade weaker enemies.

Klever promptly rolled a flash bomb down the stairs. It was a packed paper orb fashioned like a small firework. It thudded as it bounced down the wooden steps. There was a faint explosion and a bright flash of light, and he heard several creatures scrabble and skitter away.

Having cleared the *jorogumo* waiting for him, Klever gracefully descended the steps. His stats made him susceptible to sneak attacks, but once he knew where the enemy would appear, he had the tools needed to deal with them.

At the bottom of the tower was a hallway lined with wooden slats. One side was the outer wall of the castle, while the other side was a wooden interior one.

In actual Japanese castles, the ground floor of most towers was just an open space, but this one was designed like a dungeon in a game.

Was it more important to pursue reality, or prioritize the abstract needs of

the game? The answer to this question could teach you a lot about the personality and tastes of a designer. While most players might not care about such things, Klever was a detective, and these finer details could prove to be crucial hints.

Now I need to look for the instrument that will help me reunite with the group. I shouldn't have to defeat any enemies—it's probably in a wicker hamper, or in some hidden compartment.

Torao had said as much, but in truth, once the quest split them up, it was a given that they would not have to defeat any powerful enemies to proceed. Otherwise, any player in a job unsuited for solo play would be unable to finish the quest. And even if that had been the designer's intention, the dev team would have made adjustments to smooth out any such issues before adding the quest to the game.

So while Klever needed to be careful, there was no reason to despair. Before the spiders could return to their previous positions, he quickly but carefully made his way down the darkened hallway.

In less than five minutes, there was a change in his surroundings.

A pale figure floated into view from within the inky darkness ahead.

...There he is.

The sensation was familiar.

There was no need to squint. The figure had appeared right before Klever's eyes.

It was an athletic, broad-shouldered young man clad in metal plate armor that looked utterly out of place in the traditional Japanese castle. His longsword was snapped in half, and dark blood oozed from the many slashes across his abdomen. Though his face was hidden, Klever could easily imagine it was twisted in agony. The detective groaned.

It's happened again. This is a much bigger problem than the AI in the fox mask...

The Ghost Orchestra quest had been taken down after a player was surprised

by one of these “ghosts” and wound up in the hospital, creating a big stir.

Klever didn’t know what that player had seen, but he was certain that it was either a family member, a romantic partner, a friend, or an acquaintance—someone he knew personally.

The man in the plate mail standing before him now was someone he’d been close to, after all. He frowned and tried to reach out though the communication device in his tie fastener.

“Mr. Torao...can you see this? It’s the other one. Not the boy in the fox mask, but the real ‘ghost’ who caused the problem in the first place.”

There was no response. Klever clicked his tongue in annoyance.

The signal’s dead, huh?

That shouldn’t be possible—but he knew things weren’t that simple.

In fact, if the “ghost” was what he thought it was, this state of affairs was actually quite natural and predictable.

The player console did not display.

His item list would not show.

In addition to the dizziness, there was a strange, dull feeling in his limbs, similar to paralysis. He was not immobilized, but he felt like there was a thin film covering up his senses and making him sluggish.

It’s like I’m in a dream.

Klever’s late friend came stumbling toward him, plate armor shifting and clanking. The detective winced at the miserable sight. Then he spoke, using the man’s name—or rather the name of his character from Aincrad.

“You’re just as slow as ever, Yakumo...,” he drawled sarcastically, but his voice trembled. “Even after death, you’re still skimping on agility, huh? How does someone so focused on toughness wind up killed by a single hit?”

His onetime friend wobbled toward him. But though his feet were moving, his body wasn’t getting any closer, as though he were merely keeping pace on a moving walkway.

The ghost was visible for less than a minute, and then it was swallowed back into the darkness. Another wave of dizziness passed over Klever, and then he heard a voice getting steadily louder in his ears.

“...rei...Kurei! What’s wrong? Talk to me!” said Torao, uncharacteristically panicked.

The detective managed to speak between gasping breaths. “Mr. Torao... Pardon me. I seem to have spaced out for a moment...”

Even through the tinny little tie speaker, Torao’s relief was clear. *“Spaced out...? Do you not realize you were sleeping? Or not sleeping, exactly, but in a kind of REM state...”*

Unlike the others, who were all connected to the game world from their homes, Klever was logging in from a medical facility the developers had arranged for him. This wasn’t for safety purposes, but so they could monitor his brain waves and nervous system. In other words, he was being treated as a test subject.

“...Really? I was asleep?”

“Just for a moment. I thought the sensors had gone haywire. It was like what happens when a spell or an item puts you to sleep. The staff’s analyzing the data now. We’d like some more, though—can you keep going?”

Klever couldn’t help but smirk. “Of course I can, Mr. Torao. I’ve just encountered the ‘ghost’ in question. It was nothing more than a false image summoned by the brain—the byproduct of a dream. I believe that’s proof enough that it’s not dangerous.”

He had, in fact, just been “asleep.”

The full-dive experience involved elements similar to sleep and paralysis, but these phenomena only arose as a result of the technology’s artificial control of a player’s brain functions. Even in a game, a person’s mind needed real sleep.

The victims of the SAO Incident had slept inside the game, and there was nothing strange or mysterious about falling asleep.

But what had happened to Klever just now was no natural bodily process—he

had been subjected to a forced, instantaneous sleep, which had plunged him into a mandatory dream sequence.

That was the truth behind Kiyofumi Yanagi's "ghosts."

"These ghosts modeled on the players' dead friends and acquaintances which shouldn't be in the game's data are merely images within the player's memories. The quest is causing players to sleep for a span of a few seconds and stimulating the brain in order to elicit memories of the dead. The figures we were seeing weren't in the data at all, they were our own raw memories. Does that sound right?"

If Klever's supposition was correct, then this was not some brand-new technological breakthrough. It was said that most ghostly phenomena like astral projection and near-death experiences were just illusions created by the brain.

In the times before VRMMORPGs existed, there were reports of successfully inducing a near-death experience in patients by sending an electrical current through the Sylvian fissure in their temporal lobes.

Naturally, the same stimulation did not produce the same effect in every patient, and there were a wide variety of outcomes. The fact that none of the testers had seen "ghosts" was proof that these results, too, were not universal.

The human brain has always had the capability to hallucinate. Many people experience these hallucinations in the form of dreams, and VR itself is just a mechanical means of stimulating this same brain function.

Torao exhaled. *"We'll have to test it...but I think you're right. Just now, you had a very brief dream caused by interference from the full-dive system. Naturally, in your dream, you can't use communications or items. The key to this trick is unifying the scenery of the dream with the scenery of the game. And because it's so brief, you don't realize you're dreaming, and believe you're meeting a ghost inside the game. Now that we know how it works, it's no big deal. Like I said, 'The truth of the ghost was a tuft of dried grass.' And because only you are in the dream, there's no record of what you saw in the game log, and nothing in the data. It's one hell of a ghost."*

For someone who had just figured out the truth, Torao seemed rather bitter.

“You sound as though you have something to say.”

“You know what it is. Don’t waste my time by asking... This isn’t a violation, but it is unethical. Depending on the player’s connection with the deceased, meeting them could be traumatic, and most people don’t come out of trauma unscathed. Either our testers simply weren’t compatible with the stimulus, or they simply hadn’t lost anyone close to them yet—that’s it. On the flip side, the deeper a person’s scars, the more mental damage they’re going to suffer from it. It’s nasty stuff.”

Klever broke into a laugh. “Well, it *is* horror, so of course it’s nasty... But I understand what you mean. What was Kiyofumi thinking when he made this? I can’t help but wonder. If he was the type of person to delight in sticking his thumb in other people’s wounds, then I wouldn’t be very sympathetic to him.”

Unlike the detective, Torao didn’t laugh.

“Either way, it needs to be addressed. We can’t just put the quest back up as is. I don’t know where he got the tech—it seems way too precise and elegant for something a kid whipped up for fun. I’m assuming he got it from someone else... either a researcher or an active developer.”

In this case, Klever’s viewpoint differed from Torao’s.

“I’m not so sure... He might have developed this trick on his own. The fact that he constructed this quest by himself, and in such a short time, tells you that his talent is the real deal. Of course, he probably referenced various experts’ research data... But ideas aside, the technical aspect of the trick isn’t anything too crazy. All he had to do was make the player have a seconds-long dream of a deceased person using the scenery from the game. In my case, it was a deceased friend, but according to Miss Koyomi, she saw some micro-organism she was keeping as a pet. I think that to the majority of people, it would only come as a momentary surprise.”

Klever seemed to be coming to the game’s defense, which caused Torao to grumble.

“That may be fine for the majority. But like I said, the real problem is the minority of players who are coming in with serious scars. Earlier, I asked you if you could keep going, didn’t I? You’re a good actor, and very calm and rational.

But even you can't hide your vital signs—heart rate, blood pressure, brain waves—all showing major swings at this very moment. He might have calmed down by now, but the college student who caused this whole shutdown was so stunned that he passed out and had to be taken to the hospital. You can't call that safe."

The detective fingered his deerstalker cap and pulled it lower onto his head.

"...I was that rattled, huh? To be honest, though I knew he wasn't real...I was just a little happy to see him again."

That was the truth.

While it was painful to see him in such an awful state, Yakumo had been Klever's best friend and battle companion.

They'd met in college, then wound up together at the police academy. After they graduated and became officers, they would share complaints about their superiors.

Physically and mentally, Yakumo was a bit above average for a police officer. He was a jack-of-all-trades, master-of-none type, and while he didn't possess any fantastic skills, he also had no obvious weaknesses.

Klever's lips pulled into a thin smile as he spoke gently to Torao through the transceiver. "Be that as it may, I think we can wait until we've completed the quest to make a decision. Besides, if you're going to be worried about heart rate and blood pressure, maybe you should rethink doing a horror event entirely. If someone tried to sue you guys over Vanquishing the Folding-Screen Tiger, they'd have a strong case. This little trick is nothing in comparison."

"I'm gonna be honest...I'm not a fan of that one, either. But hey, at least it's equally scary to everyone. It's not the sort of thing that would pinpoint a particular individual's trauma."

Klever's eyes narrowed. "Mr. Torao, when trauma is left untouched, it can start to fester. Sometimes it's better to gouge it out, let it scab over, and learn to tolerate the pain."

"Hmph... And what if tearing it up just makes everything worse?"

“...We can cross that bridge when we come to it,” he said, knowing he wasn’t fooling anyone. And with that, the detective continued down the hallway.

Since the true purpose of this test was to give Yanagi a chance to play his grandson’s quest—a requirement actively being fulfilled—there wasn’t any real need to convince Torao to change his mind. Whether the quest was effectively canceled or reinstated did not have any bearing on Yanagi’s request.

But Klever had already received a message from Kiyofumi Yanagi himself.

Koyomi and Yanagi hadn’t realized it yet, though Nayuta might have. She was the type to keep her thoughts to herself, however.

Given that this quest contained Kiyofumi’s final message, Klever felt uneasy about simply letting it be pulled for good.

So...what kind of sophistry can I string together to make this protector of the public have a change of heart...?

As the chief of the error-testing team, Torao was a valuable ally, but a formidable man to talk down. That said, as long as Klever could convince Torao, the same logic would work on the higher-ups.

As the fox borrowing the might of the tiger, Klever would have to put one over on his business associate. He flicked his tongue over his thin lips to wet them and twirled his favorite walking stick.

§

When he finally reached the end of the seemingly endless chamber, Yanagi had to stop and take a little breather.

He’d followed the arrows on the wood grain in the ceiling to get here, but the boy in the fox mask had only shown himself for a short while, then vanished without engaging in any conversation.

Up ahead, the end of the vast room was marked with a series of sliding screens covered in dazzling illustrations.

Yanagi had stopped here because he’d remembered a warning Klever had given him—that enemies often lay in wait behind doors and sliding screens,

ready to pounce when revealed. Apparently, this was a classic horror trope.

He used this opportunity to examine the art on the screens. After all, he'd just learned that if you observed carefully, you could find hints to solve the problem at hand.

Now, let's see... The image on the screens seems quite large...

There were about ten sliding screens, which all connected to form one image. The Japanese-style ink painting was brilliantly done, and though it was in black and white, the image of a battle was crisp and clear.

Swordsmen, samurai, ninjas, priests—their occupations were varied, but all the figures stood unified in defiance of a massive dragon at the center of the painting. They stood on either side of the monster, in such a way that a keen-eyed viewer might recognize them as screenshots rendered with an ink painting filter. But Yanagi's eyes were not so sharp.

One of the people in the image was a figure he recognized quite well, however.

...Kiyofumi...?

The boy with the fox mask was modeled after Kiyofumi as a child. But the Kiyofumi on the sliding screen was from just before he died, in his mid-teens—a child still, but quickly becoming an adult.

He had a staff in one hand and was providing backup to a beautiful girl wielding a sword. There was another girl on the other side of him, and the two of them looked enough alike to be sisters.

There was a vivid sense of movement to the picture, which caught and nagged at Yanagi's mind.

Is that meant to be...Kiyofumi and his friends...?

Kiyofumi had spent a long time in the hospital and couldn't move very well, and he'd used a medical VR system to meet other children in similar circumstances and befriend them.

He and his friends had gone from the enclosed haven known as *Serene Garden* to this place, *Asuka Empire*, in search of adventure. And they were

called...

“...The Sleeping Knights...”

Yanagi mumbled the name his grandson had said to him so many times.

The reaction was dramatic.

All the screens before him drew apart as though loaded on springs.

And the sight they revealed caused Yanagi to doubt his very eyes.

There was a row of white pillars and a field of green bursting with flowers and grass. The sunshine was brilliant, the sky was pure blue, and the breeze was balmy and pleasant.

The space before him clearly wasn't inside the castle, and yet it was directly connected to this dark indoor chamber.

Yanagi forgot the detective's warning and stepped forward, drawn toward the image before him. The sensation of grass and soil beneath his feet gave him pause, and he looked around again.

There was no sign of anyone, including enemies.

He could see the bluish slopes of mountains far in the distance, while nearby he noticed a white swing set, a bench, and a stone table.

There was a stone path, but most of the ground was covered in grass, and a profusion of colorful flowers was sprouting in every direction.

When he looked back, the hall he'd been in moments earlier was still there.

Bewildered by the dramatic change in scenery, Yanagi removed his woven straw hat. In only a few steps, he found himself at a huge memorial stone in the corner of the beautiful park.

Its silhouette was somewhat uneven, and it was nearly as large as the ten-part sliding screen image, but its polished surface had a beautiful luster to it.



Yanagi slowly approached it, until he was able to read the many letters carved into its surface.

“...June 8, defeated Onamuchi, god of the underworld. June 10, obtained a jeweled tree of Penglai. June 13, barbecue party in Kiyomihara...”

It was a record of the Sleeping Knights’ activities.

Among the strings of text, a number of bolded words stood out.

“...Ran and Yuuki’s birthday party, Merida’s birthday party.....Clovis’s birthday party...”

Clovis was the name of Kiyofumi’s character.

Yanagi tapped on each string of text, which popped out a screenshot memorializing each moment.

In the pictures he saw Kiyofumi—Clovis—in the game, smiling happily with his companions.

Yanagi stared at the stone monument for a while, then pressed his fingers to his eyes.

His tears didn’t come from sadness.

I thought my grandson’s life, spent mostly in a hospital bed, had been short and devoid of any joy.

Games were just a standin for life, after all. They could never be more than a poor substitute for the real thing.

