

PLAYING DEATH GAMES TO PUT FOOD ON THE TABLE

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Yushi Ukai

Illustration by |
Nekometaru

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PLAYER NAME

Yuki

AGE

17

BIRTHDAY

April 18

LIKES

Convenience store ice cream

DISLIKES

**Waking up when
the sun is out**

HOBBY

Nighttime walks

TALENT

**Sensing people approaching
from behind**

OCCUPATION

Death-game player and student

WEAPON OF CHOICE

**Any melee weapon, such as
bladed and blunt implements**

INJURIES

Right iris (no impact on vision)

GAMES CLEARED

27

CUMULATIVE KILL COUNT IN GAMES

Too high to tally

GHOST HOUSE

Beniya

"Does that mean...
our bodies have been
tampered with?"

"I don't care about
the money as long
as I can get home
in one piece."

Momono

"Being a wage
slave is essentially
trading away your
life for money.
This option
was far more
appealing."

Kokuto

"I'm here
because...I,
um, had no
other choice."

Aoi

Kinko

"I'll stay behind.
You three, please
go on ahead."

Yuki

"People tend
to want to
play to their
strengths.
For me, this is it."



"I've had enough. I never want to be involved with another of these games ever again."

"Twice per person—that's the quota. Stab through to at least the center of the blade. Ideally, aim for a vital point."

"Anyway, she was no match for me. Not just her; that goes for everyone."

"Yes. Please take me there immediately."

Moegi

fff

Sumiyaka

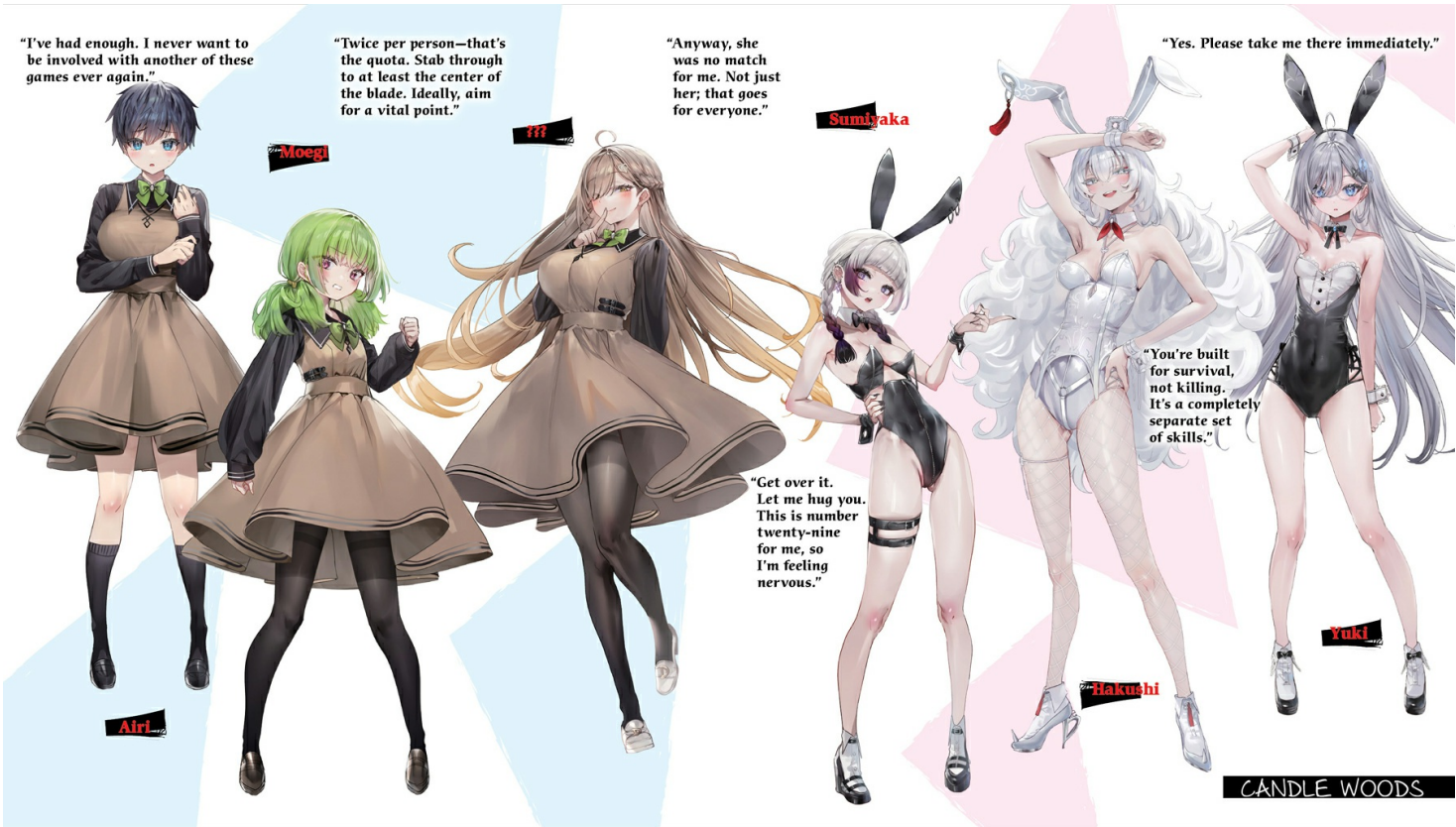
"You're built for survival, not killing. It's a completely separate set of skills."

"Get over it. Let me hug you. This is number twenty-nine for me, so I'm feeling nervous."

Yuki

Hakushi

CANDLE WOODS



PLAYING DEATH GAMES TO PUT FOOD ON THE TABLE

1

Yushi Ukai

Illustration by | Nekometaru



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Playing Death Games to Put Food on the Table, Vol. 1

Yushi Ukai

Translation by Kevin Yuan

Cover art by Nekometaru

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This is a story about a deranged world.



(0/23)

Yuki awoke on an unfamiliar bed.

(1/23)

The mattress seemed large enough to fit at least five people. It was a luxurious canopy bed equipped with curtains on all sides, the kind on which a sheltered princess would rest her weary body and the kind that no commoner would ever encounter during their lifetime.

And Yuki found the bed *unfamiliar*. As such, it was safe to say that she did not belong to the upper echelons of society.

She sat up, fully roused from her slumber. No blanket was covering her; rather, she had been sleeping on top of one. Her body was positioned diagonally across the bed, her head far removed from a pillow. Under these circumstances, “sleeping” was perhaps not an apt description of the situation. It would be more accurate to say she had been merely “lying down”—or to put it more harshly, that she had been “tossed” onto the bed.

Unsurprisingly, the clothes adorning Yuki’s body were not pajamas. To put it in the simplest of terms, she was wearing a maid outfit.

“...Urgh...” A groan escaped Yuki’s lips as she glanced down at her attire.

A *maid outfit*. The kind with a characteristically charming contrast of black and white. The kind that had long passed its heyday of popularity yet still enjoyed its share of devoted enthusiasts nationwide. Should that description be deemed insufficient, the following details should satisfy the demands of the people: It was a costume that featured a frilly apron over a dress. Maid outfits typically came with one of two styles of skirts, either extremely long or extremely short, and Yuki’s was the former. This was dubbed the “classical”

style.

Yuki got off the mattress, looking quite classical as she did so.

She was in a luxurious room, one that mirrored the character of the bed.

Much to her chagrin, Yuki found herself unable to express the luxuriousness of the room in sophisticated terms on account of her poor upbringing. But if she were to push the limits of her vocabulary, she would describe the room as having an air of elegance. The lofty ceiling stretched so high up that it was difficult to imagine how anyone would even begin to clean it. As if inversely proportional to its ridiculously spacious dimensions, the room hardly contained any pieces of furniture. However, the few pieces that were there gave off a mighty aura, like that of a queen in chess. That last comparison had sprung to mind due to the black-and-white checkered floor, which reminded Yuki of a chessboard.

But the floor was not the only thing in her vicinity devoid of color. The interior of the room featured an entirely monochrome design, from the lofty ceiling and the four walls to the bed and other furnishings, extending even to the classical maid outfit Yuki had on. The sole visible exception was the color of Yuki's skin, but even she was rather pale in complexion.

That was the sort of room she had found herself in, and not one inch of it was familiar.

She had been “sleeping” on the bed, so she must have rested her body on it at some point in the past. Yet she had no recollection of doing so. Not only could she not remember lying down on the mattress, but she also had no memory of entering the room or of changing into a maid outfit. She had woken up in an unfamiliar place, wearing unfamiliar clothes, on an unfamiliar bed.

What would people normally call this kind of situation?

The bedroom had no windows, suggesting that it was either located underground or simply not adjoined to any external walls. But it did have a door. Yuki began walking toward it, and a short while later—for “a short while” was how long it took to reach the far edge of the room—she stood before it. After a quick inspection, she grabbed ahold of the doorknob.

It turned without any resistance.