But that wasn’t true.

Kiyofumi had *lived*, right here, together with his friends.

And for the first time, Yanagi could truly feel it.

The fact that his grandson had led a real life in this place filled him with indescribable joy. At the same time, he felt ashamed of himself for mistakenly deciding that Kiyofumi must have been miserable.

Though his sobs, Yanagi offered a prayer to his grandson’s memory—only to be alarmed by the sound of footsteps behind him.

He turned, his eyes puffy from crying, and saw the child in the fox mask.

But the child was not alone. There was a white fox on either side of him, like the agents of the god Inari. They sat with their front paws neatly aligned, just like statues, but their pelts were beautiful and lustrous.

“...Kiyofumi...?” Yanagi asked in a quavering voice. The boy tilted his head in seeming confusion.

“Kiyofumi’s dead. Don’t you know?” he said flatly.

Yanagi was aghast.

It made perfect sense, of course. But deep in his heart, he’d hoped for a different answer. Even if the boy wasn’t who he’d hoped, perhaps this manifestation held the original’s memories. Even if the boy wasn’t his grandson’s ghost, Yanagi wanted to believe the child held some kind of answer.

But the boy’s voice was utterly clear, brooking no misunderstanding.

“The dead do not come back to life, nor do they return as ghosts. Kiyofumi did not believe in such things. However, that fact also made him sad. He thought that it would be nice to meet the dead again, even if they were just an illusion. That’s why he created a mechanism that allows people to see the ‘ghosts’ that exist in their memories. He was short on time, and the person who appears depends on the individual, but... What do you think, Grandpa?” The child’s voice was nearly identical to Kiyofumi’s.

Yanagi nodded, though inside, he was terribly conflicted.

“...Ah...yes. I suppose it is a weakness of human nature...that we wish to see the departed, even knowing they’re only an illusion...”

The boy tilted his head again. “That’s not weakness. It’s not a bad thing. If you want to see someone, you should. You shouldn’t assume they’re real, but if you think of it like an album that can move and talk, that’s not so strange, is it? That’s how technology progresses. At least, that’s what Kiyofumi would say.”

Yanagi considered this. “So you’re saying...you are an artificial intelligence that Kiyofumi created?”

“Yep. That’s supposed to be a secret, but I’m allowed to explain it to people

who know Kiyofumi, so they don't get confused. Also, anyone who finds this place is a special exception."

The child walked away from the foxes, sat on the nearby swing, and began to pump his legs, causing the seat to creak.

"And what is this place...?" Yanagi remarked, wiping his eyes and glancing around. "It seems completely different from the castle..."

"This is the records room of the Sleeping Knights," the child explained. "I didn't expect anyone outside of the group to find it... See, you have to look at the sliding screen art and say the password, 'Sleeping Knights,' and it will connect you to this space. It was a little prank Kiyofumi added in...or I guess you could call it a memory album. When he was creating the quest, Kiyofumi often worked on it in here with me."

He opened up a menu window as he reminisced.

This child helped Kiyofumi work on his project...? In other words, artificial intelligence or not, this might be one of his friends.

Yanagi bowed deeply. "It sounds as though my grandson owed you a great debt..."

The child in the fox mask laughed. "You're really nice, Grandpa. Just like Kiyofumi said. The warrior priestess girl and the detective are a little too perceptive. I'm not sure how to handle them... But I hope you and the ninja girl are able to finish the quest."

He waved at the foxes as he kicked his legs and swung. One of the white creatures moved gracefully over to Yanagi.

It barked. "Yip!" And suddenly, there was a small hand drum atop its front paws. It was clearly presenting the instrument to him. Yanagi took it gingerly.

"Is this drum the key to rejoining my companions...?"

"Yep. You're supposed to find it after getting past that big chamber, but you seem to be in a rush. The ninja girl got hers a little while ago, too, so you should be able to meet up again soon."

So Koyomi had managed to progress smoothly this time. Yanagi lifted his head

to thank the boy, but there was no longer anyone there.

The child in the mask and the two white foxes accompanying him had disappeared without a trace. It was the sort of exit a ghost would make, and it left Yanagi dumbfounded.

“...How eerie...”

Eventually a smile rose to his lips. He bowed in thanks to the empty garden, then thrust the end of his monk’s staff into the ground and returned to the vast, dark hall.

§

Despite belting out a cheerful song, Koyomi proceeded timidly down a long hallway inside the castle.

“...The deliicious flaaavors, of Yaaanagi mochiii... ♪ The beeest gifts that moneeey can buuuuy... ♪”

The song was an old jingle from a commercial for Yanagiya Ryuuzendou, Yanagi’s company. She didn’t particularly like it, however. Singing was just a handy way to stave off the fear of being alone, and her choice of song was a very optimistic attempt at disarming some of the traps set by a boy with a family connection to the company.

In short, she was terrified.

She also had the Bell of Izayoi that she’d found while exploring, which she incessantly banged like a gong, not for any kind of atmosphere, but out of the sheer hope that she’d come across someone else as quickly as possible.

“Ugh... There’s nobody here! Come on, I thought finding the instrument would help me meet up with Nayu again! Why do I have to wander around this creepy castle all alone?! No one warned me about this! It’s ridiculous! I want to speak to the manager! Get out here... Wait, no, no, no, please no. I’ve changed my mind, nobody come out—stay where you are. Don’t scare me, don’t scare me, don’t scare meeee!” As she wailed, she used her ninja blade to dispatch a bat that had come to investigate the sound.

“Where are you, Nayu?! Or Mr. Yanagi! The detective can get lost, though!

Also, if it turns out that he and Nayu are off flirting somewhere, I'm going to be really pissed! In fact, I'll be pissed even if they aren't flirting!"

She was shouting every thought that popped into her head in an attempt to keep her fear at bay, but her desire to be reunited with Nayuta was genuine.

As she carried on, she drew the attention of a group of dead soldiers shuffling around a corner of the hallway. They were an inferior version of skeletal samurai—common foot soldiers rather than noble warriors.

They looked like zombies clad in traditional Japanese infantry armor, and they moved slowly and clumsily. But when they were in a large group, you had to be careful not to let them get behind you.

"Aieeee! Th-they're here!!" Koyomi shrieked, drawing her weapon. "Stay back! Don't come any closer! If you do, I'll curse yooooou!"

With a scream of terror, she rushed directly at the enemy and attacked from the front.

In no time at all, she had knocked two of their heads off. Then she kicked one of them in midair to draw the attention of the others, before ducking low and slashing some more. Once she had mercilessly swiped and sliced several of their legs, they toppled to the ground, where she unleashed finishing slashes on her helpless targets. A few of the enemies began to flee, but Koyomi's deadly momentum was so great that she wound up cutting off their escape route.

"Eyaaaaaaa! This is too scary! I can't take it! Someone save meeeee!" she bawled, tears in her eyes, as her sword bit and tore into the enemies before her, annihilating them. Despite the terror in her expression and voice, there was no hesitation in her movements.

The dead soldiers, trying desperately to escape her wrath, only wound up as prey for her blade. Soon there were body parts and hunks of rotting flesh all over the hallway.

"Hic...! Sob...! I can't do this anymooooore..."

Koyomi bawled and sobbed like a child, despite having more or less finished the battle. Near her feet, a dead soldier barely clinging to life began to crawl away, trying to escape. Without even looking in its direction, she stabbed it in

the back and worked the sword from side to side for good measure, earning herself a pittance of experience and money.

She didn't even spare a glance at the *jorogumo* who showed up too late to help, but that didn't stop her from blowing it up with a gunpowder bomb. Flecks of blood splattered across her detached sleeves.

"Waaah... It's so beastly of them to gang up on a poor, innocent, helpless girl trapped in here all alone... I'll sue them all for harassment..."

As she walked, she resumed banging the bell and singing the jingle in her tremulous voice.

"...The deliicious flaaavors, of Yaaanagi mochiii... ♪ Step forward nowww, if you want to diiiie... ♪"

The fear caused her to alter the lyrics a little bit.

A weasel that had been planning to sneak-attack her from behind froze, trembling with terror, and decided to simply watch her go.

It's not always the weaker party who is the most afraid. After all, a human being terrified of a single cockroach is not *necessarily* weaker than the roach.

It wasn't until several minutes later that the tiny slaughterer ringing her bell finally experienced a moment of peace and tranquility.

"...Koyomi? Why are you singing...?"

"...N-Nayuuuu?! Waaaah!"

As soon as the beautiful warrior priestess rounded the corner, Koyomi threw herself upon the other girl without a hint of shame or propriety. Her sobs were real, though she also took the opportunity to enjoy burying her face in the digitally rendered softness and fullness of Nayuta's ample bosom.

"I was s-so s-s-scaaaared! You took too long! It's been over an hour since I got the instrument!"

"Oh... Sorry. I was wandering around, exploring," Nayuta explained soothingly, caressing Koyomi's head as she would a small child's. "Not only is this castle huge, there are some procedurally generated zones, too. It's useless to try mapping it out."

In the corner of her vision, Koyomi spotted an approaching *kasa-obake* with its one eye and one leg poking out of the old umbrella that made up its body. She threw a quick *kunai* straight through it. When it was dead, she breathed a deep sigh of relief.

“Ahhh... At last...at last, we’re together again... It was so hard to be alone. The boy in the fox mask showed up, told me he didn’t need to bother with me, and then vanished again. A giant Itsumade bird dropped a poop on my head, and once I got through the open-air bath, a faceless demon woman with black teeth treated me like some kind of pervert. Then I wandered into a tearoom, where a creepy old man with a gourd-shaped head made me tea and forced me to sit in a formal kneeling position until my legs cramped...though the tea snacks were good, at least!”

“...It sounds like you’ve had quite a fun adventure,” said Nayuta, who did not interpret this tale of bone-chilling terror the same way as its teller.

“What about you, Nayu? Were you okay? Nothing scary happened?”

“No, not really. Unfortunately, the treasure wasn’t anything worth writing home about, either.”

Koyomi found this comment a little odd. “What does that matter? This is a playtest, so who cares what rare loot you get? We can’t take it with us. Of course, I say that, but I couldn’t help trying to earn all the experience I could out of habit.”

Nayuta froze in place and her eyes locked up. “Oh... You’re right. I completely forgot. I guess I just fell into my normal routine.”

For such a levelheaded person, this was a rare miscue. Unconvinced, Koyomi leaned in for a closer look at Nayuta’s face.

“Nayu... Did something happen?”

The other girl looked down at Koyomi in surprise. “No, nothing. I was just exploring...”

Koyomi stared into her eyes.

They weren’t her real eyes, of course. Though a person’s facial expression

inside the game reflected their biometric data to a certain degree, their eyes were still just digital representations within the VR space. The real Nayuta was on the other end of the AmuSphere. But even though she was fully aware of this, Koyomi could sense from her friend's gaze that something was wrong.

"Nayu, I want you to sit down," she said, tugging on Nayuta's sleeve.

Nayuta naturally took a formal kneeling position—a result of her excellent upbringing. Even her confusion was communicated by a graceful tilt of her head.

"What's the matter, Koyomi?"

Koyomi promptly reached out and cradled Nayuta's head in her arms. Though she was much shorter, when Nayuta was sitting, it more than made up for the difference.

Nayuta's breath caught in her throat. "Um...K-Koyomi...?"

"Listen to me, Nayu. You don't have to talk about anything you don't want to. Everyone has secrets and things they don't want others to know, and I don't want to force you to tell me anything. But...*but*..."

For Koyomi, this was a rare moment of caution and sensitivity.

"When you need a shoulder to lean on, you can use mine. You don't even have to say anything. You know that, right? If you want to talk about something, just let it out. No matter how put together you seem, you're still just a teenage girl. And no matter how unreliable I might appear, I'm still a working adult. So what I'm saying is... Um, what I'm trying to convey is..."

It was so unusual for Koyomi to speak this fervently about a serious topic that she lost track of what she was saying and couldn't figure out how to continue.

Before she got too far off course, Koyomi cut to the chase. "My point is, go ahead and lean on me! I'm the one always leaning on you, and that sucks sometimes!"

"Um...what...?" Nayuta said, clearly taken aback.

But something had changed in Nayuta. It was like the part of her that had been empty had somehow been filled back up. Maybe Koyomi was mistaken,

but she felt it was a change for the better.

“Um...well... I’m sure that at some point, I’ll have some complaints to get off my chest...,” Nayuta said.

“There you go. That’s what I’m waiting for. Make sure you come to me for advice before you let some wicked man lead you astray, all right? In fact, do you want to live with me in Osaka? I have a free room.”

“Um... I’ll choose to interpret that offer as innocently as possible. Even so, I don’t think I’ll be accepting. We should start searching for the others. We don’t need the detective, but we can’t finish this quest unless we reunite with Mr. Yanagi.”

Koyomi freed Nayuta from her embrace and nodded. “Yeah, totally. I wonder if he’s found his instrument yet... Let’s just hope he hasn’t given up and left the quest...”

“Still, this is just a playtest, so we can jump right back in without any penalty. It might take time, but one way or another, we’ll meet up with him again.”

“Yeah. The problem is figuring out where he is. If we rule out the routes you and I came from, then the only place left is...”

Koyomi’s gaze traveled upward. She had come from the open-air bath and then spent her time wandering around the first floor, while Nayuta had covered the basement and the first floor. Even with all the complicated warp zones, it seemed likely that the two of them combined had seen the entirety of the lower floor.

The problem was...

“...Nayu, did you spot any staircases going up?”

Nayuta shook her head. “There were stairs leading from the basement to here...but I haven’t seen any that go from here up to the floor above.”

That didn’t make any sense.

Does that mean...there’s a hidden staircase or a warp zone somewhere?

The two shared a look.

They'd done other quests together and had the experience to anticipate these things without even needing to discuss them.

"What should we do? Split up and go searching?"

"Anything but that!" Koyomi protested at once, clinging to Nayuta's arm. "You might be fine with it, but my poor spirit can't handle any more! I was terrified! No matter what happens, we're working together... Maybe we'll find a hint somewhere—something that will point us toward the upstairs area..."

"That sort of puzzle-solving seems like the detective's forte...", said Nayuta. "But I'm guessing you have to play your instrument to make a hidden staircase appear, or press a secret switch to make it lower from the ceiling, or something like that..."

"Oh, that seems likely... In any case, we'll just have to keep wandering around for the time being. I wonder where poor Mr. Yanagi is..."

They made their way down the dark hallway side by side until Koyomi began to hear something. It sounded like festival music, somewhere off in the distance. It had been audible before during her exploration, but it had just seemed atmospheric.

The musicians were nowhere in sight, but when she listened a little more carefully, it seemed the music was coming from the floor above, through the wooden boards of the ceiling.

Nayuta was picking up the same signal. "Do you think the people playing that festival music are marching around the floor above us?"

They could hear the music but couldn't see the musicians. If they hadn't encountered them on the first floor, the logical conclusion was that the music was coming from the story above or below them, muffled by the ceiling or floor.

It sounded like the noise was moving farther away. Koyomi hastily grabbed Nayuta's sleeve.

"Nayu! Let's follow that sound. I don't know where it's coming from, but we should keep moving to where we hear it clearest. Maybe *that's* the hint to finding the secret staircase!"

That had to be it. The name of the quest was Ghost Orchestra, so the music was certain to be one of the keys to solving the mystery.

“...I see. So they’re not just invisible because they’re ghosts, but because they’re on a completely different floor of the castle... It feels like the game was tricking us,” Nayuta said, sounding just a little bit indignant.