The door swung open into the hallway. Yuki slowly peeked out and examined the surrounding area. Like the bedroom, the hallway was luxurious and entirely monochrome, and it extended as far as the eye could see.

Yuki warily exited the chamber, leaving the door open behind her. She proceeded down the hallway, taking care to avoid making any noise. As if compensating for the lack of windows, the walls were lined with doors, each equidistant from one another. Several of them were wide open, similar to the way Yuki had left hers, and she had a fairly good idea of what that meant.

Without there being any windows, the only way to glean information about her current circumstances would be to try one of the many doors, and Yuki had already resolved to open the largest one she came across. That was almost always the correct course of action, and in this case, the largest door loomed at the end of the hallway. Yuki advanced toward it with the vigilance of a soldier traversing a minefield.

When she reached it, she turned the doorknob and stepped through.

The next moment, she found herself in a dining room—one with five maids inside.

(2/23)

Keeping with the theme of the hallway and bedroom, the dining room was completely black and white.

In the center of the room was a table, but it was by no means a modest piece of furniture. It was so large that it was impossible for a single person to carry, and it was surrounded by six chairs, three on each of the two long sides. The table was covered by a white tablecloth, on top of which rested a large plate of what appeared to be sweets. Considering all these elements, the space was clearly a dining room.

Five of the six chairs were occupied—by five maids.

They were all girls. While this may have been a premature conclusion, that was how they appeared to Yuki. She took a closer look at them and speculated

that the eldest was around college age, while the youngest was a middle school student. The five were all somewhere on the spectrum of adolescence, the time of life during which they could be referred to as “girls.”

Incidentally, according to a select group of enthusiasts, a maid is defined not by clothing but by personality. The beauty of a servant or attendant lay in their ability to remain calm, collected, and dignified in any situation, neatly resolving every problem with a cool head. By that definition, none of these five girls would be deemed suitable for the role. Not a single one of them exuded an air of sophistication. One was fidgeting, another was anxiously darting her eyes left and right, a third was leaning against the back of her chair and causing it to creak, and a fourth was hanging her head in tears. The fifth was rubbing the weeping girl’s back in an attempt to calm her nerves, but not even her expression could be described as one of composure.

None of them were real maids. They were merely a group of girls dressed as maids.

Naturally, their gazes shifted to the newly arrived sixth maid. With all eyes on her, Yuki walked over to the table, pulled out the empty chair, and sat down in a seat that seemed far too elegant for someone of her nature.

“Hello,” she said. “My name is Yuki. Nice to meet you.”

She was met with silence.

After a lengthy pause, someone finally responded. “...Nice to meet you.”

“I take it I’m the last to arrive?”

“Seems that way.”

Yuki trained her eyes on the girl who replied. “Were you all here from the very beginning?”

“No, we woke up in different bedrooms and made our way here separately...”

“Were you waiting long?”

“Not really. Maybe ten, twenty minutes or so.”

“Sorry about that. I tend to have trouble waking up, so I’m *always* late.”

“...You seem calm. Unusually so.” The girl narrowed her eyes. “Despite waking up in a place like this.”

“Oh, um... The thing is...” Yuki took a second to choose her words. “I’m not new to this. Though it seems to me like the rest of you are.”

(3/23)

Where to even begin to explain? Upon reflection, Yuki realized this was the first time she had ever had this opportunity. A fluttering sensation filled her chest, for a different reason than that of the other girls.

“Right... Let me ask, does anyone here not know what’s going on? With a show of hands...how many of you have no clue as to why you’re here?”

Yuki took the lead and threw her hand up in the air. Surely the others were aware of how to raise their hands, so she had done so not as a demonstration but as a way to make it psychologically easier for the others to mirror the action.

Two hands went up after Yuki’s.

“How many of you knew about these games but are participating for the first time?”

Two of the remaining three girls raised their hands.

The final girl opened her mouth to speak. “This is my second game, but you seem more experienced than me.”

“You’re right. I do have experience,” Yuki replied. “...A lot of it, actually.”

“Then the floor is all yours.”

With the spotlight thrust upon her, Yuki scrambled to piece together the right words. “...First off, someone may have mentioned this already...but this building is dangerous. There could be traps set up anywhere.”

The crying maid’s shoulders quivered.

“By traps, I don’t mean anything like those pieces of gum that shock your fingers or those balloons that make farting noises when you sit on a chair. You

should consider these traps to be *deadly*. Is anyone injured already?"

"Nope."

"That's a relief. From this point forth, please refrain from moving around more than necessary. Even the act of gathering like this in the dining room is risky for novice players. Thankfully, we all made it here in one piece."

"So what you're saying is"—someone spoke up, as if irritated by Yuki's poorly worded explanation—"we should treat this like an *escape game*?"

"Precisely."

Yuki noticed she had begun speaking more formally than usual. Why was that? Perhaps it was human instinct to act more politely when addressing a large group of people, but regardless, she continued on in the same manner.

"This is the sort of game where we have to find a way to exit the building while avoiding getting caught in death traps."

"Do we...*have* to escape?" another girl asked.

"Yes," Yuki responded. "Otherwise, we won't be able to return to our normal lives, nor will we receive any prize money. There hasn't been any indication of a time limit, so we can assume there to be none. However, since we have a finite supply of food and drinks, we should consider that our limit."

"Um... Excuse me!" cried out the teary maid. "Is this really happening to us?"

"Sorry to be the bearer of bad news, but yes, it is."

"How can that be possible?!" The girl raised her voice. "Because... This just isn't..."

"I also have my doubts," added the maid stroking the crying girl's back. "I'm aware these are deadly games where you can make a quick fortune, but what *exactly* are they? A billionaire's unspeakable secret pastime? Or something more along the lines of a business venture?"

"I'm not certain of all the details myself," Yuki replied, shaking her head. "What I *do* know is we're constantly being recorded. An *audience* is watching our every move through surveillance cameras. This is only a hunch, but I think they place bets on which of us will survive, since...the prize money varies

depending on the player.”

“Who tends to receive more?”

“Contestants with the cutest faces.”

“...What a cruel world we live in.”

A different kind of silence fell over the room.

“I think each of you stands to win quite a lot if you survive,” Yuki added. She had hoped to lighten the mood, if even just a little, but her attempt fell flat.

“We can’t see how the audience reacts, can we?”

“Nope.”

“No two-way interaction, huh? Guess that means no appealing for donations...” The maid fell silent, pondering something.

“So this really *is* a thing...,” said another girl. “I’d heard plenty of rumors about this sort of thing before, but I never imagined they actually existed.”

Yuki had shared the same feeling. Still, the idea of these games was by no means unrealistic. History was host to many forms of grisly entertainment. There was a period when executions by guillotine were treated as public spectacle. In another era, slaves were forced to fight against wild beasts to entertain their masters. And in modern times, ethics had fallen by the wayside, with the prevailing attitude in society being that dirty business practices were nothing more than a product of desperation. In conditions such as these, it wasn’t strange that something like death games had come along. Although the industry currently operated in the shadows of society, Yuki wondered if the games might end up going mainstream in another thirty or so years, but that was probably a little too far-fetched. She’d been in this profession a long time, so her perspective was likely biased.

Regardless of what the future held, what existed in the present was real—these were genuine games in which people died.

“It’s probably better not to ask,” the same girl continued, “but what’s the survival rate like?”

“No, that’s a good question. While I can’t deny the existence of games where

virtually all players get wiped out...it's typically around seventy percent."

"That's the average for *all* players, isn't it?" The maid apparently participating in her second game butted in. "But what about for beginners? Yuki, how do you like our odds of survival for this game?"

"....." The pointed question left Yuki floundering for a response. "It's true that first-time players are less likely to survive. However—"

Deciding it was time to quit being so distant, Yuki cleared her throat in an exaggerated manner.

"But don't sweat it," she continued. "I take an altruistic stance in these games. I'll do everything I can to ensure as many of us survive as possible."

(4/23)

"Altruistic?" one of the girls parroted back.

"In death games, players tend to adopt one of three attitudes toward one another..." Yuki paused, deciding instead to turn the lesson into a question. "Any idea what those might be?"

"Manipulating other players for your own survival."

"Yep."

"Ignoring the other participants and trying to clear the game alone, while avoiding interaction as much as possible."

"Bingo."

"And the third... Helping everyone stay alive?" The girl in her second game cast a skeptical glance at Yuki. "But what does that accomplish? Sure, we'd love your help, but what's in it for you?"

"It maximizes my odds of survival in the long run. If I help you out here, you may feel more inclined to return the favor the next time we meet in a game."

"Next time? You don't know how many of us will even *have* a next time."

"I don't mind. As long as it doesn't work against my own interests, I'd rather help people than abandon them."

Although that was what Yuki genuinely believed, her words failed to disarm the doubtful stares pointed in her direction.

“Well, in any case,” she added, “it’s best you stay wary. I could be saying these things while having something far more sinister in mind. Maybe I only see you all as meat shields. I can’t control what you think, so judge me as you wish.”

Yuki reached for the large plate on the table. A diverse array of sweets lay atop it, including chocolates, cookies, muffins, macarons, and other treats whose names escaped her knowledge. Like everything else, the individual sweets were either completely black or completely white, and though the color scheme hardly inspired much of an appetite, how could anyone resist the allure of sugar? Yuki ripped open a wrapper and bit into the dark-colored muffin inside.

“Is that really okay to eat?” The other maids stared at Yuki in disbelief.

“Yep. It’s pretty good,” she answered. “This isn’t one of *those* kinds of games, so the food we find generally won’t be poisoned. These snacks are here for us to stave off hunger. Sure, our lives are being toyed with, but surprisingly enough, there are some lines these games never cross.”

Yuki took a look around and saw that none of the other girls had reached for the plate. It didn’t surprise her that they were suspicious. After all, they weren’t exactly in a situation where they could easily indulge in food, and in the context of a death game, seeing sweets would normally set off alarm bells in anyone’s head.

After hearing Yuki’s words, one of the other maids slowly brought her hand to the plate. But just before grabbing something, she paused and turned to Yuki. “...This is exactly the kind of thing we should be wary about, right?”

Yuki grinned. “Right. Who knows, maybe I secretly know how to tell which sweets are safe.”

In truth, Yuki had no such knowledge. She had simply reached for a muffin because it looked scrumptious. Food and beverages set up in death games were a safe haven. Although it had never been officially announced that refreshments were safe to consume, it was practically an unwritten rule that they wouldn’t be tampered with. Even though death games represented a

human rights violation of the highest order, they still adhered to standards of their own. If not for that consistency, the industry would have never found success, nor would it have attracted regular players like Yuki.

Still, since the other five had no knowledge of that, they were unable to shed their caution in the face of the sweets. In other words, the stage was set for Yuki to monopolize the food. A smug grin spread across her face as she took another bite of her muffin when all of a sudden—

—someone reached out from across the table and snatched the half-eaten pastry away.

“Huh?” Yuki turned to the thief. It was the maid who’d almost reached for the plate a moment prior.

“So *this* is what you’re suggesting we do,” the girl said.

“Er, no, not exactly...”

The girl offered no additional response and instead took the third bite of the muffin.

“Ahhh...” Yuki groaned.

After shaking it off, Yuki once again reached for the plate but immediately realized her blunder. This time, she couldn’t even rip open the wrapper before the hand of a different maid appeared from beside her. Their skin touched. The next moment, the white macaron was snatched away. The same thing happened three or so more times. Ultimately, the only thing Yuki came away with was the knowledge that none of the others participants’ bodies was as cold as hers.

(5/23)

“So, um... Why don’t we introduce ourselves?” Yuki suggested, after the swiping of sweets had come to an end.

The others had been more famished than they let on, as they had continued to steal from Yuki and wolfed down the food. They had taken so much from her that, by the end, she had closed her eyes and begun guessing based off touch

alone whose hand was doing the grabbing. At that point, Yuki realized she had yet to learn the others' names, hence the proposal.

"I'll start," she continued as five pairs of eyes trained on her. "My name's Yuki, and this is my twenty-eighth game. Since I have the most experience here, I hope I can help everyone escape this building."

"You've played that many?" one of them asked. The others were probably thinking the same. "If this is your twenty-eighth game, you must be swimming in cash. Why are you still playing?"

"Well... I don't do it for the money." Yuki felt somewhat embarrassed to explain. "I'm aiming to set a new record for consecutive games cleared. My goal is ninety-nine."

"Huh? A record...for these death games?"

"Yeah... That's right."

"Breaking the streak means you die, right?"

"Yep."

"And the survival rate is seventy percent, yeah? So ninety-nine games means..."

"Don't start calculating the odds. It's too scary to think about."

"Why in the world would you put yourself through that...?"

"Because I'm cut out for it." Having been posed the same question countless times before, Yuki responded almost immediately. "People tend to want to play to their strengths. For me, this is it."

The room fell to a hush. The gazes trained on Yuki regained the caution they had shed. Maybe it was a mistake to have explained. She might have been better off fabricating a justification for her choice of career.

"So, um..." Yuki spoke, unwilling to let the silence linger. She gestured to the maid sitting directly across from her, the one who had first snatched the muffin out of her hand. "Can you go next?"

"I'm Kinko."

The girl had distinctive blond pigtails, which appeared ever more dazzling against the monochrome backdrop of the room. Some girls had such frail, scrawny bodies that they would provoke worry in anyone who saw them, and Kinko was one such young lady. Her neck was so thin that it seemed as if it would snap with the lightest of touches, and her fingers were so slender that Yuki wondered if there were any bones in them to begin with. Her delicate build was evident even underneath her maid outfit, which was the embodiment of loose-fitting clothing. She had the smallest frame of the six girls in the room, and she appeared to be the youngest as well. But considering the girl's comparatively serious facial expression and how she'd behaved earlier, Yuki deemed her capable of thinking and acting for herself.

"This is my first game. I'm here to pay off a debt."

"Debt?" Yuki tilted her head to one side. The girl didn't look like the kind of person to go into debt. "Never would've guessed."

"It's not mine. It's my father's."

"...Aren't you not liable for that as a child?"

"Sure, but I figured it was necessary to pay back what was borrowed."

Yuki was at a loss for words. The girl across from her was *that* kind of person. Yuki was certainly in no position to judge, but anyone willing to risk their life in a death game for a paltry sum was *off* in one way or another. For some people, this showed a disregard for their own life, while for others, it reflected an inability to accurately assess costs and benefits. What made Kinko off was obvious: She was responsible to a fault.

Kinko turned to her right. Next to her sat the maid who'd been crying this whole time. As if judging the girl to be in no condition to speak, she instead gestured to the maid sitting diagonally across the table from her.

"Can you go next?"

She had pointed to the maid playing in her second game.

"The name's Kokuto," said the girl in a comparatively relaxed tone. "This is my second go-round as a player, but my first game was two years ago, so I'm practically a beginner. The reason I'm here is, well, let's just say I need cash to

cover living expenses.”

Kokuto had a shady aura about her, like the kind that belonged to a tabloid gossip columnist who only ever wrote tasteless articles or a prison dealer who would smuggle in anything requested of her. It signaled that she was involved with the shadows of society. However, like the other maids, she had a rather attractive face, so behind the darkness emanating from her lay a hint of charm, as though she were a delinquent girl struggling to put on a tough act.

Since these death games were a form of show business, the girls who were invited to participate were generally attractive. Accordingly, one of the few benefits of being a player was the opportunity to easily get close to gorgeous girls, but even so, there was no way of knowing how long those bonds would last.

“If you’re only doing this for living expenses, does that mean you’re not in an urgent bind?” Kinko asked.

“Not really, but not having money is like being in a bind. I’m not in any debt, though.”

“Why not just work some normal job?”

“Give me a break.” Kokuto shrugged. “Being a wage slave is essentially trading away your life for money. This option was far more appealing. Wouldn’t you agree, Yuki?”

With the ball in her court, Yuki forced a smile. “I don’t know about that.”

“Next,” Kokuto said, relinquishing her hold on the conversation. “Can you speak?”

She pointed to the weeping maid. Crying was the natural human response to being forced to play a death game, but Yuki found the sight refreshing. In a certain sense, that girl, more than anyone else in the room, was savoring everything the game had to offer.

In a high-pitched voice, the girl spoke up. “I’m Momono... I—I shouldn’t be here. I was tricked...”

“Tricked?”

“She says she didn’t sign up for this,” Kinko explained. “Apparently, someone offered her an easy, high-paying job, but when she followed them, she got knocked out and woke up here. Seems like she’s had it rough.”

“Ah...” Yuki reacted. There wasn’t anything else for her to say.

A small number of players were brought into these games through direct invitations—in other words, from being scouted. There was a myriad of reasons why the organizers would want to approach potential players: if a game lacked enough participants or if they came across an absolute stunner, for instance.

Yuki was convinced that Momono had been scouted for the latter reason. The girl was, by all standards, an extraordinary specimen. First of all, her hair was pink. Her voice was so high, anyone would worry for her vocal cords. Although it was difficult to notice with how much she was crying, she was the prettiest of the six girls in the room. But above all else, her most salient feature was her voluptuous body. A maid outfit normally didn’t reveal the contours of its wearer’s physique, but that rule certainly didn’t apply to Momono. Maybe she had been stuffed in a costume one size smaller than appropriate, but every inch was bursting at the seams. And the biggest difference was that she was the only one wearing a miniskirt. After sizing the girl up, Yuki determined the most sensuous aspect of her body to be the thighs jutting out of her skirt. Perhaps as an act of caution, Momono had positioned her chair farther away from the table than anyone else, allowing Yuki to get a glimpse of the girl’s thighs from her seat. They were quite girthy and certainly appeared large enough to support the girl’s plump upper body. The portion of skin that was exposed between her frilly miniskirt and her white knee-high socks glistened brilliantly against the world of black and white. Yuki felt a genuine desire to touch them. In any case, every aspect of Momono seemed inviting. She had to be popular with guys.