Koyomi laughed off her complaints. “I dunno, maybe it’s our fault for misinterpreting it from the start. When you think about it, we got here using almost no hints from documents or anything... I guess it’s supposed to be one of those stories where the interpretation is up to the player.”

Nayuta frowned, and Koyomi noticed the change in her expression.

“Um... Did I say something weird...?” she asked.

“No... I was just thinking that sometimes you’re really sharp... I think you’re right. What you see in this quest depends on the player. I bet we were purposely given a limited amount of information for that very reason—so we’d be forced to fill in the blanks ourselves.” Nayuta began to hurry, and Koyomi had to run to catch up.

Whenever the sound of the festival music grew faint, they changed direction, sometimes turning back at a corner and always moving in an attempt to get closer to the sound from above.

“This map is generating itself on the fly, isn’t it?” said Koyomi. “It’s too big to be static, and the layout seems totally random.”

“I agree. It’s probably designed to keep you permanently lost if you don’t pick up on the hint to move on,” Nayuta said, her legs moving tirelessly.

Eventually, they came to a dead end where the walls were coated in plaster. The music passed over their heads and moved beyond the wall.

“...This has gotta be it, Nayu.”

“...Yes. Very suspicious.”

The white plaster wall seemed to float up out of the darkness due to its color but was otherwise totally unremarkable. If not for the music overhead, they wouldn’t have given it a second look, but now they didn’t dare pass it by.

Koyomi put her hands on the wall, hoping to find a hidden switch of some kind.

Almost immediately, the wall rotated.

“Whoaaa!!”

“Koyomi?!”

The movement was so smooth, it startled them both. Koyomi promptly tumbled forward; the wall did not support her at all, and there was nothing for her to grab onto to regain her balance. Thankfully, Nayuta was there to grab the back of her collar and keep her from falling flat on her face.

Behind the spinning door disguised as a wall there was a single passageway and a set of wooden stairs leading upward.

“Th-thanks, Nayu... Wow, did we hit the jackpot?”

“It seems like it. Let’s just hope that Mr. Yanagi is up there...”

They moved through the darkened passageway and started climbing the stairs.

The music sounded close.

Koyomi put her hand on the ninja blade at her back, just in case they were required to battle the musicians.

She watched Nayuta’s back as the other girl climbed the stairs ahead of her. As always, it seemed somehow fragile. It felt to Koyomi like her friend would simply fade away into nothingness if she took her eyes off her. It was that fear that pushed Koyomi to pay so much attention to her—too much, perhaps.

The one thing that Koyomi found scarier than ghosts, zombies, or even tigers on folding screens was the regret that came with seeing something coming and being unable to do anything about it.

She sped up the stairs, determined not to fall behind Nayuta. Their footsteps on the wooden boards mixed with the music from above like an extra layer of percussion, beating out a mournful rhythm.

As they climbed higher, Nayuta called back to Koyomi to warn her.

“We’re coming up on a dark zone, Koyomi. I’ll get a lantern ready, so give me a moment.”

“Got it... Ugh, I hate dark zones...,” she complained, holding on to Nayuta’s sleeve. “There’s always something waiting in there to scare you...”

The dungeons in 108 Apparitions were all dim, dingy places. But even when there wasn’t an obvious light source, they were always designed so you could make out your surroundings. The dark zones, however, were different—they were areas of pure blackness, where even a lantern would only provide enough light to see several paces ahead.

It was out of this blanket of darkness that the music was coming, loud and raucous.

I hope they don’t surround us...

Based on the echoes, it seemed they were entering a wide-open space, not some cramped hallway. When the lantern came on, a patch of wood-slat floor rose out of the darkness, stretching for several paces in all directions.

Just then, Nayuta noticed something wrong with the ceiling.

“Koyomi... I’m only saying this so you won’t be alarmed. The ceiling looks extremely grotesque. Please don’t look up if you can help it.”

“Huh? The ceiling...? Gyaaaaa!!” Koyomi shrieked, in a decidedly unladylike way.

Covering the ceiling above them was a massive swarm of serpents—all sculptures.

Though fake, they were rendered in incredible detail, right down to the scales. Their thick trunks were piled on top of one another, with the occasional head rising from the mass.

Because of the limited scope of the lantern, they could only see a small part of it, but they could easily guess that this sculpture covered quite a large area.

“...Ugh, it’s *ghastly*...”

“Hopefully it’s only here for atmosphere... But I have a feeling that there are some real snakes among them that are going to attack. Let’s keep our guards up for an ambush.”

Koyomi nodded and clung to Nayuta’s left arm. It made it difficult to move, but very unlikely they’d get separated in the darkness.

Nayuta focused carefully, listening for the precise direction the festival music was coming from. There wasn’t much echo, so she could detect a clear difference in volume as she changed her angle.

It was clear by now that they were on the same floor. But as soon as she decided on a direction and took a step forward, a snake promptly dropped down in front of her.

“*Ffffhhh!*” Koyomi hissed like a cat and swung her ninja blade. The snake was cut in two before it could even touch the ground. Nayuta was impressed by her friend’s lightning reflexes.

“That was really something, Koyomi. Even I’m not that quick.”

“Why are you fine?! Why are you fine?! I know I’m repeating myself, but it’s an important question: *Why are you fine?!*” Koyomi babbled, half-mad. The sight of her complete lack of poise actually calmed Nayuta down—or so she wanted to think.

“Well, I don’t have that much of a problem with snakes... I don’t like touching them, of course, but I find bugs with lots of legs much grosser.”

“I hate bugs, too, but that’s not the point! Huge snakes are dropping onto you from the ceiling in the dark! I’d say that warrants getting a little spooked!”

“First of all, it was only one of them... And if we’re going to talk about extreme reactions, the way you lashed out and struck a critical hit before it even landed was a lot crazier than me not being scared.”

This was the kind of thing that character stats had no bearing on—it simply came down to one’s nature.

Koyomi had claimed that she was ambushed by a half-fish man in an open-air bath on their first run. Nayuta felt like any enemy that managed to score a

sneak attack on Koyomi deserved praise. She must have slipped on the wet stone. Nayuta couldn't imagine any other way the fish-man could have outmaneuvered her reflexes.

They continued moving, Koyomi's blade flashing with each falling snake, while Nayuta focused on getting them closer to the festival music. Their target must have been moving as well, because they seemed to be staying at a fixed distance. But paradoxically, that told Nayuta that she was getting closer to the goal.

And if that was true, what about Yanagi?

"I hope Mr. Yanagi's all right," she said. "It doesn't matter if he has to try a couple times, but he's so new to the game. I'm not sure he'll be able to make it this far all on his own..."

"That reminds me...", Koyomi murmured. "The kid in the mask said something weird... I told you how he was like, 'I don't need to bother with you,' right?"

"Yes, you did mention that after we met up again. And that you were treated like a pervert by a faceless demon woman with black teeth."

Koyomi put her hands on her head. "I didn't even touch her! Maybe I *would* have if she were as pretty as you—but literally, who wants to touch a monster woman's titties?! Plus, we're both women, so she should have called me a pervertess or something... Oh, what am I saying?! I was supposed to be talking about the boy in the mask!" As she wailed, she sliced through another falling snake.

It occurred to Nayuta that maybe Koyomi was so terrified because of how aware she was of her surroundings.

"Anyway," she continued, "I tried to ask him what he meant by 'I don't need to bother with you,' and he said, 'Just do your best, okay?' So I'm wondering...is that AI in charge of managing the player's difficulty setting?"

Nayuta blinked in surprise. "I see... That's a very keen observation, Koyomi. I believe it's possible. In fact...if that's true, a lot of things would start making sense."

In short, the child in the fox mask was like the quest's administrator.

“It’s rare for 108 Apparitions to have an AI adjusting the quest’s settings, isn’t it?” she continued. “I figured it would be like most other quests: If you don’t meet the recommended level, you toughen up a little before trying it, and if it’s an easy quest, you should breeze right through it.”

Following Nayuta’s lead, Koyomi spoke in a hushed whisper. “Well, I mean... If the designer thought that after his death, his grandpa might try to play the quest alone, he probably figured he’d need some kind of...y’know, difficulty adjustment. But if he made it easy enough for a beginner to play, it’d be way too easy for most people. And then if he made it too hard, his poor grandpa wouldn’t be able to play it...”

And Yanagi didn’t have much time. Kiyofumi had probably realized that as he was making the quest.

“But in that case...,” said Nayuta, “maybe the devs were wasting their time raising Mr. Yanagi’s level for the playtest.”

Koyomi shook her head. “I don’t think so. Remember what Tora-tora said? There’s no way to beat it at level-1... That’s gotta mean the developers did some difficulty balancing before they implemented the quest, right?”

Nayuta gasped in realization. Torao’s explanation had sounded so normal for a developer that she had let it go in one ear and out the other. But if Koyomi’s theory was right, that balancing would have removed one of the AI’s purposes.

Kiyofumi had set up the AI in order to balance the difficulty so that anyone could finish the quest. But the team hadn’t liked that and had rebalanced it so that you couldn’t finish the quest unless you were above a certain level.

It wasn’t a matter of who was right or wrong. Designer, developer, player—each side had its own reasons for doing what it did.

“Of course, the developer’s right to change what they publish supersedes the AI’s right to manage,” said Koyomi. “So if it can’t make the enemies or traps any weaker, it’ll try to find some other way to help the inexperienced Mr. Yanagi get through the quest... Or that’s what I think, at least.”

Nayuta agreed. “Maybe it’s better for us that they took down the quest,” she said with a sigh. “If Mr. Yanagi was still level-1, who knows if we’d have reached

the ending within the time limit...”

“Is his condition that bad...?” Koyomi asked.

Nayuta wasn’t sure how to respond. “Honestly, I don’t know. But when we visited him, he wasn’t able to get up out of bed. I’m pretty sure he believes this playtest will be his last chance.”

Koyomi gripped Nayuta’s arm. “All right, then...let’s do it! Let’s go find Mr. Yanagi and beat the boss at the end of the—”

Without any warning, the festival music abruptly and unnaturally stopped.

Instantly, Nayuta grabbed Koyomi and leaped to the side.

Moments later, something massive sped like a locomotive through the space where they’d just been standing.

Nayuta stood up, set Koyomi down to one side, and faced the enemy.

“Aieeee!!” Koyomi wailed. “Something’s here! Wh-what is it?!”

Their attacker lifted a long, curved neck.

It had a shining, cylindrical white torso; a long, flickering tongue; and golden eyes that cruelly surveyed its prey. Crucially, it was a lot bigger, but its features were no different from those of all the other snakes Koyomi had slain on their way here.

The giant serpent, having missed its sneak attack, bared sharp, menacing fangs, then drew back its head and slunk into the darkness before them.

“N-N-N-N-N-Nayu...snake...snake...! Snakey!”

“...It’s a giant serpent,” said Nayuta. “That’s probably the boss. I think that attack was its way of saying hi. We haven’t met up with Mr. Yanagi yet—but it’s probably a good idea to engage with it a little, just to help us come up with a strategy.” As Nayuta walked gracefully into battle, Koyomi grabbed her sleeve with trembling fingers.

“N-no, wait! I need to mentally prepare myself! Also...I don’t think I can handle a giant reptile monster like that head-on! Let’s try to circle around the sides!”

Nayuta briefly considered this. “It might be difficult to outflank it. Snakes sense their prey by heat and smell. That’s assuming this giant serpent has the same senses as a real snake, of course...”

If it was programmed to function like a snake, then it would sense them no matter which angle they tried to take in the darkness.

Koyomi opened her menu. “Hrrm... When you’re in trouble, find a useful item! Let’s see... Something...something... Ooh? Nah... I’ve got nothing....”

If the enemy sensed its targets with heat rather than sight, a smoke bomb was essentially useless. In fact, it would do more to impede their own vision, so it was a liability unless they were using it to flee.

A substitute seal was meant to confuse the enemy with illusions, but that wouldn’t work against a heat-sensing enemy, either.

“When dealing with something that senses body heat... You’re supposed to confuse them with fire, right? So a gunpowder bomb would work.”

“...They don’t do much damage, so I used all of mine up taking out the wimpy monsters on the way... Other than that, flame techniques seem like the most obvious choice...”

Nayuta and Koyomi looked at one another.

One of them was a warrior priestess with high agility who fought with her bare hands. The other was a ninja with speedy reflexes and quick feet.

Together, they had both bludgeoning and slashing attacks, and their fighting styles were so similar that they could unleash considerable combo damage. But because they could only use the most elementary types of sacred, shaman, and *onmyoji* magic, they lacked options. If only they had a friend who specialized in magic, they’d be set, but there was no point lamenting that now.

“Koyomi, you can use the Fire Escape technique, right?”

“Technically, yes...but my skill level is still at one, so it’s only for emergencies. It’s like lighting a campfire, nothing more... Honestly, I’ve only used it a handful of times.” Koyomi didn’t sound very confident.

Nayuta tried her best to bolster her friend’s morale. “I think that’ll be enough.

Let's try to learn the enemy's attack patterns, then run away. We'll put off beating the boss until Mr. Yanagi arrives. This is just reconnaissance."

"...Okay! In that case, I'll do my best!" said Koyomi, drawing her blade.

It was straight and flat, shorter than a classic katana, but long enough, considering Koyomi's size. If she tried to wield anything larger, she would have to sacrifice speed and agility.

"So... Will this work on those scales?" she asked.

"I think it should be able to pierce them, but the real problem is this enemy's size. We'll want to hit its sensory organs—the eyes, nose, tongue—but I'll handle that. Koyomi, you draw the enemy's attention with Fire Escape and focus on staying away while I get to work."

"Okey-dokey... Wait... Umm... Hmm? What the...?"

Koyomi's head rapidly swiveled back and forth. Nayuta, too, noticed multiple lights writhing and blinking within the dark zone.

There were six in total—two on the left, two in front, and two on the right. Each pair of glowing lights appeared to be coming from a very large creature.

Koyomi's cheek begun to twitch, and Nayuta furrowed her brows.

"...I'm sorry, Koyomi. Change of plans."

"...Yes. Agreed. I'm all in favor!"

They leaped at the same moment.

The pack of glowing orbs rushed toward them from the front. A moment later, massive jaws attacked from both sides.

All of a sudden, the locomotive-sized giant serpent had multiplied into three, and all of them came mercilessly out of the dark, baring their fangs. Coordinated attacks from three directions at once proved too much to handle, and Nayuta and Koyomi promptly began to retreat.

"Rrgh! We have to deal with three of them at once?!" shouted Nayuta.

"There's no way! That can't be a boss, it's gotta be a special unbeatable trap! Or else it's an illusion!" Koyomi was ranting.

Nayuta had considered the last option, too, but she wasn't going to take an attack on purpose just to prove it.

They would have to either escape the dark zone or lure the creatures to a location that would make it easier to take them out one at a time. Staying put would be madness.

The giant serpents were extremely fast for their size, and even if the girls ran at full speed, they would likely be overtaken.

"Oh no! Oh crap! Wait... Fire Escape!"

Koyomi turned around and made a hasty sign with her hands. It resulted in an almost comically tiny poof, and a ball of flame about the size of a campfire exploded in a puff of smoke a few steps behind them.

The serpent on the left opened its mouth and chomped down on the flame, buying the girls a few more steps.

Still, the three serpents writhed and flopped after them. After a few seconds of running, they at last spotted a bright light at one corner of the dark zone.