“I don’t care about the money as long as I can get home in one piece.”

After saying that, Momono fell silent. Although she didn’t indicate someone to go after her, the maid sitting to her right—the one who had been rubbing Momono’s back—began to speak.

“My name’s Beniya. I knew of these games beforehand, but this is my first

time participating in one. I'm here for the same reason as Kinko—to pay off debts."

The girl had short scarlet-colored hair. Like the others, she also had an attractive face, but hers had a different type of appeal. To use a rather trite description, Beniya had a princely demeanor; she was the kind of girl who would be popular with other girls. She was about as tall as the average man, and her arms and legs were noticeably longer than those of the other maids. Her slender frame was the polar opposite of Momono's. She had the most dominant aura out of everyone in the room, but in sharp contrast to her outward appearance, her expression indicated that she was being swept up in the game, suggesting a lack of mental fortitude. Perhaps she had resorted to stroking Momono's back to maintain her composure by associating with someone who looked more anxious than she was.

Beniya continued, "Although in my case, my liabilities are entirely of my own making."

Liabilities. There was something curious about her choice of terminology.

"Do you run some sort of business?" Yuki asked.

"You could say that. I incurred some costs along the way."

Her tone implied an unwillingness to delve into the specifics, so Yuki refrained from prying any deeper.

Beniya encouraged the last maid—sitting directly across from her—to speak.

"...oi." The girl's voice was barely audible.

"Um, what was that?" Yuki prompted.

"I'm Aoi." The girl seemed to be doing her best to speak up, but even then, her voice remained soft. "This is my first-ever game."

She was the very picture of timidity, with shaggy blue hair and a nervous expression. She was clearly hunching forward, and her gaze was shifting rapidly between the table and the other maids. Yuki had no memory of the girl saying anything prior to this moment. It seemed she wasn't one for conversation.

"I'm here because...I, um, had no other choice."

Aoi neglected to explain any further, so the exact circumstances that brought her to the game remained a mystery, but Yuki surmised that the girl's reasons were similar to her own. Aoi displayed a conspicuous lack of social skills, which meant she likely had to resort to playing death games to make any money. Eventually, she could very well end up walking the same path as Yuki as a player.

After the introductions concluded, Yuki took another look around. To bring the topic to a close, she said, "Great. It'll only be for a little while, but let's get through this and try to clear the game with as many of us alive as possible."

Her remark was greeted by the other maids' overlapping voices.

"Let's do this." "Hoping for the best." "I appreciate your help."

"So what exactly do we have to do?" asked Kokuto.

"Well, this *is* an escape game," Yuki answered. "It's time we start exploring."

(6/23)

Many people in the world have likely played an escape game that posed no danger to their lives.

True to its name, an escape game was designed so that its end goal was for players to find a way out of a designated space. Yet, for some reason, the exit would always be locked; the key to the exit would be stored somewhere, like in a safe; and the combination to that safe would be hidden underneath a bed, behind a shelf, or in a corner close to the ceiling, forcing players to search every nook and cranny for clues and items. In addition to investigating the space, players would sometimes have to solve puzzles or riddles.

In these death games, however, there were never any complicated problems to solve, at least in Yuki's experience. After all, it was part of a show, a program meant for entertainment, and grueling puzzles were not a source of good drama. In most cases, the key would be left out in plain sight and unlock the exit without issue. However, players would typically run into the real problem *around the key*. For that reason, the girls couldn't afford to let their guards down, but at the very least, finding what they needed would be a walk in the

park.

But the maids still had to conduct a search—and it was important not to forget they were inside a mansion of death.

“For now, I’ll cover the most important points to keep in mind,” Yuki said to the other five girls after they had all left the dining room and entered the hallway.

It was decided that the six of them would move around as a group.

Since Yuki was the only person in the group with significant experience, the others technically had the option of sending her out of the dining room alone to finish the necessary exploration, locate any traps, and secure a guaranteed safe route to the exit before returning to escort everyone out. That would ensure the greatest safety, but the group opted not to go with it. Nobody had proposed they all go together; rather, it was simply an unspoken agreement. That was probably because everyone feared being left behind. If Yuki went on ahead and found the exit, there would be no guarantee she would return for the others. To eliminate the possibility of her escaping on her own, the obvious solution was to act as a group. Since they were inside a trap-riddled mansion, it would seem safer to remain in one location, but at the same time, the idea of sticking close to a death-game veteran also offered a sense of security. Between the two options, everyone elected to throw their support behind Yuki.

“First and foremost, the key to survival is cowardice,” Yuki told them. “Don’t approach anything that seems even slightly fishy. Speak up as soon as you notice something off. There are people in this world who choose to call an ambulance when a taxi would suffice, and that’s exactly the kind of playstyle you should adopt. Ideally, you should be so cautious that you hesitate to take even a single step.”

“Is that really a good idea?” It was the princely maid, Beniya, who posed the question. “Aren’t we being monitored? If we appear too reluctant to act, I fear the organizers will intervene...”

“That won’t happen, at least to the best of my knowledge. I’ve been in games where everyone was so guarded that nothing happened for over a week, and games that we cleared without incident or injury because everyone cooperated,

but the organizers never stepped in once. Players have full agency in deciding how they progress the game... At least, I think so.”

There was no official information on that topic, so Yuki softened her tone.

“In games like these, pessimism is your friend. You should constantly imagine the worst outcome of any situation. Be suspicious of anything and everything. Just having that mindset will significantly affect your chances of survival. Other than that... Right, since I’ll be the one securing the route forward, don’t stray too far from me.”

“Will you really be able to figure out a safe escape route?” This time, the question came from the maid with blond pigtails, Kinko.

“It comes with experience. And I’ve learned from many *painful experiences*.”

“...Painful experiences...” A troubled expression formed on Kinko’s face, but she asked a follow-up question. “Does that mean getting caught in a trap won’t necessarily kill you?”

Maybe Kinko wanted to take the opportunity to ask everything on her mind, or maybe she was following Yuki’s advice and being suspicious of anything and everything. Either way, the answer was the same.

“That’s right. The audience won’t get much enjoyment from watching a player die in one fell swoop. Unless you’re extremely unlucky with how you get caught in a trap, or you’re up against a large-scale obstacle, odds are you won’t die instantly.”

“What do you mean by ‘large-scale obstacle’?”

“There are some traps you can’t avoid, which are especially common in these escape games. They’re what serve as the highlight of the show, and they cost the organizers a pretty penny to design. With six players, we’ll likely run into one or two.”

“...I’ll mentally prepare for them.” Seemingly envisioning a negative future, Kinko closed her mouth and said nothing further.

Yuki felt a tug on her right arm. She had raised her guard after stepping into the hallway, so she nimbly turned around. Thankfully, she hadn’t set off a trap.

The source of the tug was none other than Aoi, the very personification of negative thinking, who had grabbed Yuki's sleeve.

"Ah..." The girl made eye contact with her. "I...I'm sorry."

"You don't have to apologize... What's wrong?"

Aoi angled her head upward, to the point where it would fall off if she raised it any farther. "You said we shouldn't leave your side, so..."

"Ah...", Yuki mumbled.

It was true that clinging to Yuki's body was the best way to stay close. However, she had made no such suggestion, nor had the idea even crossed her mind. That was because when people reached a certain age, there was a tacit understanding that it was inappropriate to touch other people more than necessary. *Stop acting cute*, Yuki thought, breaking into a smile.

Next she felt a pull on her left arm, and she turned to see Kinko clinging to her. Unlike Aoi, who had only lightly grabbed her sleeve, Kinko was tightly grasping her arm.

"This is okay, right?" Kinko asked with a sheepish grin.

Yuki thought that her earlier act of swiping a half-eaten muffin would have resulted in the same kind of expression, but evidently, this girl had different standards.

Then she felt an overpowering sensation on her back. Someone had wrapped their arms around her stomach. There was no need to turn around to know it was Momono embracing her from behind. The next moment, new hands appeared on her right shoulder and right hip, and by process of elimination, Yuki deduced they were Beniya's.

"You're a popular one, Yuki." The voice belonged to Kokuto, who had walked out in front. A devious smirk colored her face.

(7/23)

The maids proceeded down the hallway in a cluster. Everyone was huddled together except for Kokuto, who seemed somewhat more relaxed on account

of this being her second game. Although none of them voiced their feelings aloud, they were all probably nervous. They were clinging to Yuki for the same reason that Beniya had Momono's back—physical contact with another person generated a sense of security. That was a law of human nature that held true even on a freezing snowy mountain.

But for some reason, Yuki felt a hint of restlessness, even though the others likely found comfort in their current formation. She was, quite literally, sandwiched among a group of beautiful girls. Even Aoi had progressed from gently holding Yuki's sleeve to tightly hugging her body like the others. And yet it was important to note that what came over Yuki was not joy or bliss but nervousness. Why did people tense up when in physical contact with pretty girls? *Pretty girls*, for goodness' sake. Was it because their level of happiness exceeded maximum capacity? These thoughts ran through Yuki's head as she ventured onward.

The group first headed for the door at the end of the hallway directly opposite the dining room, as they figured it would be important. However, it was locked. The girls concluded that they would unlock the way forward by searching for a key, so they turned their attention to the other doors lining the hallway.

To reiterate, this was less a game of escape than one of death. The problem would not be locating a key—it would be the risk of a player springing a trap and getting injured. For that reason, the key would not be concealed in a hard-to-find location. The majority of the time, it would be somewhere immediately visible, such as on a table or a shelf. However—

“It's not here,” someone said.

The group was currently searching the bedroom where Yuki had woken up.

Normally, the locations where players started a death game—in this case, the bedrooms—were safe areas. That was because a game would be rendered pointless if players inadvertently got caught in traps while asleep. Since these rooms were safe, they never contained any items necessary to progress the game. Yuki knew full well it was pointless to search the room, but they had already gone through everywhere else, including the five bedrooms where the

other girls had woken up. This was the final place a key could be hidden.

Yet the only thing they acquired was the knowledge that it was nowhere to be found.

“What should we make of this?” Kinko asked while tightly clutching Yuki’s left arm. “Did we overlook somewhere obvious, or do we need to search more thoroughly? Maybe looking for a key was the wrong idea to begin with.”

“No, I am fairly certain we do need a key...,” Beniya responded. “After all, we found nothing else indicating a possible way forward.”

“Then should we take another quick look around...?” Momono timidly suggested. “Searching more thoroughly sounds too scary.”

Momono’s point was valid. Looking under beds or behind dressers would accordingly increase the risk of running into a trap. Before resorting to that, it would be prudent to go over the path they had come from—which they knew was safe—and check to make sure they hadn’t simply overlooked a key. Just as Yuki was about to voice her agreement—

“What are you all saying?” The objection belonged to the lone outlaw who hadn’t joined Yuki’s flock—Kokuto. “There’s still one room we haven’t searched.”

“Huh?”

“The dining room. It’s not like that was a safe area, right?”

(8/23)

The dining room was exactly as the group had left it. That was no surprise, as nobody else was around. Upon entering the room, the maids loosened their grips around Yuki, likely out of relief from returning to a familiar place.

A familiar room. And nowhere inside was there a key.

“Guess it’s not here,” Kokuto said. “Come to think of it, we were sitting in here for so long, we would’ve noticed one. Sorry, this was a waste of time.”

“No, it was a good suggestion,” Yuki said. “This room was a blind spot.”

Under normal circumstances, that was a realization Yuki should have come to on her own. Because she was guiding a group of beginners for the first time, or perhaps because she was in high spirits from being hugged by the many maids, her perspective was more limited.

“While we’re here, we might as well take a break.”

Yuki approached the table, and the other girls fully detached themselves from her body. She felt a twinge of loneliness at the loss of human touch. She took a seat, and the other five followed suit.

They had spent no more than thirty or so minutes searching—at least according to Yuki’s estimate, as there were no clocks in the mansion. That scant amount of exertion hardly warranted a break, and although Yuki did feel nervous, her level of exhaustion barely registered at all. Nevertheless, considering that their lives were on the line and the other girls were unaccustomed to death games, the experience was likely taking a greater toll on the group than Yuki imagined. She herself had just made the mistake of overlooking the dining room as a place to search, so she wasn’t in peak condition, either. She had been the one to state that it was okay to be excessively cowardly. Now was the time to put her own words into practice.

Yuki reached for the large plate on the table. She had set her sights on a cookie, but before she could grab it, Kokuto snatched it away.

“Come on... Really?” Yuki sighed. “You’ve had so many by now, you should know these are safe. Knock it off and let me eat in peace.”

Yuki glared at Kokuto. However, the girl didn’t appear apologetic, nor did she retaliate with a scowl of her own. She kept her eyes fixed on the cookie, deep in contemplation.

“...A blind spot...,” Kokuto muttered.

She shifted her gaze to the plate, which was around the size of a large pizza. After putting back the cookie, she lifted the plate with both hands and moved it to another spot on the spacious rectangular table.

Beneath where the plate had been was a ring of golden keys.

“...Aha!”

The maids began to murmur.

Kokuto scooped up the keys. “This was in a real blind spot. Who knew we’d been reaching our hands over this all along?”

She showed the object to the others.

At that very moment, Yuki noticed something glimmering near the bottom of the ring—an extremely fine string, like the kind used for magic tricks.

Then, in an uncharacteristic act, she shot up out of her chair and shouted at the top of her lungs. “Kokuto! Get down!”

“Huh?”

A *zwoosh* cut through the air—

(9/23)

Three sounds rang out in rapid succession.

The first was the sound of a flying object lodging itself into Kokuto’s head, a noise so small and crisp that it defied all expectations of a human brain being pierced. The second was the thump of Kokuto falling over from the momentum of the blow to her head after being deprived of the ability to stand on her own. And the third was the jingle of the bunch of keys falling out of her hands onto the table.

Technically, there was also a fourth sound—that of Yuki’s chair toppling over. She had stood up with such vigor that she accidentally kicked it away. But that was all. Be it three sounds or four, there was nothing else as Kokuto’s life came to an end.

She breathed her last. The game had taken its first victim.

“—!”

A muted scream filled the air.

Momono curled up into a small ball, clutching her head. It was the kind of pose that suggested a wish to be absorbed back into her mother’s womb.

Hers was the most noteworthy reaction to the events that had unfolded, as

none of the other maids flew into a panic. That was the only silver lining. But while they had avoided becoming hysterical, not a single one of them was *not* in shock. The color had drained from each of their faces.

Their expressions indicated they had fully come to accept that they were in a game of death.

“What was that?” After an unknown amount of time had passed, it was Kinko who first regained enough composure to speak. “Was that a trap?” The question betrayed that she still had holes in her understanding.

Yuki nodded. With an eye on Kokuto’s corpse, she explained, “This often happens, where there are particularly dangerous traps set up around important items. I should’ve made that clearer when I had the chance.”

Kokuto had been the only non-first-time player besides Yuki. Had she not known the golden rule for these escape games? Or was she aware but hadn’t internalized it? Either way, the truth had vanished with her dying breath.

Yuki regretted that she hadn’t been able to shout her instructions a second earlier. Even if it wasn’t possible to stop the trap from activating, Kokuto could have evaded it by ducking. If only Yuki had been slightly more in form, if only she had the experience of leading a group of beginners even once in the past, if only she had deduced the location of the key ring before Kokuto, if only she had realized the possibility of a trap and taken a moment to assess the situation, then Kokuto may have been spared her fate.

Yuki felt sorry for the girl but didn’t voice it out loud.

She left her place to examine Kokuto’s body, which had unmistakably turned into a corpse. The girl was dead as a doornail, beyond a shadow of a doubt. A sharp metal spike resembling an ice pick had penetrated her skull, from her right temple all the way through to her left. Although it looked as if she had donned one of those prank headbands, there was no denying the reality of the situation.

“So...what do we do with that?” The voice was Beniya’s. As if realizing the word *that* was inappropriate, she immediately reworded her question. “What do we do with *her*?”

“Nothing. We have no choice but to leave her like this,” Yuki answered in a nonchalant tone. “It’s not like there’s anywhere to bury her. The one thing we can do is clasp our hands in prayer, but I’d strongly advise against that.”

“How come?” Kinko asked.

“There may be situations coming up where we won’t even have the luxury to offer someone a prayer. If we pray for Kokuto but can’t do the same for someone else later, our hearts will grow weak, and that weakness may come back to bite us when the going gets tough. In this kind of game, emotional scars run far deeper than you think. That’s why I don’t stop to mourn when anyone dies. I do that all at once after the game is over.”

“...Right.”

Yuki turned her gaze to the table—or rather, to the bunch of keys resting on it. The thin wire that had set off the trap was still intact. It was possible that the trap could activate a second time, so she severed it with great caution.

Nothing happened.

Yuki took the key ring in her hands. “This should unlock that door from earlier.” She looked around at the group of maids, which was now one fewer in number. “Do you all have the will to continue?”

(10/23)

The five maids once again huddled together and walked down the hallway. None of them spoke a word. Only the sound of five sets of footsteps echoed in the air.

They ran into no traps. That was to be expected, as they had already traversed the same hallway once before. Upon reaching the door without any trouble, the cluster temporarily disbanded, as it was possible the act of inserting the key would cause them to relive the same nightmare from earlier. Yuki instructed the others to crouch down, then approached the door and tried each key in succession.

The third fit perfectly and turned in the lock. The door swung open—nothing more, nothing less.

Since they had just experienced the feeling of having their hopes raised only to be thrust into despair, neither Yuki nor the others exhibited the slightest hint of joy. Instead of dropping their guard, they doubled down on staying alert and passed through the doorframe.