"Come this way, you two!" shouted an elderly monk carrying a small hand drum—just the person they were looking for.

"Mr. Yanagi?! You're all right!" exclaimed Nayuta.

"And you can use your sacred power!" Koyomi added. "That's amazing!"

The monk's sacred skill Mantra of Light lit up dark zones much better than any lantern. Its evil-repelling power drove away enemies weaker than the caster and raised any allies' resistances—it was extremely useful.

The two girls raced across the chamber toward the sacred light.

Behind Yanagi, they could see a stone wall and a smallish steel door. If they could get through it, they could escape from the serpents chasing them.

Yanagi opened the door, and the two burst through it almost simultaneously. An instant later, the door shut, stopping the serpents' pursuit. Once they were assured of their safety, Yanagi and the girls shared a moment of joy at their reunion.

“You found the instrument, Mr. Yanagi!” said Nayuta. “We were worried.”

The elderly monk smiled gently and raised his woven hat. “I did, thank you. I wasn’t sure if I would make it...but that boy in the fox mask helped me. It seems he was an AI Kiyofumi left behind—not the real thing. But it was a valuable experience for me.”

His expression was serene, as though he’d reached some kind of acceptance. They hadn’t finished the quest yet, but it felt kind of like he’d achieved his goal already.

“It sounds like something good happened,” said Nayuta.

The monk’s eyes narrowed happily, and he looked a little embarrassed. “Well, how shall I say this... I’ve learned that while I thought I knew my grandson, I didn’t really know him at all.”

Ordinarily, a realization like that would leave someone crestfallen, but Yanagi seemed satisfied. He inclined his head and smiled again. “It’s quite silly, really. So...it seems Klever hasn’t joined you yet.”

“It’s likely he was already defeated,” Nayuta said, coldly brushing aside the absent detective. “Let’s forget about him and focus on beating the quest by ourselves.” She rapped the steel door behind her with a fist.

The three giant serpents were probably waiting for them on the other side. Koyomi had suggested that they might be an unbeatable trap, but Nayuta still thought the snakes were the quest’s boss.

That said, she did not think they could defeat such an enemy head-on.

Once they’d had a moment to breathe, she looked around. The dark zone had ended at the steel door, and they were now standing outside on a wide walkway running along the outer edge of the castle.

In addition to stretching around the castle’s perimeter, it appeared the walkway connected the main castle to a separate wing. It was uncovered and well maintained, almost like a pedestrian sidewalk.

The size of the walkway, however, was preposterous. It was like the stage of Kiyomizu Temple, but dozens of times larger. The space wasn’t just a place to

walk, either. It seemed like they were directly atop the roof of the dungeon's first floor.

Depending on your viewpoint, it might appear like something from a shrine, or simply a massive open deck.

"This place is so huge... Wow, look at that..." Koyomi murmured, drawing Nayuta's gaze upward. The clouds had cleared, revealing a sky full of stars.

The freedom of being out of the cramped dark zone and relief at escaping the giant serpents had left Nayuta more susceptible, and she was spellbound by the sight.

Koyomi, however, had already switched modes again. She began trotting around excitedly like a little puppy dog.

"Um... Did you come across from the other wing, Mr. Yanagi? You didn't go through the dark zone, did you?"

Yanagi chuckled awkwardly. "That's right. When I got here, I heard a terrible commotion on the other side of that door—and the moment I opened it up, I was shocked to find a bunch of snakes chasing you two. At that size, they're going to be quite an ordeal," he said, though his voice sounded almost gleeful.

Nayuta let her mind work as she beheld the starry canopy. She had started in the basement. Koyomi had been in the open-air bath on the ground floor, and it seemed the great hall Yanagi had told them about was in a separate wing.

The detective had probably been put in the tower, like last time. Maybe he'd run into something that was delaying him in the upper area.

Everyone starts in a different spot. So is this dark zone supposed to be the goal where we all meet up...?

Koyomi came over to her and tugged on her clothes like a child. "Nayu. Hey, Nayu. There are stairs leading up and down over there. Also, this isn't just a walkway from one place to another, but a circuit that goes all the way around the castle. It's pretty big, but maybe there's some trick to it. Want to investigate?"

The outer stairs leading below were probably meant as an emergency exit for

retreating and saving the group's progress. But they were doing a playtest, so not only would they ultimately lose any experience they'd gained, but they also didn't need to save any progress, since it would all be retained for testing purposes anyway. In other words, there was no point in leaving.

Yanagi had already explored the separate wing, which left the stairs leading up and the walkway circling the castle.

"Shall we go up first?" suggested the monk. "Perhaps we'll find the detective held up somewhere."

"Oh right, he started in the tower, huh? Okay, I'll go first..."

Koyomi started to rush up the steps—right as a roar split the night and a long shadow crossed overhead, blocking out the stars.

Nayuta's face shot upward.

There were a number of huge, square holes along the upper wall of the castle—and a giant serpent was slithering out of one, its head raised. She couldn't see its entire form, but the way it was stretching out of the hole made it look almost like an arm extending from the castle's body—albeit with hideously sharp fangs for fingers.

It fixed its eyes on its prey, piercing them with its gaze, but Nayuta glared right back at it and assumed her battle stance.

The snake plunged as quickly as if it were falling. Its mouth was open wide, ready to swallow Nayuta whole.

She leaped backward to avoid it and circled around the enemy's side. Without bothering to shout, she struck the side of its head near the hinge of the jaw with her outstretched palm.

She'd been trying to hit its eye and missed, but it was enough to make the snake flinch and writhe. It moved back to hug the exterior of the castle.

That felt like it made a dent. There was a hit point gauge displayed beside the giant serpent, and it had decreased ever so slightly.

Noticing the change in its status, Nayuta crouched and tensed her knees.

"N-Nayu! Are you all right?! You aren't hurt, are you?!"

“Who would have thought the serpent would come outside?!” exclaimed Yanagi.

With her focus still on the serpent, Nayuta glanced briefly at her two companions. “That thing’s not a trap, it’s the boss. We should finish it off here.”

“Whuh?!” yelped Koyomi. “W-we’re not running?!”

Nayuta stayed on guard. “There were three of them attacking us all at once inside the dark zone, so we pulled back... But now we have plenty of visibility, and there’s only one. Let’s do it.”

“Y-yeah, but...if that thing escapes upward, we won’t be able to reach it...”

“It’s not running—it’s coming right for us.”

Nayuta ran straight ahead. The serpent had momentarily withdrawn up the castle wall, but now it flew at her again like an arrow.

“Aaaaah! Fine! I ain’t no chicken!” Koyomi bellowed, picking an odd phrase for someone so perennially scared as she rushed off to join the fray.

The two girls took up positions closer to the boss and let Yanagi bring up the rear. If an intense melee battle broke out directly around the serpent, it could put the elderly man in danger.

Avoiding the snake’s jaws, Nayuta swung around its flank and gave it another fierce punch to the scales. More powerful than a standard strike, the Purifying Blow was infused with her holy power as a warrior priestess, and it worked on all kinds of monsters.

The first hit had convinced her that the giant serpent was a living creature, so she tried out her Smashing Palm skill, which was good against living enemies. It did damage but wasn’t enough for a critical hit.

This blow took more than twice the HP of the first, and the serpent writhed in pain in midair.

“Koyomi! This thing is a *yokai*, not a living creature! Anti-spirit attacks will work better!”

“Got it! Time to meet your maker!” Koyomi said, throwing out another random exclamation as she thrust her ninja blade into the giant snake’s trunk.

She then activated her Thunderclap ninja technique, which sent a surge of electricity through the blade.

They heard the crackle of flesh sizzling. When the snake pulled back, Nayuta leaped onto its forehead and struck one of its open eyes with her fist.

It didn't puncture the eye, but the sensory organ was apparently a weak point, and the attack took a huge amount of the serpent's HP.

"Huh?! This thing's kinda weak!" Koyomi blurted out.

Nayuta felt the same. They still hadn't beaten it, so she wouldn't call it a pushover, but given the fierce challenge she'd been expecting, it was proving something of a letdown.

Maybe this is about right for the boss of a low-level quest.

Of course, there were two more, so they couldn't get cocky. For now, however, this first snake seemed more like a little warm-up.

"C'mon, Nayu! Let's finish this thing off!"

"You bet!"

They pounced on the serpent from either side.

Koyomi's ninja blade pierced the creature's forehead, while Nayuta's fist glowed with holy light as it struck the left eye. With a tremendous roar that split the darkness, the pitiable serpent fell to the ground and lay still.

"There we go! If the others are about the same, I'd say we can take the last two at the same time!" said Koyomi, her motivation high.

"My goodness... All I did was stand here and watch," said Yanagi with a wry grin. Now that they could see a path to success, the mood had grown light.

Nayuta relaxed a little and stood up straight, but she quickly noticed something was off.

The body of the serpent is still here, even though we defeated it. It hasn't vanished.

In fact, it was starting to drag itself back into the castle, where its tail end still lay hidden.

Koyomi's cheek twitched. "What the...? Its HP went to zero, but it's still here... and it's moving...? What? Why? Is someone pulling it back into the castle...?"

Nayuta just watched in silence.

The battle wasn't over. If anything, this little skirmish was only the starting signal.

A few moments after the serpent was dragged back inside the castle, it happened.

"Ohhhhhh..."

A deep chanting seemed to rise from the earth, so loud that it vibrated everything around them.

With a shock, they looked up to see the walkway circling the top part of the castle packed full of ghostly, translucent musicians.

The festival players were now dyed gold, and there was no expression whatsoever on their faces. They wore pointed *eboshi* caps, hunting robes, or long-sleeved guardsman's robes. All at once, they lifted their instruments and began to play. The magnificent sound they produced completely overwhelmed the trio.

Nayuta momentarily forgot to breathe, she was so enraptured. The sound was like nothing she had ever heard before: an orchestra of hundreds of players, all performing in exact unison. It was *too* grand, and began to take on an eerie quality.

As the unearthly festival music continued, a change came over the exterior of the castle.

Creaking gave way to shaking, until the front face of the building crumbled altogether—revealing an enormous snake monster with eight heads and eight tails.

Its thick torso, where all the heads and tails met, lay heavily across the upper floor of the castle. Its eight tails hung from the sides of the building, but even swinging around, they were too far away to reach Nayuta and the others.

The enemy's means of attack—and the party's target—were the seven heads

glaring down at them.

There had been eight in total, but they'd already defeated one. Although it was connected to the same body as the others, it was inactive. The other seven writhed and swayed while it slumped inert within the castle.

In time with the music, the seven heads opened their mouths as one.

Koyomi grabbed Nayuta by the waist.

"Y...Yamata no Orochi, the eight-headed serpent?! We've seen this guy once before! But that one was a huge raid boss that you needed to fight with a hundred people!"

"Look closely. I think this one's a juvenile," Nayuta pointed out. She was a lot calmer than her friend.

The Yamata no Orochi of the previous event had been composed of snakes each as thick as a river, and the length of its body could stretch across an entire mountain. It was like something out of a *kaiju* flick.

In comparison, each of these serpents was only about as wide as a train, making it less than a tenth the size of the bigger one. Still, it would be tough for just three people to tackle. There were still seven more heads to defeat, to say nothing of the rest of the snake.

Yanagi seemed awestruck by the sight.

"How ghastly... And it's enormous. Will this be a difficult foe?"

"Uh, yeah, definitely... Hey, Nayu? When we fought the Yamata no Orochi in the raid, each head had a different special ability, yeah?"

"That's right. If memory serves, one produced flames, one ice, another controlled the wind, one used poison, another paralyzed you, another could harden its scales, yet another produced illusions with its evil eye, and the last one possessed a powerful healing ability."

The battle against the Yamata no Orochi they were discussing wasn't part of 108 Apparitions. It was a stand-alone group event that had been held the previous year, before Nayuta and Koyomi met. In hindsight, it was probably a kind of test leading up to the current event.

In that fight, Yamata no Orochi had been so large that maneuvering around it was difficult, so players had to split up into teams of about twenty for each head and coordinate their attacks.

If one team of twenty lost, the serpent it had been fighting would join another of the heads as backup, increasing pressure on the remaining players. On the other hand, if one of the heads was defeated, that team's players could go assist the other groups.

It was a long battle of attrition to see which side would outlast the other, and Nayuta had found it quite draining. From what Koyomi had said, it seemed she'd tried it once, given up, and not bothered to attempt it again.

While this one was much smaller, handling an eight-headed serpent with such a tiny party sounded like a joke, and not a very funny one at that.

"...Now that I think of it," Nayuta said, "there was a Yamata no Orochi model in the free assets the team made available for people programming quests. I think your grandson must have modified it for his submission." She felt foolish for not realizing this earlier, even if the color of the model *had* been altered.

"So, Nayu...", Koyomi muttered, "Does that mean the power of the giant serpent we just beat was..."

It hadn't used any kind of breath attack. Its defense had been on the low side, and it had been shockingly easy to defeat. If it had had a special power, it had to be...

Yanagi narrowed his eyes and pointed the tip of his monk's staff toward the serpent in the castle. "You two...it appears the serpent you defeated earlier has *awakened...*"

The fallen serpent slowly lifted its head. Its emptied HP bar had returned to about 20 percent, and the other heads were carefully supporting their wounded companion.

Nayuta lifted her hand to her head, while Koyomi slumped forward, crestfallen.

"It *was* ultra-healing!"

“Let’s just think of our earlier fight as a nice warm-up,” Nayuta suggested.

As the grand festival orchestra continued to play, Nayuta thought she saw the eight snake heads laughing, mocking her.

§

The flame breath missed by a hair, and the ice breath grazed their clothes.

A wave of poison breath left them struggling to apply antidotes, then paralysis left them susceptible to strong gales that sent them flying, only for them to be body-slammed by a serpent with hardened scales. They managed to heal themselves just in time, only for their counterattack to strike an illusion from another serpent’s evil eye.

Nayuta’s party was completely at the mercy of this swarm of giant serpents and their many special attacks. The battle was not going well, to say the least.

They were managing to damage all eight heads, but with little chance to apply a concentrated offense, they hadn’t been able to bring down a single one.

“...Huff...! Huff...!”

Even in the game, the sense of fatigue was real. Nayuta’s shoulders were heaving as she dodged a body blow. She kicked the beast’s head and jumped off in another direction.

She was coming down near another head, which she gave a withering punch to the snout, when a gust of wind knocked her off balance and a blast of flame breath hit her dead center from another direction.

“Rrrgk...!”

“A-are you all right, Miss Nayuta?!” asked Yanagi, who’d come rushing up behind her.

A white light had filled Nayuta’s vision at just about the same instant the fire had hit her. Yanagi had used his sacred Diamond Barrier in the nick of time.

But while it blocked most of the damage, her innate lack of defense still left her seriously wounded.

“Mr. Yanagi, stay back!”

“I cannot. You need to be healed right now.”

He held out his monk’s staff and performed his healing skill while Koyomi used her unwieldy Fire Escape technique to distract the giant serpents. She was still leaping around nimbly, but Nayuta could tell she was near her limit.

We won’t win at this rate! Her logical mind was screaming at her. *We need to pull back and prepare for another attempt.* But Nayuta kept hesitating.

She and Koyomi weren’t the only ones who were tired. The elderly monk was in the same boat. They’d been playing for several hours, and if they retreated now, she knew they’d have to call it a day.

If they could simply meet up and play again tomorrow, that would be no problem. But Yanagi’s condition could deteriorate at any time.

Plus, Koyomi couldn’t keep taking time off, which would make things even harder. Nayuta wanted to finish this quest today at all costs—so she willed herself to buckle down and get up again.

“Mr. Yanagi, you focus on evasion and defense! If we can just take out one of the heads, the battle will keep getting easier...”

Because of the nature of the Yamata no Orochi, the key to winning was surviving the initial onslaught. Once you’d taken out half of the heads, they could only attack half as often, and it got easier and easier for the party to focus on the remaining targets.

The fact that Koyomi was continuing to fight without whining about it proved she was just as aware of the stakes. But at this rate, they were likely to wipe without taking out a single head.

“Fnyaaaa!”

As she was thrown back, Koyomi let out a strange, animalistic cry over the sound of the music, which by now was simply serving as BGM. Her little body bounced and rolled like a ball, thudding two or three times along the connecting walkway until she ran into a handrail and came to a stop.

“Koyomi?! Mr. Yanagi, please heal her!”

“Ah! Right away!” he said, racing over to her crumpled form at the edge of

the walkway. Emotionally, Nayuta was right there with him, but she had to serve as a decoy while he worked on healing Koyomi.

Mr. Yanagi's sacred power won't last forever... We need to make some serious headway, and soon!

And in her haste and consternation, Nayuta made a fatal mistake.

She was so focused on drawing the snakes' attention that she leaped right into their midst.

Front, back, left, right, and above—the eight heads blocked her in every direction. Even with her agility, there was no escape.

No...!

It was the kind of mistake she would ordinarily never have made, and this time it would be her undoing. She had just resigned herself to her fate—when a flash of light came from an unexpected direction.

There was a loud bursting sound, followed by a shower of sparks and smoke. All the serpents turned toward the disturbance.

This is my chance! I can escape!

Nayuta leaped back with everything she had, weaving her way through the tiny space that had opened up. But then her body made contact with an obstacle that hadn't been there a moment ago.

It was a fox wearing an out-of-place inverness coat and deerstalker hat, smiling down at Nayuta with a patronizing expression.

"Hello there, miss. It looks like you're having trouble."

"D-Detective?!"

The fox-faced young man winked at her so obnoxiously that she nearly punched him in the face. Only his position as her elder stayed her hand. Instead, she fixed him with a baleful glare as chilly as the serpent's frost breath.

"You were so late, I assumed you'd already died. Where were you while the rest of us were fighting?"

"Don't make it sound like I was lost. That's rude. Didn't I bring you a nice

souvenir?”

He pulled a gunpowder bomb from his pocket and hurled it up into the air.



It burst just like the last one, and the swarm of serpents all looked up toward the same point in the sky. They were practically hypnotized—like cats looking up at a new toy dangling from a string.

The detective's eyes narrowed, as if he wasn't the least bit worried.

"The efficacy is astounding. I found these 'snake fireworks' in the castle's warehouse. It's a special item meant to distract giant serpents, but they're rather hard to come by unless you happen to have a lot of luck. If it weren't a playtest, I'd give you some of what I found."

As Nayuta tried to get her breathing back under control, she said, "Um... I thought snake fireworks were the ones that fizzle and leave wriggling ash that looks like a snake..."

The detective chuckled smugly. "Ah, yes, the classic of every firework set. They leave one strangely disappointed, but I find that pleasant in its own way," he said breezily. The fact that he was so calm and aloof even in the midst of a raging boss battle put Nayuta somewhat at ease.

At any rate, he'd bought enough time for her panting to subside. She reassumed her battle stance, ready to face the serpents once more.

"I'm ashamed that you have to see us struggling like this, but I'm assuming you can't fight, so you can stay in the back with Mr. Yanagi—"

"No, I'll help. If I leave it all to you, Mr. Torao's going to strike it rich in overtime pay." Klever murmured the last part, tapping the ground near his foot with his walking stick.

"What...? I don't think that's going to work. Not with your stats anyway..."

She was going to say, *You'll only get in the way*, but the detective's thin smile stopped her in her tracks.

"Five seconds... No, three."

"What?"

"I'll defang that giant snake in three seconds. Just stand back and watch," he said with complete confidence. It was hard to tell if he was simply a fool, or if this was some kind of trickster fox routine.

According to legend, the Yamata no Orochi had first been intoxicated by Yashiori sake—distilled eight times—before it was slain. Perhaps Klever had stumbled upon a jar of the liquor, she thought.

But instead, the detective selected a wooden percussion instrument and a cloth-wrapped mallet. Nayuta could scarcely believe her eyes.

The instrument was rounded—almost spherical, in fact. She had definitely seen one before. But she wasn't sure that she would call it an "instrument" as such.

The detective used the mallet to strike the item's smooth, shining surface at a deliberate pace.

Pok, pok, pok, pok, pok...

"...It's a fish gong, used by monks as they chant their sutras."

The detective bobbed his head gracefully as he kept up the rich, calming sound.

"This is the reuniting instrument I found. However...I think it's *after* we're back together that they really show off their true worth," Klever said confidently.

It was a surreal sight, watching the detective stand stock still and strike the wooden fish gong, but Nayuta didn't have the presence of mind to laugh at him. And sure enough, a change began to occur.

The music of the ghost orchestra, which had turned into BGM for the fight, began to die down as the sound of the fish gong grew louder. Koyomi, who was back in action now that Yanagi had healed her up, noticed the shift in volume.

"The orchestra's getting quieter... What? My instrument's reacting!"

Koyomi's bell, which she'd removed from her inventory, was casting a faint light in response to the sound. Nayuta removed her flute and Yanagi his drum—both of which were glowing as well.

The detective wore a bewitching smile. "You should join the performance," he said. "What did Torao say? These are the tools that protected the village. Because the serpent stole the instruments, the villagers lost their souls and

were forced to be players in the serpent's orchestra. That means it's the festival music giving the serpent its strength, and the ritual instruments are the key to neutralizing the effect."

He finished his speech, quite proud of himself. Nayuta put her lips to the flute and began to blow. The vibrations in the air created a sound.

When the note reached the ghost orchestra, they stopped their performance and listened to the ritual instruments. And when the ghost orchestra stopped, the Yamata no Orochi lost its vitality and began to falter in confusion.

The detective's eyes narrowed in a grin. "The giant serpent wanted the musicians to strengthen itself. By stealing the ritual items that could stop it and placing them under its control inside the castle, it was able to make itself into a god. But then we stole the instruments back, and now we're the ones in control. We've turned the tables on it."

Now that he'd changed the tide of battle just as quickly as he'd promised, the detective resumed striking his wooden fish gong.

This didn't quite satisfy Nayuta, but since she'd failed to figure out the trick, any complaints she made now would only come off as sour grapes.

Thankfully, she now had eight targets on which to take out her frustration.

Flute in hand, Nayuta leaped toward the serpent heads. Unlike before, the weakened snakes were sluggish, slow to react. They bared their fangs, but their aggression was nothing compared to before. At this point, they were just enormous punching bags.

And Nayuta took great pleasure in using her fists on them. Koyomi soon joined in, and their two-person cleanup crew got to work.

"Nayu, you can leave this half to me! Mr. Yanagi, keep up your support!"

"I will. It seems as though victory is in sight."

He struck his hand drum while offering strategic support to the other combatants. One could scarcely believe he'd only begun playing a few days ago, so skilled was he at casting heals and buffs.

As the serpents' HP bars steadily shrunk, Nayuta turned to glance at the

detective.

Klever was staying out of the fight. He would only be a liability on the front line, so that was perfectly all right, but she couldn't shake the annoying feeling that he was just using them.

However, it was also true that if he hadn't used his instrument, they would have lost to the giant serpent. And of course, if not for him, they wouldn't have been able to take part in this playtest at all.

In that sense, it seemed almost miraculous that Yanagi had gone straight to him with his request.

And right beside the detective, as he happily watched them pummeling the snakes, she thought she saw the image of a child in a fox mask.

§

The Ghost Orchestra quest ended with a huge fireworks display under the night sky.

When they vanquished the juvenile Yamata no Orochi, the souls of all the villagers trapped and forced to play in the orchestra ascended to the heavens. The masterless castle soon began to fall apart and ascend as well, melting into the sky.

As the fireworks began, Nayuta exhaled, feeling rather spent.

"...In the end, you were the star of the show, Detective."

As it turned out, their hard battle against the serpents prior to his appearance had been completely pointless... What a stupid oversight on her part. Of course you were supposed to use the quest's key items; it's what they were there for. But she was so tied to the notion of the instruments' sole purpose being reuniting the party that she'd eliminated the possibility they might also be used in battle.

Klever watched the fireworks explode above them.

"When you think about a designer's tastes, you can start to see how their puzzles work." There was no smugness in his voice now. "When we were

offering the *botamochi* to the shrine, you must have felt it, too. ‘It can’t be this easy,’ right?”

Nayuta gasped. The list of offerings that had started with the message *I want to eat botamochi* didn’t actually require the player to track down each of the items it requested. Simply writing the words on a piece of paper was sufficient as a substitute.

If one did it the diligent and “proper” way, it would take an incredible amount of effort and time.

“Even when it looks hard, there’s always an easier way to solve the problem. That’s the style of this quest’s creator.”

Yanagi was lost in thought, watching the fireworks. He couldn’t hear the others talking, even though they were right beside him.

The detective sighed. “Yes. The difficulty changes drastically depending on one simple factor: whether you notice the hint or not. That’s a frequent feature of this quest. I’m guessing it was designed that way for Mr. Yanagi. Even if you’re a low-level player, you can still beat it as long as you notice the little details—although that was lost somewhat when the developers adjusted the difficulty level.”

Something about Klever’s explanation seemed off to Nayuta. He was acting like he was speaking to her, but his tone was oddly stiff, almost like his words were actually meant for someone else.

“Are you cursing out the devs?” she asked.

The detective laughed. “No. They helped me make a good chunk of change, and I’m not that petty. But...it’s true that this quest strongly reflects the will of its creator, the late Kiyofumi. It’s my belief that if the devs want to alter that, they ought to have good intentions, a good plan, and a good reason. Since this is a player-submitted quest, as long as the creator’s intentions are sound, it is my opinion that they should be reflected to the utmost extent possible.”

Nayuta mulled over the detective’s rather long and roundabout explanation for a moment. “So you’re saying...they should put it back online already without tampering too much?”

He shrugged. "It's not up to me. But if you want to know my personal opinion...that about sums it up."

But there was still one problem with restoring the quest—the very reason it had been taken down in the first place: the presence of ghosts that shouldn't exist in the game's data. The team would have to decide what to do with the quest after examining the results of this playtest.

And the detective was waffling about something related to those ghosts.

Nayuta still didn't know the man very well. She hadn't been around him long enough to guess what was bothering him, and she didn't intend to pry. But they say even chance meetings are not all up to chance, and the two of them were no longer strangers.

"Detective... Whose ghost did you see?" she asked softly, her voice nearly drowned out by the fireworks.

He seemed perplexed. "Hmm...? I already told you. It was a good friend who passed away in *SAO*."

"Yes, you said that...but you didn't give us any other details. Maybe it was your girlfriend, or someone you were in love with. And you didn't mention how it happened."

He looked at her with surprise. "I didn't expect you to ask me something like that. I thought you were the sort of person who didn't pry into other people's lives."

She was surprised by her actions, too. "You can just ignore me if you don't want to talk about it, of course. It's just...earlier, Koyomi told me, 'If you want to talk about something, just let it out.' But you seem like a loner, so I thought I'd lend you a shoulder to cry on," she said, a little condescendingly. That way, if he really didn't want to share, she could pass it off as a joke.

Klever seemed to see through this and chuckled. "How very cheeky of you. But...I suppose there's no need to hide it. I knew he was headed for certain death...and I wasn't able to stop him."

She picked up a very slight negative tone in his voice.

“He was a friend from my college days,” Klever continued. “And no, he wasn’t a girl, so don’t get any funny ideas in your head. We both liked games and decided we’d get into *SAO* together... And as it turned out, that was a very fateful choice.”

A slight, wincing pain ran through Nayuta’s chest.

“I’ll spare you the longer story... I prioritized my own survival and took the safe route. But he was in such a hurry to get out and back to the real world that he ended up dragged into a reckless battle by an incompetent officer. He paid for his mistake with his life.”

Nayuta pressed her hands to her chest without realizing she was doing it.

“And were you there...when it happened?” she asked.

Klever shook his head. “No. I heard about it from one of the survivors. So the ghost I saw was a total figment of my imagination. I have no idea what look was on his face when he died. Because I was trapped in *SAO*, I didn’t even get to attend his funeral. Even now, I have nightmares. It’s sad to admit.”

Despite his words, the tone of his voice remained flat and emotionless throughout.

“The fact that I couldn’t stop him from marching to his death...is the greatest regret in my entire life. I should have tied him up and kept him from going... He would have survived, and I might be leading a very different life right now.”

Nayuta felt a smile cross her lips. It was a depressing story, but the realization that a man so perpetually aloof had been close enough to someone to care this much brought her some measure of relief.

“So you really...really cared about your friend.”

He took a deep breath and let his shoulders sag. “I know I should be over it already. Go figure... I’m only here to help Mr. Yanagi finish this quest, and yet look at me, grappling with my deepest regrets. So...now it’s your turn. Let’s hear about it.”

Nayuta nodded and closed her eyes.

She took one breath, then another. Once her thoughts were clear, she

opened her eyes to see a huge firework blooming in the darkened sky.

“The ghost I saw was someone very close to me. Up until now, I’ve been keeping a lid on my emotions... But when I saw the ghost in this quest, it made me realize, ‘Oh, he’s really dead.’”

The detective said nothing. Nayuta continued her monologue, speaking off the top of her head.

“I think I was trying to run away from what happened. But this quest helped me understand something. The trick of those ghosts appearing... It’s an illusion that only the player sees, or a dream, or something like that, isn’t it? It’s not reading your memories or anything that dramatic... You see ‘something’ at random that your emotions respond to. I think it’s that simple.”

Klever nodded, staring at the show in the sky.

“That’s right,” he said. “What you see is completely reliant on the individual. The dev team thinks it’s a risk factor. What do you think?”

Nayuta chuckled. It would be rude to say so, but she thought the question was rather stupid.

“Would you consider the fact that people have dreams of the past when they sleep a ‘risk factor’?”

“Well...it depends on the dream. This is virtual reality, so we’re not technically sleeping...”

That’s not how he really feels, thought Nayuta.

The detective probably agreed with her. And for that reason, he was trying to get *her* to say it out loud first. Most likely, he was trying to get the developers, who were secretly monitoring their conversation, to hear it from someone else’s mouth. Sensing this, Nayuta chose to play along.

“I’m grateful for it. It was something I needed to face sooner or later anyway. And more than that, I think the developers should butt out of players’ dreams. Having dreams is a freedom, not a risk. I don’t want them extracting my memories to use as data, but if that’s not what’s happening, I’d rather have that element of the quest preserved for the sake of future players. And whether the

outcome is good or bad depends on the person, doesn't it?"

More fireworks shot off. The detective's shoulders shook with laughter. Apparently, this was exactly the answer he'd been hoping to hear.

"That was surprisingly intense. In that case, how do you think the developers should be held responsible if something goes wrong?"