The group found themselves in a hexagonal chamber.

It had a different ambience from the other rooms they had explored. Every inch of its interior was white, bringing to mind a laboratory or hospital. The room was completely devoid of furniture, clearly indicating it had not been designed as a living area. It served some other kind of purpose. A *game-related* purpose.

“What is this place...?” Kinko voiced her confusion, as if recognizing the oddity of the chamber. “Could this be one of those ‘large-scale obstacles’ you were talking about?”

“Probably,” Yuki replied.

An unavoidable trap. One they would have to contend with in order to make progress in the game.

Directly across the room from where they had entered was another door—a sliding door with a panel above the handle that read CLOSED. It was exactly as the word suggested: The door wouldn’t budge. Whatever force was keeping it shut made it impossible to break through by sheer strength alone.

“Um... Excuse me!” Momono shouted. “This door won’t open!”

Momono was fiddling with the door they had come through. She was by no means fooling around; her earnest attempts to open it were being thwarted by the uncooperative knob.

All the exits had been cut off.

“We’re trapped,” Yuki said calmly. “Seems like we’ll be stuck here until we do what we need to.”

“By that, do you mean...we have to use *those*?” Beniya turned to look at a spot on one wall.

Each of the walls in the hexagonal room was equipped with a single lever.

Since the topic of doors had dominated the conversation, the word *lever* may have falsely conjured an image of a door lever, but these levers consisted of two metal rods connected to a handle that could be pulled down, like the kind that would be used to pilot a giant mecha. Of the six levers in the room, four were set in the exact center of their respective walls, while the remaining two—the ones sharing a wall with the entrance or exit—were slightly off-center due to the position of the doors. In any case, there were six levers.

“Do we have to pull them simultaneously?” Yuki wondered out loud. She reached for a lever but stopped short of touching it. She would have acted differently had she been on her own, but with a group of beginners in tow, there was no reason to take excessive risks. “Pulling the six levers at the same time will probably result in something new to puzzle over...but it should be progress.”

“At the same time...?” Momono parroted back, her voice tinged with hesitation. “But right now, there are only...”

She was alluding to Kokuto’s death. Her point stood; there were only five people present, one fewer than the number of levers.

“I don’t believe that will pose an issue,” Beniya said. “Since there was a deadly trap before this point, the game must be designed with that in mind. For example, maybe we only need to pull five levers, or maybe one of them will stay down after being pulled. Or we could fashion a rope from our maid outfits to keep one secured in the down position.”

“We can’t be sure we even need to pull any to begin with,” Yuki remarked. “I know I was the one who brought up the idea, but in these situations, there are sometimes hidden paths forward, ones that seem extremely simple in hindsight. Those alternate routes make it more entertaining for the audience. The key to surviving is calling everything into question. It’s best if we consider the levers our last resort.”

“So we should try everything else we can...?”

Although the girls were trapped, they had eaten an abundance of sweets earlier. They didn’t have to worry about going hungry in the immediate future, and they had plenty of time to spare. And so the five maids tested every idea

they could come up with. Could they open the door without the levers? Was there no other means of escaping the room? Was there some way to keep the levers secured without manually keeping them in place? Would something fortunate happen if they waited around?

Alas, none of their efforts bore fruit. The more they tried, the more painfully clear it became that there was only one way forward.

“I guess we’re stuck trying the levers,” Kinko said. “Even if there’s a safe alternative path, it’s pointless if we can’t find it. Should we get it over with?”

Yuki estimated that around an hour had passed. Yet it was no ordinary hour; she had spent it in a closed space facing risk of death with a group of people she had met only a short while ago. The time that had ticked away felt far longer than an hour with a hand on a hot stove. Upon glancing around the room, Yuki noticed exhaustion had begun to color the others’ faces. The game would still continue after they escaped this room. There was no better time to accept the reality of the situation.

“...Should we?” Yuki turned to each of the other girls in succession.

“Yes,” Beniya replied with a clear voice. Momono and Aoi kept silent but nodded.

“Great. Let’s do it.”

Each maid selected a spot to stand and grabbed a lever.

“So should we assume one of these levers is a dummy?” Beniya asked.

“Yeah, let’s stick with that theory for now. We’ll stay in this formation and keep shifting over counterclockwise until something happens. If that doesn’t work...it’ll be a waste of these clothes, but we can try fixing down a lever.”

“Yuki, I want to ask something before we begin,” Kinko said. “Pulling these levers won’t be the end, right? ...I think I might know the answer...but what will happen afterward?”

“It’ll probably start some kind of minigame.” There was no reason to keep it a secret, so Yuki offered a response drawn from her experience. “Like maybe water will pour into the room, and we’ll have to solve a puzzle before time runs

out to avoid drowning. Or maybe the floor will open up, and we'll fall headfirst into a dark pit if we let go of the lever. You should expect something along those lines. We can make it through safely if we play our cards right, but on the flip side, it's possible we'll be wiped out if we flub it."

"This really does feel like a show...," Beniya muttered. "They went to such lengths to design this set that it seems wasteful to only use it to film us... I'm sure there are plenty of other ways they could make money from this."

"Any other questions?" Yuki's voice echoed loudly throughout the room.

"Nope." Only Kinko answered. Momono and Aoi again stayed silent but indicated their agreement by nodding.

"Then let's get started. We'll pull on the count of three." After a brief pause, Yuki began counting. "One, two, three!"

She pulled the lever.

All five maids acted in unison. In that sense, their attempt was a success, but nothing else happened. No minigame began, and the panel on the door still read CLOSED.

Yuki waited approximately three seconds before releasing the lever. It rose back up to its original position with a clunk. The others followed suit. As decided earlier, each of them shifted one space over counterclockwise to create a new combination of levers, before Yuki gave another signal. Still, nothing happened. Once again, they shifted over one lever.

"One, two, three!"

Nothing.

They again took up new positions, but the situation remained the same. Had they not met the necessary conditions? Did they actually need a group of six to proceed?

The maids began to grow uneasy, and as if reflecting that feeling, their fifth attempt ended in failure. Finally, they were on their last combination of levers.

"One, two, three!" Yuki shouted. She pulled the lever noticeably harder than before.

Five clunks rang out. But that was all. Soon, only silence filled the room.

“.....”

The girls exchanged glances. Between them was the kind of quiet that would linger on forever until someone intentionally broke it.

“So...” Yuki bravely spoke up, assuming her role as the experienced guide. “Since nothing’s happening...let’s gather back together for a moment.”

While finishing her sentence, Yuki relaxed her hand. Her eyes were on the other maids and not on the lever. She didn’t need to look to know what was going to happen. The force of the lever would cause it to revert to its original position, so once Yuki loosened her grip, her hand would naturally be pushed upward. She subconsciously expected to feel that force on her palm.

However, it was not her palm that felt an external force. It was *her wrist*—and it was being squeezed.

“Huh?”

Yuki turned around.

She had been handcuffed.

(11/23)

A metal cuff had appeared from beside the lever.

The lever’s position was evidently linked with how tight the handcuff was—the higher the lever, the stronger the force around Yuki’s wrist. She began feeling pain once the lever was around seven-tenths of the way up, so she stopped experimenting any further. If she let go completely, her hand would probably be sliced off. Pulling the lever loosened the restraint, but there wasn’t enough slack to slip free even at its lowest position.

She had been shackled. This was an unequivocal sign that a minigame had begun.

Parts of the floor began to rise, and soon, they reached the ceiling. From Yuki’s perspective, two walls had formed, extending from the vertices of the

hexagon to the center of the room, thereby separating her from the four others. Combined with the wall to which she had been restrained, the walls formed a triangle. The other maids probably had the same view. The hexagonal room had been divided into six equal sections, as if it had been sliced like a cake.

A harsh, grating sound assaulted Yuki's ears. She turned her head toward the source of the noise—the ceiling.

Saw blades had emerged from above.

There were one, two, three of them, positioned along the sides of the triangular slice. They were spinning too fast for Yuki to tell if they had any teeth, but more likely than not, they did. Even if her assessment was incorrect, coming into contact with those raging high-speed blades of steel would mean certain death.

The saw blades inched closer and closer to Yuki. Although they were not descending quickly, their pace was fast enough to send any player's heart into overdrive. Yuki imagined it must have taken some amount of trial and error to settle on the exact speed of descent. She judged that if the blades reached the floor, there was no chance of escaping with anything less than a mortal wound, no matter how close she pressed her body against the wall. Evading them was going to be impossible.

She had to stop their descent, and she had to do so with one hand restrained to the wall.

"Yuki! Yuki!" Someone was pounding a wall. It was Kinko. "Saw blades! They're descending from the ceiling!"

"I know," Yuki replied calmly. In reality, she *was* calm. Perhaps it was her wealth of experience as a player that had caused her to develop a mental constitution where her heart grew colder the greater the imminent danger. That was the secret to her success—the impressive human ability of adapting to one's environment.