"Nobody needs to be responsible for another person's dreams. All they need to do is reveal the mechanism of the trick. You keep mentioning risks, but compared to the risk of implementing user-submitted quests, this is a drop in the bucket. The developers should preserve and honor the wishes of the late designer of this quest, and if they don't have the guts to do that, then they shouldn't have run this event in the first place."

The detective suddenly patted her on the head, and she momentarily froze. The reaction was unconscious on her part, but Klever seemed to find it the height of comedy.

"S-sorry, sorry. That was incredible. I'd never have guessed such a prim and proper young lady would have such a sharp tongue. Maybe you're more suited to joining the police force than you thought. If you studied up on interrogation techniques and added in that biting wit of yours, you could really go places."

Nayuta sighed heavily. "To be honest with you, I simply don't like hard exercise and rigorous training. I'd rather work for your detective agency than do anything like that."

After another round of laughter, the detective straightened up and sniffed. "Ahh, that was fun. Well, I owe you one after this, so if you ever need help, I'll offer you some job advice. Apparently my company abuses its employees, but I can recommend you a proper workplace where I know someone. It'd be worth your time, at least." After he made this strangely generous offer, Klever's eyes began to wander. Nayuta followed his gaze.

The child in the fox mask was standing before them, lit by the colorful fireworks above. Yanagi and Koyomi had noticed his arrival, too, and were slowly moving toward him.

The boy looked at Nayuta and Klever and said, in a strangely clear voice,

“Congratulations. You beat the quest the right way.”

The detective nodded and held out his hand for a shake. “It was thanks to you. I appreciate all the hints you gave me.”

The AI boy seemed confused. “I don’t think I did anything more than what was required of me...but that’s fine. Kiyofumi left a message for those who know him and clear the quest: ‘Thanks for playing.’”

“Th-that’s a much shorter message than I was expecting,” Koyomi grumbled. “Really? That’s all? I may not have known him in life, but is there really nothing else?”

The child glanced up at the fireworks. “Hmm... There are a number of messages for individual players, but they’re not for you guys, so I can’t tell you. Sorry. But...”

The boy pointed down below, in the direction of the castle entrance.

“Grandpa’s got unlocked at the shrine when you beat the quest. The detective solved the first riddle, so I’m sure you can figure it out, right? In case the developers restricted my abilities, Kiyofumi hid all the really important stuff in there.”

And with that, he waved. “So long. Good-bye.”

“Oh, wait a minute!” Nayuta called out, and the boy turned back.

“What is it?”

“Um... Are you here all alone?” she asked, before she realized what she was saying. The boy giggled.

“You’re nice. It’s all right, I’m not here all the time...and we live more freely than you probably realize.” The boy spread his arms. “Humans have human friends, and AIs have AI friends. We’re growing at an incredible speed right now. But...I don’t have much interest in that, myself. Though I’m here, other mes made from this one might show up in other places. If you happen to come across one...I hope we can play together again.”

And with the tiny tinkling of a bell, the boy in the mask vanished like mist in a breeze. Nayuta turned to Koyomi, feeling like they’d just been hoodwinked by a

real magic fox.

“Detective, was that...?” Nayuta began.

“What?” Koyomi cut in. “What just happened?”

“I don’t know that I can answer your question...,” said Klever. “But we do have one last errand to run. Let’s head back to the entrance of the castle.”

Before he left, the child had brought up the shrine there. He’d said that Kiyofumi had hidden something important in it. Apparently, Klever already knew what that was.

The fireworks display had just finished.

Though the serpent’s castle had broken apart and fallen into ruin, the area where they were standing was still intact. They went down the stairs and through a one-way warp zone that put them right back at the entrance.

The enormous gate, which had seemed so eerie on their first encounter, now looked almost charming, like a big facade someone had made for a film.

In the center of the short set of stone stairs leading down from the gate was the little shrine they’d offered the “mochi” to. The child’s statue inside was now resting peacefully.

“So...what do we do here?” asked Nayuta.

The rest of the group looked baffled as the detective put on a knowing smile. He gazed at the shrine with his narrow fox eyes.

“Well... Do you all recall what was asked of us here at the beginning?”

Koyomi tried to puzzle out what he meant. “*Botamochi*, right? And then *koori mochi*, and *kuzumochi*, and the rest of the mochi series...”

“In what order?”

“Huh?”

Nayuta stopped short. Even she couldn’t remember the sequence in that much detail. Neither could Yanagi, who stared at the statue with a troubled expression.

The detective chuckled. “I see. I guess I was the only one who received the

message, then. Here's the order: *botamochi*, *kuzumochi*, *habutae mochi*, *koori mochi*, *koban mochi*, *nikki mochi*, *isobe mochi*—and lastly, there was a hint: '*Ruri and hari* shine when lit.'"

After a few moments, Nayuta gasped. And then she realized exactly why the detective could remember the order of the mochi so clearly.

Koyomi hadn't figured it out yet. She pulled on Nayuta's sleeve.

"Why did you make that sound? What is it, Nayu? Did you realize something? Don't hold out on me, say it!"

"I'm not holding out on you... It's the first syllable of each request. If you put them together, it spells out..."

She wasn't sure if she should say the answer in front of Yanagi, however, and faltered.

"The first syllables...?" said Koyomi. "Um, *botamochi*, *kuzumochi*... Oh!" Her face abruptly turned deadly serious.

Yanagi's white brows furrowed with thought.

Bo, ku, ha, ko, ko, ni, i, ru.

I am here.

It was a heavy statement indeed coming from someone who knew he was dying.

The detective addressed Yanagi.

"It sounds like a declaration of presence by the late Kiyofumi... A final howl made with his death at hand, a record of the earnest emotions he infused in his creation—or that's how I interpreted it. But maybe it isn't as heavy as I thought. It might even be as simple as saying, 'I am here, so ask me anything you want to know.'"

"Huh? Are you saying..."

That wasn't what Nayuta had been expecting, and she hesitated. A message this powerful felt like a cry from someone who feared death and wanted to at least leave something behind to prove he had lived.

Rather than answer their questions, the detective took a piece of paper from next to the offerings and scrawled something on it.

Yanagi mochi.

The nationally renowned flagship product of Yanagi's company, Yanagiya Ryuuzendou.

A popular and affordable assortment of eight different flavors of mochi in one attractive package, the kind of thing that just about anyone in the nation would recognize.

Once offered to the shrine, the paper disappeared and was replaced by an envelope. Klever picked it up and handed it straight to Yanagi without breaking the seal.

"I believe this is for you to open, not us."

Yanagi took the letter with trembling fingers.

The text of this message was much longer than the demands for different mochi had been.

To the person who finds this letter:

I don't think anyone but my grandpa will be able to find this.

If someone else finds it instead, please just leave it and forget you saw it.

What follow are my final words, written for my grandpa to read.

Dear Grandpa,

I said just about everything I wanted to say while I was alive.

But there's one last thing left.

At the risk of repeating myself, there's one thing that I really need to tell you, straight from my heart.

When I was born with this illness that meant I wouldn't live long, you gave me the greatest medical care and most comfortable environment you possibly could.

I know that everyone pitied me, but I was very blessed.

There are many people all over the world who die from a lack of medical care.

I probably should have died much earlier, just like them, but it was thanks to you that I lived as long as I did.

You gave me the years I spent on this earth.

You bought me a computer and a phone.

You gave me time to live before I died, and the chance to learn many things.

I made friends in the world of VRMMORPGs.

The Sleeping Knights.

Ran, Yuuki, Merida, Jun, Siune, Talken, Nori, Tecchi...

It's because of the memories I made with them that I'm able to face death without regrets.

And at the very end, I got to make a quest for this game I love so much.

There were lots of things I thought about while working on this quest for 108 Apparitions.

I gave my character name to the AI who helped me put it all together.

He likes to play pranks, so it's possible he might have tricked and confused you, Grandpa.

I feel like Ran and Merida helped me make this quest, too.

They're not around anymore, but while I was working, I got the strangest feeling that they were with me.

I'll be going to join them soon. Maybe it's morbid of me to say this, but I'm actually looking forward to that a little.

To a lot of people, VRMMORPGs might seem like "just another game."

But they made the last few years of my life a real treasure.

You gave all of this to me.

Grandpa,

Thank you for giving me time and possibilities.

I'm sorry I don't have anything to give back to you.

But everything you did for me made my life worth living.

Yanagi fell to his knees, his shoulders racked by violent sobs.

Nayuta and Koyomi rubbed the old man's back with gentle motions.

The fox-faced detective said nothing. Instead, he simply stared up at the brilliant sky, full of stars illuminating the night.

Puppy-Style Bear Stew

This diner is based on the strange concept of all-you-can-eat bear stew. If you can believe it, the bear meat served at the store is brought back by the owner's dogs when they go hunting in the north.

And don't assume these are cute little puppies. Their leader is a regal Akita, and they include a Kai Ken, a Kishu, a Tosa, a mastiff, a Great Dane, a German shepherd, and a Doberman—the manliest of manly dogs, fierce and brave. Their sharp gazes frighten even the nearby *yokai*.

The dogs have only their fangs for weapons, but they leap onto their prey, arcing though the sky like shooting stars and wielding their teeth like a samurai's sword. Occasionally they even add in a roll and twist for extra damage.

The bear meat these dogs bring back is offered for one coin per bowl, and more is ladled in should you finish. The flavor is rich, gamey, and masculine, but there's a good helping of other ingredients like mushrooms and wild greens added in, so women won't be disappointed, either. It's popular with visitors from abroad, especially northern Europeans with a deep appreciation for canines.

Despite the cute-sounding name, this place really gives you your money's worth. Highly recommended, if you can leave your preconceptions at the door.

Kitty-Style Soba

Next door to Puppy-Style Bear Stew is its most bitter rival, the lair of the split-tailed *nekomata* cat—or so you might think, but these two businesses are actually on very good terms, and the employees of each diner are regular customers at the other.

Putting aside for now the image of cats devouring bear meat stew, for all the many sights of Ayakashi Alley, Kitty-Style Soba is the only place you're likely to see dogs slurping down soba noodles.

This hidden gem is beloved for soba that even people with buckwheat allergies can enjoy. This kind of shop is the forte of *Asuka Empire*, with its heavy focus on traditional culture and aesthetics.

The shop was probably based on Utagawa Kunimasa IV's famous ukiyo-e woodblock *Cats in Soba Noodle Restaurant*. The layout is virtually identical, in fact.

The menu aims for the classics: *kake* soba and *zaru* soba are the main items, with toppings like tempura, *sansai*, seaweed, and croquettes freely available to add. It's not all-you-can-eat, so take your time and enjoy. Because the restaurant offers delivery to any location in Yoiyami Street, there are many regular customers from the shopping district.

Most remarkable is the *mujina* soba, based on a scary story from the writings of Lafcadio Hearn. A merchant is startled by the sight of a faceless *noppera-bo* and runs into a soba restaurant for safety, only for the soba chef to ask him, "Did it look like *thiiis*?" and terrify him again.

As for what happens when you order the *mujina* soba here, you'll just have to try it and find out.



A decorative arrangement of light gray cherry blossom silhouettes. Some blossoms are clustered together, while others are scattered individually. They are positioned around the central text boxes, with some appearing to float above and others below.

Final Chapter

Nayuta's Tears

Near the end of March, around the time the cherry blossoms were in full bloom in the capital, news spread that Teiichi Yanagi, the chairman of the sweets company Yanagiya Ryuuzendou, had passed away from illness.

He was eighty-one years old.

While there were small obituaries in newspapers, it was not something the public took great notice of. His death was quietly accepted by the nation.

That day, Klever bought a souvenir package of Yanagi mochi from a department store before he visited the office of his friend, Thinker. Thinker was the manager of the popular news website MMO Today and a fellow SAO survivor who'd led the group known as the Aincrad Liberation Squad.

Thinker cast a thoughtful gaze at his phone and sighed heavily. "So Chairman Yanagi passed away... Are you going to attend the funeral?"

Klever—Kaisei Kurei—looked at the floor. "Of course. I'd like to give my condolences to his wife. A strange twist of fate brought us together, and who am I to deny that?"

Just days after finishing the Ghost Orchestra quest, Teiichi Yanagi had slipped into a coma. After another few days, he was at last called up to heaven.

Thinker tapped at the phone in his hands and picked up a mochi to eat.

"His widow sent us a very nice gift. I made the right choice putting them in touch with you," he said.

It was Thinker who'd been the go-between for Yanagi and Klever.

Yanagi had been looking for help with the quest and asked for advice from a business acquaintance who advertised on MMO Today. From there, he was able to get in touch with Thinker, who put him through to the tour guide/detective.

Thinker and Klever had once fought together in the Liberation Squad. Not for very long, however. Klever had only helped out Thinker and Yuriel for a short time toward the end of the game. It was after they were released from SAO that their relationship truly blossomed, as Thinker managed his news site and Klever started up a network security company, bringing their interests into alignment. Sometimes Thinker sent work Klever's way, as with Yanagi, and it

was an easygoing alliance that benefited both sides.

“So that Ghost Orchestra thing.... The Sleeping Knights made that quest? Did we ever talk about the Absolute Sword from *ALfheim*?”

“Yeah. I’ve heard he’s an incredibly talented fighter. If you’re mentioning the Absolute Sword, then...is he in that group, too?”

Thinker inclined his head. “Not him—her. But you’re correct. She was a member of the Sleeping Knights, too, the second leader of the group. Her name was Yuuki, and she was a friend of a friend... But she passed away just the other day. Still in her mid-teens.”

Klever closed his eyes.

He had never met the player named Yuuki. They had been active in different games, for one thing.

Since the expansion of The Seed, it had become easier to convert your character data, even between different types of games, but her stomping ground had always been *ALfheim Online*, while Klever was a fixture of *Asuka Empire*.

“It doesn’t seem that she was aware of Ghost Orchestra... I suppose Kiyofumi didn’t tell his companions that it was accepted.”

Klever sighed. “I think I understand why. It was probably hard to bring up... Or maybe he never even thought of it. It’s impossible to know when a quest will be added, even if it’s accepted into the game. If he were still alive when it happened, and could take his friends through it, that would be one thing... But if not, it just makes everything more awkward. If some of them were about to pass away, that would only make it harder to talk about the future.”

As it stood, Ghost Orchestra was temporarily down for adjustment. Its return was unscheduled, and it would likely stay offline until May or later.

There were a few other possible reasons Kiyofumi might not have told his friends about the quest.

Klever could only speculate, but perhaps Kiyofumi didn’t like the idea of bragging about his accomplishment. As part of a group of friends who would all

die young, maybe it pained him that he alone had something special to leave behind. With others close to death, celebrating such an accomplishment might even come off as cruel.

On the other hand, compared to the precious memories he'd made with his friends, the news of his quest being accepted might have simply seemed trivial.

Or maybe the members he'd wanted to celebrate with had already died before the news was final.

Given all of that, why did Kiyofumi leave a record of the Sleeping Knights inside the quest? Was it for surviving or future members who just happened to pay a visit? Was it purely a result of the desire to leave a record of them somewhere? Was it a memorial to those who had already died? In any case, it would only be crass to speculate further.

There was one thing Klever could say for certain, however: Ghost Orchestra was not a project Kiyofumi had undertaken for some kind of bragging rights. No, it had been made out of the sheer desire to *create something*.

And the reason he'd crafted it with the assumption that his grandfather would play it was that he recognized Yanagi's deep feelings of guilt.

Yanagi had believed he was powerless to do anything for his dying grandson. And mistaken beliefs like that are hard to undo because denials just sound like empty reassurances.

So Kiyofumi had done what he could to destroy that misunderstanding by presenting Yanagi with hard evidence: actual signs of his success.

The call for user-submitted quests in 108 Apparitions, and the creation he ultimately submitted, were the perfect means for Kiyofumi to fulfill all his wishes at once.

Klever could still see Yanagi falling to pieces over Kiyofumi's final message. The scene was seared into his brain.

By all accounts, the doctors had been stunned at how peaceful Yanagi's expression was in death. If completing Ghost Orchestra had helped his soul pass on peacefully, then that was something to celebrate.

While Klever was lost in his thoughts, Thinker grabbed another mochi.

“I don’t know what you’re thinking about...but it seems old habits never change. You want a friendly ear?”

“...Did it look like I was thinking hard? I was just spacing out a little,” Klever said, getting up from his seat. He was a bit annoyed at the thought of someone prying into his feelings when he wasn’t even upset. “Well, I’ve gone over all the details of Mr. Yanagi’s case, so I’m going to head out now. It was a very lucrative job for me. Let me know if you hear about anything else like it.”

“Just so we’re clear: You don’t want this in an article, right?” Thinker asked.

Klever grinned. “Please don’t. It’ll affect my clients’ trust in me. And I’m supposed to be meeting with the president of Yanagiya soon. He wanted to know more about what happened. I can ask then if any of this is suitable to be made public.”

The current president of Yanagiya Ryuuzendou was Yanagi’s son—Kiyofumi’s father.

Over the phone, he’d voiced his regrets over his failure to be a good father to his son or a good son to his own father. But from Klever’s perspective, that had been largely unavoidable.

Realistically, it was not easy to protect the family business and ensure the financial livelihood of one’s family and employees. The president couldn’t prioritize his son if it meant leaving his workers out in the cold, and he couldn’t provide for his child if he let the company he’d inherited fall into ruin.

Time was limited, and you only had one life to live. There would always be limits to what a human being could accomplish.

As Klever was about to leave the office, Thinker stopped him and handed him a paper bag. “A present from my trip to Canada. Take it.”

It was small, but heavy.

“Thanks. Maple syrup?”

“Yeah. Put it on a fresh-baked scone. I can’t give this to you in a game, after all.” So he remembered when Klever had treated him in the past. “If it’s too

much, you can share it with that girl who's working for you. You seem rather fond of her," he teased.

Klever rolled his eyes. He wouldn't deny that he was fond of her, but he hadn't told anyone the reason why. It wasn't something he wanted to make public, after all.

As he headed back to his own workplace, Klever let his thoughts wander again.

Nayuta, the playtester he'd hired to help out with Yanagi's quest...

Klever's feelings toward her were rather complex. Not in a romantic sense, of course.

Just yesterday, he'd heard something odd from Torao, who was in the process of analyzing the data from their time testing Ghost Orchestra.

It's really not my place to be telling you this sort of thing...but when I was checking the system logs before and after the test, I noticed something a little concerning about that girl's login and log-out records. And when I looked further, it seems like something that happens just about every time...

According to Torao, Nayuta was always logging in to *Asuka Empire* from another server. When she logged out, it was the same. She didn't return to the real world directly. She always made her way through a specific server instead.

If she were trading time among different games, it wouldn't be that odd to see her bounce from one server to another. But in that case, the other servers would belong to those games, and the system admin would be able to determine which other game that character was playing.

Nayuta's situation, however, was different.

I think she's going in and out of the game from a private home server, or a rental server. I have no idea why, and it's not against the rules... I just thought you might want to know.

In short, before she started up the game, and before she returned to the real world when she was done, she added an extra step to the process, and it was hard to figure out why.

However, Klever had a hunch about her reasons. Nayuta's last name, Kushiinada, was rather rare, but he knew *two* people aside from her who shared it.

One was a fellow police cadet and comrade who was almost certainly Nayuta's older brother: Yakumo, aka Daichi Kushiinada.

He had died in *SAO* far too young. Of all the regrets Klever had in his life, not stopping him from joining the battle that had killed him was by far the greatest.

The other was a technical officer in the police department's telecommunications department, Kimihito Kushiinada—Nayuta and Daichi's uncle.

When Klever returned alive from *SAO*, Kimihito had come to him directly, wanting to know more about how his nephew had died.

Blood ties were common in the police department. It wasn't simply because of a propensity to hire the relatives of those already on the force—it was also a result of how handy it was to bring in new recruits whose backgrounds you already understood.

There was always the risk of hiring people with antisocial views—or, even more extreme, agents from other countries—trying to infiltrate the police. For that reason, background checks were much, much stricter within the force than in regular civilian businesses.

Also, having relatives on the force made it easier to understand what was going on in the organization, which in turn made it easier to advance and seize future opportunities.

It was from Daichi's uncle that Klever had discovered what had happened to the Kushiinada family after his friend's passing.

News of Daichi's death and what happened in the aftermath quickly spread around the police force. There was particular sympathy for his uncle, Kimihito. Nayuta's mysterious login history probably had something to do with that, too.

Klever, who had survived the *SAO* ordeal, was also a target of curiosity. After his recovery, he'd promptly left the force. He made up likely reasons for quitting to tell the others.

He'd lost the confidence to be a policeman, he wanted to reexamine where his life was taking him, he was still shaken by the death of his friend...

These were all lies. Klever was not such a laudable and admirable person as those reasons implied.

The real reason he quit the police, started a meager security firm, and took up work as a tour guide/detective was far sillier than any of his fake reasons.

At the very least, that was how he felt about it. That was why he'd only told a very small number of people the truth.

The fact that he'd come across Nayuta, Daichi's sister, right at the moment the company was starting to gain momentum was too perfect to be a coincidence.

The spring sunlight was warm, but his mood was chilly.

In his pocket, his phone began to ring. The name *Nayuta* was listed as the incoming contact.

Klever put on his most level tone of voice and stopped at the side of the road to answer the call.

"...Hello?"

"Oh, Detective... Sorry for calling out of nowhere. This is Nayuta. Are you available to talk now?"

"Yes, it's fine... Is this about Mr. Yanagi?"

She didn't say anything—that meant he was right. That was the only reason she would call him at a moment like this.

Klever said, "If you want to attend the funeral, I'll send you the details once I have them. It's probably going to be a company funeral, so there will be a lot of mourners. It should be easy to slip in unnoticed."

"Y-yes... Um, how did you know?" asked Nayuta. *"Can you read people's minds? It's almost like your powers of observation have crossed the line into telepathy."*

Klever let out an exaggerated sigh. "Yes, you've got me. Let me tell you what

you're thinking right now. 'I swear, that guy is crazy,' right?"

Nayuta was silent for several moments. Eventually, with some annoyance, she said, *"You're so self-deprecating... Anyway, that's not fair. Anyone would think that."*

"How rude. I know I was right. Anyway, I'll contact you later," the detective said, hanging up quickly and letting out a deep breath.

I don't think she picked up on how rattled I was.

Back when he was alive, Daichi had often remarked on Klever's hypotheses by saying, "Kaisei, can you read people's minds? What you're doing is more like telepathy than observation."

Hearing the same comment from both siblings was just too much. It had gotten to him.

Beneath the clear, beautiful spring sky, Klever felt his thoughts turn gloomy, and he quickly hurried toward his next destination.

§

Teiichi Yanagi's service was a grand affair.

In addition to the company's employees and business partners, there were competitors who had known him personally, people from the confectionary school he'd headed, and even acquaintances from the worlds of haiku and tea ceremony, all gathered to give a send-off to a man who'd lived a very full life.

Klever and Nayuta, dressed in mourning clothes, slipped into the line, offered incense, and retreated to a corner. So as not to disturb the foot traffic, Klever found a tree on the temple grounds where he could rest in the shade and loosen his tie a little.

"The weather's starting to get hot," he said. "Might finally be time to take that heated *kotatsu* table and put it back in storage."

"...Yours is still out? I wouldn't have guessed you were the *kotatsu* type, either. You don't look like one at all."

Klever snorted. "I'm not going to live my life according to how well things suit

my look. A *kotatsu* is great. It's a cheap heating option, very efficient at what it does, you can sit under it or sleep under it... And if you take off the blanket, you can use it as a low table in the summertime. It's a fantastic invention."

Nayuta burst into laughter. "I'm sorry, it's just so weird to hear you talk about practical household concerns when you look like *that*. I just assumed you sat in an expensive apartment with a bougie all-white interior, swirling a wineglass around and sneering down your nose at other people."

He chose to take that comment in a positive light; the barely concealed insults were a sign that she felt comfortable enough around him to speak that way.

"For some reason, I hear that often. But my tastes are not so luxurious. If anything, I just like old things, Japanese or Western. Can't you see it in the way I decorate my detective agency?"

Nayuta had to agree. "Ah, yes. I like the look of your office."

"I didn't show you at the time, but I also have a tatami-floored *kotatsu* room in the back. One of the nice things about virtual spaces is that it's so easy to change the decor."

She beamed. It was a strange expression for a funeral, but Klever found it reassuring.

"I understand," she said. "Sometimes I..." She paused, stumbling over her words. "Oh, right. Speaking of virtual spaces, Detective, the topic of the Monster Cat Teahouse came up in an e-mail I got from Mr. Yanagi's wife the other day. She said she wanted to see it. When things have calmed down a little, would you like to invite her?"

He grimaced awkwardly. For whatever reason, Yanagi's widow had really taken a shine to Nayuta. And he could guess how the topic of the Monster Cat Teahouse had come up in that e-mail.

After they successfully completed Ghost Orchestra and Kiyofumi's message left Yanagi a sobbing mess, they didn't feel right about simply leaving, and so they decided to head back to the Monster Cat Teahouse for a little celebration.

Yanagi was startled at the presentation of the various sweets for sale, and he was particularly flummoxed by the flavor of the *mamekan*. The Monster Cat

Teahouse's famous rendition of the dish used special peas flavored with vanilla. This made it a Japanese confection with a Western touch. A stickler might find it blasphemous, but Yanagi received it with childlike bemusement.

By the time they were ready to leave, he laughed and said he wanted to bring his wife to try some next time. He logged out full of laughter and good cheer.

That was the last time we saw him.

Every human being eventually reaches the end of their life and passes on.

In a matter of a few decades, Klever, Nayuta, and Koyomi would almost certainly be dead. Death affected everyone. Some died young like Kiyofumi, and unforeseen accidents befell people every single day.

Those who died peacefully without regrets, like Yanagi, might be considered a rare and fortunate few.

Nayuta dabbed at her eyes with a handkerchief and smiled bravely. "Before he went into the coma, Mr. Yanagi told his wife about the Monster Cat Teahouse... She said he was talking so proudly about it that it made her want to go there. Suzuka said she had no interest in games because she didn't want to fight things and walk all over the place, but she *loves* sweets, apparently. And she insisted that you come along."

"Well, considering her husband's very generous payment, I don't have a problem offering some extra customer service... My main problem with her is her fixation on you and me being in a relationship. Please make sure to correct her misconception. My company will go bankrupt if I get arrested."

He was kidding, of course, but in her mourning dress, Nayuta looked much older than her actual age, so the jokes only went so far.

"You're a very wise and discerning man, Detective, so I trust that you won't make such a mistake. Do I really look that appealing?" she asked, teasing him back. Her tone of voice made it clear she wasn't serious, but there was a dangerously flirtatious edge to the comment all the same.

"The devil himself designed that question; anything I say in response will make me look bad. If I say yes, they'll put me on a watch list, and if I say no, then I'm being a chauvinistic cad who's cold to women. So I'd like to exercise

my right to remain silent.”

Nayuta put away her handkerchief with an exasperated look. “Oh... I didn’t realize being a man was so complicated. Why can’t you just be honest and say, ‘I’m not interested in kids’?”

Apparently, she thought of herself as a kid. Klever had to close his eyes and pinch the bridge of his nose.

“All right, that’s enough of that. Either way, this conversation is going to have a sad ending... Oh, it looks like they’re moving the coffin.”

People were lining up along the path to the funeral hall, where the coffin was being taken through to the hearse. Klever and Nayuta joined the line, put their hands together, and prayed as the car left and the temple bell tolled in the background.

No one aside from the family and very close friends would be going to the crematorium, so it was time for Klever and Nayuta to leave.

“So...shall we grab some lunch and be on our way, Detective?”

“I don’t mind... But do you have any plans after this? If not, I have something to discuss with you, if you’re willing to accompany me.” He held up his car key. He was half expecting her to decline a car trip alone with him, but Nayuta didn’t seem to mind.

“All right. Let me guess—it has to do with my brother, doesn’t it?”

Inwardly, Klever flinched. He didn’t think he’d been that obvious.

“I’m surprised... When did you figure it out?”

She fixed him with a cool, keen gaze.

“When you told me you were an *SAO* survivor, I thought, ‘Maybe he knew my brother in the game.’ Then you blanched when you saw my signature, didn’t you? A few days ago, when I got your business card, I showed it to my uncle at the police department. He said that it was a real shame what happened, because you were going to be a very good officer.”

The detective had no choice but to throw up his hands. He’d known she was good, but she was clearly much sharper than he’d realized.

Klever had been quite honest with her uncle about his experiences in the game. That meant she'd probably heard quite a lot of Klever's story from him already.

"I'm sure your uncle was just being kind. If you already know who I am, that saves me the trouble of telling you everything. In the Ghost Orchestra quest the other day, I saw your brother, Daichi Kushiinada. Though it wasn't really his ghost, it's probably as good a time as any. I'd like to go and pay respects at his grave. Will you come with me?"

Nayuta nodded solemnly.

They barely spoke a word to one another in the car.

Thankfully, it wasn't an awkward silence. If anything, it was comfortable, because each knew what the other had been through. There was no need to search for a topic to discuss.

Klever's car quietly took them closer and closer to the cemetery where Nayuta's brother slept.

§

Nayuta stood before the rectangular gravestone and murmured, "I don't usually come here. I think it's been since the funeral."

"That's for the best. It's not good for a young person to be in the habit of visiting graveyards."

Klever lit the incense he'd brought and put his hands together to pray. He didn't believe in ghosts or spirits, but he did have affection and sympathy for the deceased.

Nayuta did not pray. She stood behind Klever and lifted her head to gaze at the peaceful spring sky. There were no cherry blossoms in sight, but they must've been blooming somewhere nearby, because some fallen petals were scattered about on the ground.

"...First of all, I need to apologize to you," said Klever. "I wasn't able to bring Daichi back to the real world with me."

Nayuta smiled slightly, but her expression was lifeless and her eyes empty.

“My brother was very stubborn. No matter how you might have tried...he wasn't going to listen to you, was he?”

“...That's why. He was so bullheaded and passionate that if anyone could have stopped him, it was me, his friend. I could have tied him up, or trapped him and had him sent to jail—there were plenty of ways to do it. Or I could have made that idiotic officer telling him what to do lose his standing...”

“...Stop it,” Nayuta said. Her voice was barely above a whisper. “Please, just stop it. What happened to my brother was an unavoidable accident. Don't tell me that it could have been averted... That's much crueler. After I was finally able to write it off as something that was ‘meant to be’...”

Ultimately, it was meant to be.

Klever was not a prophet. He couldn't know a person's fate before it happened, and regretting it afterward wasn't going to make a difference anyway.

He and Nayuta had processed Daichi's death in different ways.

Klever blamed the ringleader of the incident, Akihiko Kayaba, and made him the target of his vengeance.