Now, what was it they had to do? Of course, that question assumed the existence of a solution. If there was none, that meant the situation was a punishment imposed on the players for having committed some sort of

mistake, in which case it would be futile to try anything. That was why Yuki disregarded that possibility. While jiggling the lever, she examined the accursed cuff keeping her in this predicament.

On the side of it, she discovered something resembling a keyhole.

A keyhole.

The restraint could be unlocked.

With her free hand, Yuki immediately grabbed the bunch of keys that lay in the pocket of her maid apron. She pulled the golden ring out and scowled at the sheer number of keys attached to it. With no other choice, she quickly scanned them one by one.

Toward the end of this process, she found one that seemed to be a match for the keyhole. She slipped it in and turned, and the cuff came off with a satisfying sound. At the same time, the harsh noise in the room became slightly less grating. Yuki looked up to find that all three saw blades overhead had stopped.

So that's how it is, Yuki thought.

But even though the blades had stopped, the noise remained. Only the ones in her section of the room had shut off. The other four girls had to follow the same steps as her.

The question was—*how?*

Yuki racked her brain while looking around the triangular area she'd been sectioned off in. The walls stretched up to the ceiling, but there had to be a gap somewhere. Otherwise, there would be no way to pass around the keys, which almost certainly would unlock the others' restraints. It was possible that each of the cuffs had to be dealt with in different ways, but if that was the case, the others would have to cross that bridge on their own.

Yuki found an indentation at the tip of the triangle, where the center of the original room had been.

She pushed it. A section of the wall slid out without resistance and fell onto the floor on the other side. Near the midsection of the wall, a gap the size of a mailbox slot opened at the center of the sliced cake where all six walls joined

together.

“The center of the room!” Yuki shouted, yelling over the saw blades. “I’ll hand you the key ring to unlock your cuff! Once it’s off, the ceiling blades will stop!”

It was a poor explanation consisting only of a slew of facts. That was the best she could muster in this emergency. There was a chance the others had failed to hear her, so she repeatedly yelled out the same information as she slipped her hand through the gap and set the key ring on the floor.

The very next moment—

“Eep—!”

Four hands simultaneously rubbed against Yuki’s. A chill ran through her arm, and she reflexively pulled back her hand, leaving only the key ring in the center. The sound of jangling echoed out as four hands wriggled about in the opening of the wall.

They were fighting over the keys.

As she watched four writhing hands wrestle over the single key ring, an inexplicable dirty feeling ran through Yuki. Now she could understand why certain people had a hand fetish.

“Ugh... Stop fighting! We’re down one person, so there’s more than enough time to spare for everyone!”

The words *down one person* carelessly slipped out of Yuki’s mouth, but that was the truth. Although she couldn’t refute the possibility that the time limit had been reduced to match their current numbers, it should still be possible for all of them to survive regardless, as long as they handled things well.

All of them, as long as they didn’t sabotage one another like this.

One of the hands disappeared with the key ring. In response, the remaining hands pulled back as well.

Yuki could tell that Beniya had won the keys. Yuki had struggled against everyone in a prolonged battle over sweets in the dining room, so she’d gained the ability to discern which hand belonged to whom.

In fact, Yuki had predicted Beniya would be the first to take the keys. After all,

the girl was the tallest of the group. Since everyone had one hand restrained to the wall, they would need to stretch a considerable distance to reach the center of the room. Although Yuki was no longer bound, she tried mimicking the act and was only barely able to reach the center. The span of someone's arm was roughly equivalent to their height, and Yuki was taller than average. If this was how difficult it was for her to reach, it would be even harder for Aoi and Kinko, both of whom had small statures. Conversely, it would be a piece of cake for the tall and slender Beniya. The advantage offered by extra flexibility in fighting over the keys was enormous, and the irreversible reality was that Beniya benefited from that the most.

The sound of jangling rang out once again. Yuki crouched down and peered through the gap to see four hands wriggling about.

Four.

Yuki furrowed her brows. For some reason, Beniya's hand was there, too, even though her restraints should have come off. What on earth was she doing? Before Yuki could speak up, the answer came to mind.

Beniya was *playing favorites*.

She was attempting to pass the keys to the room directly to the left of hers, where Momono was trapped.

An indescribable feeling welled up within Yuki. Beniya's action implied she favored Momono over the other two, and her prior behavior had suggested as much. The two girls had seemed close to each other, but even so...

Yuki was unable to stop her. The key ring made its way to Momono, just as Beniya intended. The faint sound of metal scraping on metal echoed, mixed with the grating noise of the saw blades.

Yuki sat down with her back to the wall. Things had taken a turn for the worse. The other girls had wasted too much time struggling over the key ring twice. Yuki couldn't see how far the remaining saw blades had descended, but if the situation had been designed with *proper game balance* in mind, then there was no longer a chance for all of them to make it out alive. Someone was going to die—either Kinko or Aoi, or perhaps even both of them. As they barreled toward that inevitable conclusion, there was nothing Yuki could say. She could

only remain silent and let the others decide their own fates.

Although seeing what was going on wouldn't make the future any more hopeful, Yuki couldn't take her eyes off the gap in the wall. She didn't have the special feeling of wanting to see things through to the end, nor did she have the attitude of a curious onlooker. What came over her was nothing more than an overwhelming force that prevented her from averting her gaze. Perhaps it was the same feeling that gripped the game's audience.

In the end, there was no struggle.

Suddenly, an entire *wrist* passed through the opening of the wall where only fingers had been before.

It didn't stop there; someone inserted a full half of their forearm, all the way through to the space where Momono was.

The arm belonged to Kinko.

Yuki recognized that immediately. However, she couldn't understand *how* Kinko had gotten her arm through there. The distance should have been too great for the girl to reach. Not even Beniya could pull off such a feat. There was no way she could have stretched that far with her other arm fixed to the wall.

The answer finally came to her. Kinko had probably—

The arm pulled back at an astonishing speed. In that split second, Yuki saw that Kinko had won the key ring from Momono and clasped her fingers around it. Then she heard the clanging of the keys as they scraped against the gap in the wall.

Since Yuki's room neighbored Kinko's, she put her ear to the connecting wall. She could hear the frantic rattling of keys, hinting that little time remained.

Please, please, please, Yuki prayed. Although she had left the others' fates in their own hands, her hopes for their survival remained unwavering. She wanted to call out to Kinko but intentionally kept quiet. She didn't want to distract her. And so Yuki simply waited, keeping her worry bottled up inside. Soon, the same satisfying sound she had heard earlier rang out, followed by the distant metallic noise of someone setting down the key ring. And then...

And then...

She heard a faint pounding against the wall.

“—!”

It was weak, but Yuki heard it as clear as day. That sound indicated the person on the other side had the liberty of free will. Kinko had survived.

Yuki breathed a sigh of relief.

And in the same moment...

“Aah—”

...what filled the air—

“AAAAAAAH!! AAAA*****AA*****!! *****!!
*****!! *****AA*!! ***AA*****AA*!!
*****!!
*****AA*AA**AAAAAAAAA**AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA/

—was a voice none of them had heard before.

That was unsurprising, as it belonged to someone who had hardly said a word up until this point. It was the first time any of them had heard a distinctly audible noise from the girl, much less a scream.

The voice belonged to the timid maid, Aoi.

It was the first and last bellow she would ever let out.

(12/23)

Everything went quiet. A deafening silence enveloped the room, much like the kind that hit after stepping out of an amusement arcade.

Then a noise filled the air. It was the sound of the game items disappearing from view. The walls that had risen sank back into the floor, and the six sets of three saw blades—eighteen blades in total—retracted into the ceiling. The only object that remained was the section of the wall Yuki had dismantled in order to pass around the key ring. The triangular chamber transformed back into a hexagonal one, and Yuki, who had been leaning against the wall, fell onto the

floor.

Another person fell over. It was the girl on the other side of the wall—Kinko.

Yuki pulled herself off the floor and looked over. The girl had fallen flat on her face, and her body was quivering wildly. She seemed to be in tears. She was also rhythmically repeating an action, though it was difficult to tell whether she was saying something, taking deep breaths, or simply convulsing. The saw blades must have scraped her, as parts of her maid outfit and gorgeous blond hair had been cut.

On top of that, *there was nothing beyond her right wrist.*

What had previously been attached had fallen close to the wall. That was how Kinko had pulled off the trick: She had severed her own hand. It was the simplest way to escape from the cuff.

Since human bodies were not plastic models, it was impossible to sever a body part on a whim. It was not Kinko who had done the deed, but the cuff. The restraint was linked to the position of the lever: Raising the lever tightened it, while pulling down loosened it. Yuki had surmised that if the lever reached its highest position, the cuff would be tight enough to slice off a hand. That may very well have been the expected solution for the game. While other players fought over the keys with their fingertips, any player who had the courage to cut off their own hand and go after the keys with their full strength would survive. That was what the game demanded—a mindset that did not balk at the idea of sacrifice.

Kinko had made it out alive because she had given up on escaping unscathed.

Her quivering was likely not because of pain.