Nayuta, meanwhile, chose to paralyze her emotions so she could avoid feeling the pain of losing a family member.

She wasn't the least bit afraid of 108 Apparitions, because her senses were half-broken already. If bravery meant admitting that something was frightening and standing up to it anyway, then she wasn't brave, she was just giving in to inertia—refusing to feel fear and proceeding as normal.

But sometimes that kind of inertia could be an anesthetic that protected the mind.

Nayuta's mind needed an anesthetic.

Klever exhaled and turned to her. “I'm sorry, that was insensitive of me. But I didn't want to just chalk Daichi's death up to something that was ‘meant to be.’ If that's how you see it, that's fine. You weren't there, so you couldn't have

done or said anything anyway. But me? I was there. I wasn't present at the battle where he died, but I was trapped in the same world with him, and I was able to see him whenever I wanted. Our situations were different. At the very least, I had options. And that's what I regret."

Nayuta, dressed in her mourning attire, stared back at Klever.

"...No matter what options you had... No matter how much you regret it, nothing will change what happened. My brother died. And no amount of thinking about it will bring him back."

Her voice was trembling. She understood what she was saying on a logical level. But her emotions were having a hard time keeping up.

After her brother's death, everything had been so unfair.

Because he knew bits and pieces of the story, Klever couldn't help but speak up, even knowing that he was helpless to aid her.

"...That's right. Nothing that happens now will change what happened in the past. The dead don't come back to life. Not to sound self-aggrandizing, but death comes for everyone. Mr. Yanagi, Kiyofumi, Daichi, and many other people have found that out already. One day, you and I will die as well. At the risk of being morbid, an unfortunate accident could befall us at any moment. Which is exactly why I decided to live my life so that I have no regrets when my time comes. That's why I quit the police and started my company."

Nayuta was keenly aware of the repentance contained in Klever's words, and she stiffened up.

He stood before his friend's grave and continued, "Full-dive VR and everything it entails are developing so fast that our legal systems can't react in time. The police as they are can barely even investigate VR-related incidents, much less intervene in them. That was the case for me, too, while I was still in the force. To others, it would look like I was just playing around, and aside from some special cases, I wouldn't be allowed to conduct undercover investigations in-game."

Nayuta nodded vaguely. Since she had been raised in a police family, he probably expected her to understand some of this.

“At this point, the police aren’t even sure how they want to handle VR spaces. And since the spread of The Seed, there’s illegal gambling, prostitution that doesn’t feature any physical bodies, e-drugs that induce endorphin secretion in the brain, and other new avenues for crime to flourish. On top of that, terrorists and cults have the ability to lure in new members and train them to be soldiers, even brainwash them... Any of these activities can help raise funds and recruit personnel for isolated, misanthropic groups. But our present apparatus makes investigating even those things difficult. My company collects information in secret on crimes like those and submits it to the police as a civilian collaborator. Unfortunately, the rewards for those activities don’t pay the bills, so we have to rely on other business opportunities to make ends meet.”

Nayuta frowned. “You’re disillusioned with the police... So you built your own vigilante force to operate inside VR?”

“Not quite. A vigilante force would use physical force, but my group is just collecting information and testimony to assist law enforcement. I haven’t grown disillusioned with the police. Their organizational power is reliable. But it clearly wasn’t the right place for me to be if I wanted to do things my own way.”

Klever averted his gaze.

“The truth is...this is something I joked about with Daichi in Aincrad. Right after we got hired, we ended up trapped inside the game on a permanent leave of absence. So we figured, if the cops fired us, we should start our own company together... The idiot had to go and force me to do all the work, and now he’s livin’ it up in the afterlife. Next time I see him, he’s getting a piece of my mind.”

And with that, Klever relinquished his spot before the grave to Nayuta.

“You should have a chat with him, too. I’m going to take a little walk. We’ll get lunch somewhere nearby on our way back.”

He tossed his folded jacket over his shoulder and walked off without a backward glance.

Nayuta was probably crying back there. For now, he’d let his friend be the one to comfort her.

The detective let his feet wander, strolling through the forest of headstones with no particular destination in mind.

§

When she got home, the one-room apartment where Nayuta lived was empty.

It was a small place close to her high school. Her uncle was paying for it, just until she graduated.

She intended to go to college in a place with student dorms, but she'd have to get into one first. Her uncle said that it wouldn't be a problem if she needed to rent another place, but she didn't want to keep troubling him.

The detective had bought her lunch, so she changed out of her mourning clothes, set the timer for her bath to fill, then put on the AmuSphere. She lay down on the bed, which felt especially large in such a small room, closed her eyes, and took a deep breath.

Eventually, the electric signals reached her brain, whisking her mind away to the virtual world.

This time, her destination wasn't *Asuka Empire*.

This was a familiar bedroom, neatly arranged and decorated in black and white. A gigantic black cat plushie sat on the bed, a toy from her youth. The real thing had gotten old and worn out, and she'd thrown it away.

She'd always regretted that, but she was able to bring it back in the virtual world.

The bookshelf on the wall was packed with electronic books and magazines just like a real bookshelf.

The computer on the desk was for performing various tasks inside the virtual world. It was the same system Klever used in his detective's office. Koyomi didn't seem to know about it, but it was a very useful tool that was practically a necessity for using The Seed.

After getting up from the bed, she moved to the living room.

Her father and brother were there, playing shogi.

This time, her brother was winning. That happened about two times out of ten.

“Are you off work today?” Nayuta asked, reciting the code phrase.

“...If I weren’t, do you think I’d be at home playing shogi with Dad?” he replied sardonically, the same as ever.

Nayuta smiled sadly, recreating the conversational pattern she had programmed.

Their mother looked over from across the kitchen island. “Don’t you think he ought to be out on a date, instead of cooped up here playing shogi? Your father would probably have a stroke if you brought home a boyfriend, Yurina, but I bet he’d love to see your brother with a nice girl.”

“Yurina, just to be sure...you don’t have anyone like that in your life yet...right?”

“If she did, she wouldn’t be spending a valuable Saturday afternoon playing video games, would she? That’s check, Dad.”

“No...! You’re cheating! Ugh... I’ll have to trade my rook for your knight...”

Nayuta silently watched her family act out the scene, like an animated photo album.

She didn’t really remember the time around when her parents died.

Her parents were already mentally exhausted from the ordeal of having her brother trapped in *SAO*, and his death had driven them into absolute despair. While preparing for the funeral, her father had been so distraught that he’d caused a huge car accident. Her mother was in the passenger seat, while Nayuta was in the back.

Her parents died instantly, and while Nayuta survived, she was in a coma for a month. By the time she was conscious again, she’d long ago missed her parents’ funeral.

When she saw her uncle for the first time in years, he looked horribly gaunt.

She didn't remember much about that time. Most likely, her brain had simply refused to process reality.

Nayuta was all alone, and her parents' absence didn't even feel real.

It was suggested that she could live with her uncle, but he didn't have enough rooms. Besides, her cousins were close to her in age, and she didn't want to cause them any trouble.

Most of all, she didn't think she would be able to bear seeing another family up close.

Instead, Nayuta sat in the living room she'd built in the virtual world and watched her artificial family in a daze. They could only interact in certain preprogrammed ways. The strange thing was that you could fit most ordinary family chitchat within those parameters.

Have a nice day, I'll see you tonight, I'm home, welcome back, good morning, good night, the bath's ready...

She'd even programmed in some finer details, such as her mother's dialogue being linked to the bath timer in the real world.

Although it was repetitive, by now, she had virtually recreated her prior life in VR.

These were just empty images, not even ghosts. She'd created them, so she knew that better than anyone.

Still, when she was at her lowest points emotionally, this was the place that helped keep her upright. If she hadn't had these images of her family to interact with, she would have taken her own life by now.

It wasn't a question of right and wrong—sometimes people just needed an escape.

Nayuta closed her eyes and took a deep breath.

Maybe Klever knew about this place. When he had taken her to her family grave, she'd felt like he was telling her, *Your family is here.*

But Klever didn't press her or demand answers. Nayuta wasn't sure why he was holding back. It probably wasn't out of consideration for her. And she

didn't think he was hesitating because he wasn't sure of the truth.

Most likely, there were other people aside from Nayuta who were using The Seed for similar purposes, and Klever wasn't able to decide if it was a good or a bad thing.

It probably wasn't healthy. But there were people who needed this kind of escape. All humans have dependencies, though the extent varies.

You depend on your family, depend on your friends, depend on your company, school, or country. You depend on food, depend on air, depend on the Earth to support you.

Adding a virtual world to that list of dependencies didn't seem so significant.

A message arrived on the tablet tool she'd installed in the living room.

It was from Koyomi.

How was the ceremony, Nayuta? The detective didn't try to mess with you, did he? I'm working overtime today, but if you're free tomorrow night, come by the Monster Cat Teahouse so you can tell me more!

Nayuta couldn't help chuckling to herself.

Koyomi's cheerful, frivolous nature had been a kind of salvation, too.

She'd asked Nayuta to lean on her more. It seemed she didn't realize how much Nayuta already did. Maybe it wasn't obvious, but it was true.

I'm already back home. There was some stuff with the detective... I'll tell you more in the game tomorrow.

At this point, she felt ready to tell Koyomi about her brother and parents.

With her reply sent, she leaned back and closed her eyes.

I'm not saying I don't have any problems.

There was no doubt that her virtual family had saved her. But she didn't think she could stay this way forever.

Nayuta took a deep breath and turned her back on her family.

Maybe... I'll be all right now...

With the detective's help, she'd been able to visit her family's grave.

"Are you going out, Yurina?" asked her AI mother's voice.

"...Yes, just for a bit," Nayuta said vaguely, turning back.

The images of her family were a bit blurry.

"Mom, Dad, big brother... I'm going to try not to come back here so often. I have to stop worrying my real family..."

She slid her finger toward the LOG OUT button on the tablet tool. But before she touched it, she had a moment of hesitation.

Her blurry mother replied, "I see... Well, have a good trip. Take care of yourself."

Her father smiled weakly. "If it gets too hard, don't feel bad about coming back."

Her brother, Daichi, sidled up to her and put his hand on top of hers, pressing it against the button.



“We’ll always be right *here*,” he said, his voice almost a whisper, right as her vision cut to black.

Her link to the VR world had been severed. Nayuta opened her eyes in the small bed of her one-room apartment. The light of the setting sun came through the window and bathed the ceiling in a brilliant orange.

She reached for the AmuSphere, her senses dulled, and took it off. Then she stared at the ceiling for a while, like a body that had lost its soul.

The last words her false family had said to her...

...Did I...record...those lines...?

If she had, she certainly would have remembered. But she couldn’t.

Before she had a chance to recover from her confusion, her smartphone went off near her pillow. Koyomi’s name was on the screen.

“...This is Nayuta.”

“*Nayu! Are you all right?!* ” Koyomi shouted the moment Nayuta answered. “*What did that fox freak do to you?!* ” Apparently, the message she’d just sent had been misinterpreted.

“Um, Koyomi,” Nayuta started, intending to explain, but Koyomi was on a roll.

“I don’t know what happened, but you need to know that I’m on your side! If you need me, I’ll leave work and rush over there. Or you can come here! My point is, lean on me for help! So just tell me what’s...wait... Hey, N-Nayu...? Are you...crying...?”

She hadn’t realized it was happening, but Nayuta felt a tear drip down her cheek. Somehow, Koyomi had sensed this over the phone, and now she was really panicking.

“Wh-what is it?! What’s wrong?! Do I need to take out that detective? Should I cut him to pieces? Cut his head off and display it to the public? L-look, just don’t cry! Aaaagh, I hate doing this over the phone! Listen, I’m going to leave work early. Can you meet me at the Monster Cat Teahouse in thirty minutes?! Sorry, chief, I can’t do overtime! I’m goin’ home!”

It was only at this moment, with Koyomi's desperate attempts to comfort her sounding in her ear, that Nayuta realized she was finally trying to grapple with her family's deaths.

She used her sleeve to stem the flood of tears and let out a silent sob—and in time, she was bawling like a child.

For a brief moment, somewhere off in the distance, she heard the familiar sound of festival music.

The End

Afterword

The setting of this game, *Asuka Empire*, was the first VRMMORPG played by Yuuki, the central character of the Mother's Rosary story.

It's a minor game that rarely appears in Kawahara's main *Sword Art Online* series, but a DVD-only bonus story, "Sister's Prayer," starred Yuuki and her sister Ran before the founding of the Sleeping Knights and took place in the world of this game.

The start of the story you're now holding in your hands resulted from an offer I got to write a piece set in one of the games aside from *ALO* and *GGO* that popped up after the spread of The Seed. I replied that I would love to do a story set in a traditional Japanese fantasy world, and my editor remarked, "Well, that's perfect! We have a game called *Asuka Empire*!" So you see, it was simply meant to be.

In short, I really took advantage of the fact that this game barely appears in the original story to write basically whatever I wanted. Sorry for being so selfish.

I should first extend my deepest thanks to Kawahara, who was very generous with his supervision, Miki, and the rest of the staff.

It's the first time I've ever taken part in a spin-off (?) project like this, so it was a bit of an experiment for me. I figured things out as I went along, and I found it to be a great experience. I'd been curious about the VRMMORPG concept before this but never had a chance to write something set in one, so I'm very grateful for the opportunity.

And having cried my eyes out at the Mother's Rosary arc, I was both intimidated and very delighted to get to write a story connected to the Sleeping Knights—though I don't want to say too much, in case you haven't read the

book yet. Thank you for this wonderful treat.

I'd also like to take this opportunity to thank Ginta for the tremendous illustrations that graced each chapter when they were first serialized in Dengeki Bunko!

His female characters are adorable, of course, but I also think the eerie foxiness of Klever the detective comes across very well. The illustrations made the characters even more memorable for me as I wrote them.

Speaking of memorable characters, Koyomi was designed to be more of a side character in my plot outline, but the instant I got back the rough design sketch, I felt like she'd already been upgraded to a primary cast member. At the time of the first chapter, I hadn't really described her in the text, and I wound up totally delegating the design, so when I got the illustration, I was delighted to see Koyomi's true essence staring back at me. Moments like this make it all worth it.

Now, in the real world, VR devices and software are flooding the market, and while we might not have full-dive tech like *SAO*'s, it does make me wonder how VR will advance in the years ahead.

Personally, I'm hoping for things like VR planetariums you can view while sitting on your couch, or 3D views of the scenery along real-life train routes, or trips through the stars, or even simulated skydiving experiences that you can try out while lying on your back on the floor. Of course, I'm sure that the main application of VR will be games, and I'm looking forward to seeing how well it works with horror games, which are sure to be heightened by the more intense presentation.

Wandering around a forest late at night, realizing you've found your way into an old abandoned shrine, walking through the torii gates to discover—...

Locked in a horrifying ruined hospital, trying to escape but finding the hallways loop endlessly, until you are met by the sight of a horrifying monster that—...

All of these experiences could be truly exciting with the coming wave of VR. I can imagine tropes like hands reaching out of the display to grab your actual eyeballs. The thought has me breaking into a cold sweat. Ooh, scary.

...I should probably point out that I actually hate horror stuff. But when I say “hate,” I mean, “I hate that it works so well on me,” so while I often get burned by the genre, I’m sure that if there were an event like 108 Apparitions, I would totally jump in headfirst.

That’s the desire that went into creating this little story about *Asuka Empire*.

I do hope that it brought you some measure of delight.

Soitiro Watase—Fall 2016

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