“I’m sorry.”

That quiet remark reached the ears of Yuki, who was a short distance away. And not just once; Kinko repeated those words at irregular intervals each time a wave of emotions washed over her.

The girl’s voice was so soft that it put Aoi’s to shame.

Speaking of Aoi, her remains lay on the section of the floor that had belonged

to the room adjacent to Kinko's.

"What...is *that*?" Momono asked. She and Beniya were standing close together. Both of their faces were strained with fatigue, as if they had been forced to work for three days and nights without rest. "Why is it *not red*?" Momono's voice was filled with neither fear nor disgust but, rather, confusion.

The reason for that could be traced to Aoi's current condition. Three saw blades had torn her entire body to shreds, yet the scene noticeably lacked fresh red spatters. There weren't brightly colored pieces of visible flesh, nor was there the metallic smell of blood or the odor of waste that had remained in the girl's bowels.

Instead, lying strewn across the floor was a considerable amount of white fluff, like the kind that would spill from a plushie after it was ripped apart.

Yuki realized this was the first time the others had seen this, as Kokuto hadn't taken much bodily damage when she died.

"It's because of the Preservation Treatment," Yuki explained. "People watch these games, after all... That's why they use a technique to tone down the gore. Every player who dies in these games ends up like that."

"Is that possible in so little time?" Beniya asked. It seemed she wanted to recoup at least a sliver of her composure by joining the conversation. "Wiping up flesh and blood, scattering around cotton, and deodorizing the space to completely eliminate any hint of gore... They would've had no more than a few seconds to set up the scene."

"Oh, no, it doesn't work like that..." Yuki shook her head. "Sorry, I didn't explain it properly. The Preservation Treatment doesn't happen after death; it's been active ever since we started."

Momono and Beniya both made confused faces.

Yuki continued, "I'm not too familiar with the details...but take that white fluff, for example. All of that was Aoi's circulatory fluid. Our blood's been treated to solidify immediately upon coming in contact with air, so even if we get injured, any bleeding will stop on its own. That's why there isn't any smell, either. None of us should give off any body odor. Oh, and treated corpses won't

start rotting even when left out in the open. I think it's because they injected some preservative chemicals into us."

The color drained from both the girls' faces. Yuki felt guilty for unsettling them even further, but it appeared they understood everything she had wanted to explain.

"It's not an urban legend... Like the one that says people who consume lots of preservatives decompose slower when dead..." Beniya muttered. "Does that mean...our bodies have been *tampered with*?"

"Yeah, when we were being brought here. That's why you shouldn't donate blood or anything. They'll give you a rundown once the game's over."

Finally, Beniya went completely silent. Yuki worried she would faint from being overwhelmed. Although that didn't happen, she did hang her head limply. Momono seemed comparatively less shocked, and she started rubbing Beniya's back. Their positions had reversed.

Yuki turned to Kinko. She was still in the same posture—face down and crying—and she kept murmuring "I'm sorry" at irregular intervals. The results of the Preservation Treatment were on full display when it came to her right wrist. It was covered with white fluff, and the bleeding had stopped.

"You should stop saying that," Yuki warned. "It's fine to think it, but it's better not to voice it out loud. It'll only make you weaker."

Kinko showed no reaction.

Yuki could tell what she was feeling. Kinko had a warped sense of responsibility that had compelled her to take on her father's debt, which suggested she was heavily swayed by emotions. Of all the game's players, she had taken the greatest physical and mental toll thus far. Yuki deserved some of the blame for falling short as a leader, and she felt quite sorry for the girl, but she consciously repressed those feelings. Even if Yuki's actions had led to undesirable outcomes, she'd adopted an attitude of not taking responsibility in games. She had decided that a long, long time ago. That was why she had said nothing when Kokuto died and why she was prepared to refuse to apologize to Kinko even if the latter demanded an apology. That was her rule—her ironclad dogma to survive even a minute or a second longer in this world.

Yuki hoped Kinko would adopt the same mindset. Alas, she couldn't think of any useful words that would inspire a change of heart.

Yuki approached the door whose panel now read `OPEN` and slid it open. She stood there, waiting for the other maids to voluntarily express their willingness to proceed.

(13/23)

A single path stretched out beyond the door.

The maids walked in complete silence. Nobody said a single word. It was the same as when they had walked down the previous hallway, but the context differed drastically. The silence from earlier had, in a sense, stemmed from *resolve*. They'd been quiet because they were fired up. But now their quiet was an unmistakable sign that they were in the grips of despair. Filled with anguish over the harrowing situation and regret for joining the game, they plodded along in low spirits out of a sense of resignation that they had no choice but to continue after coming this far. Inertia carried them forward.

Additionally, the four of them no longer stuck together in their earlier formation. The reason behind that was unclear. Perhaps it was because the maid who was supposed to cling to Yuki's right arm was gone, or maybe the events of the previous room had caused cracks to form in their relationship. Yuki had felt tense at being hugged by a group of pretty girls, but now that they were off her, she couldn't shake the indescribable feeling of loneliness that had come over her.

Although their cluster had disbanded, Yuki remained in front as the lone experienced player. Kinko trudged behind her to the left, wearing a gloomy expression, as if having inherited Aoi's spirit. To the right, Momono and Beniya were walking hand in hand with their bodies against each other, all but confirming any suspicions that they had developed a close rapport.

"Well, we're past the worst of it," Yuki said, hoping to dispel the oppressive mood hanging in the air. "We started with six players. It's safe to assume we won't face any trials more brutal than that one. Considering our current numbers, all that's left is to cross the finish line, I think."

That was no lie. These death games were designed to have an average survival rate of roughly 70 percent. With two out of six players dead, they had already crossed that threshold, so it was unlikely that any more serious obstacles stood in their way. If there were any more trials they had to overcome, there would be at most one, and it likely wouldn't claim any victims. However, none of the maids' expressions showed any indication of relief.

"Oh, by the way, you don't have to worry about your hand," Yuki said, glancing at Kinko's truncated right arm. "The Preservation Treatment makes it simple to reattach. They'll fix you right up after the game."

Surprisingly enough, these death games were backed by a full range of medical support. Although treatments were provided by back-alley doctors, the doctors would do everything in their power to treat injuries sustained in a game. And thanks to the Preservation Treatment, the girls' capacity to heal was far greater than normal. For one, severed limbs could be reattached without issue. Hair, skin, teeth, and nails could also be repaired to some extent. Sometimes, replacement organs would even be provided, albeit of unknown origin. These treatment services would perhaps be better described as "restorations." As long as their hearts were still pumping, players would, for the most part, end up as good as new.

Kinko would recover her right hand, yet the gloom on her face remained. Why was that? Yuki was at a loss. Although this was her twenty-eighth game, she hadn't learned how to cheer up a dispirited beginner. She had never before led a group of first-time players.

In her entire career as a player, Yuki had experienced few games more abnormal than this one. After reflecting on this, she realized the design of the game was unusual; the players were too greatly imbalanced in skill level. The setup basically ensured that Yuki would dominate. That wasn't interesting in the slightest. It would be a different story had a "wolf" been disguising themselves as a beginner, but based on everything she had witnessed—to the extent that she trusted her powers of observation—there was no one like that among the participants.

The process of matching players to games was not a perfect science. Indeed, Momono had been scouted to round out the player numbers, so it was possible

the game was simply unbalanced due to chance. Still, Yuki couldn't help but wonder about the composition of the game. If the game had been intentionally set up this way—if the game had been designed under the presumption that Yuki would take command and attempt to escape with all players working together...

“.....”

As she focused on that train of thought, no words escaped her mouth.

The four girls proceeded down the straight hallway. There were plenty of furnishings befitting of a mansion—framed paintings, taxidermy displays, a five-tiered chest of drawers, and more—but with no way of knowing if any traps lay nearby, the group paid them no heed.

They remained completely silent until they reached the end of the hallway.

(14/23)

The hallway led to a small room, which contained two doors standing side by side. The one on the left was open, and inside was a space approximately the size of a shower stall that was slightly too small to be considered a room. It was most likely—

“An elevator,” Yuki said after approaching the open door. “If we take this at face value, then I suppose they’re telling us to get in...”

Yuki examined the gap between the door and the elevator car. The simplest trap idea that came to mind was a guillotine blade flying through the gap and slicing the first person who dared to enter in half. She took off her headband and slowly passed it through the door.

Nothing happened.

It was possible the trap was designed to not activate for nonliving objects, so she reached into the elevator with her left arm.

Nothing happened.

She then stepped forward, brushing her long skirt against the floor as she entered the elevator.

Nothing happened.

Yuki inspected the interior of the elevator, but not even a single razor blade shot out. This was expected, as she had surmised that they had already gotten past the worst of the game, but she still let out a sigh of relief.

She gestured to the three girls waiting outside, indicating that the coast was clear. One by one, they shuffled into the elevator. Nothing happened when Kinko entered, nor when Beniya came in after, but as soon as Momono stepped inside, a buzzer went off.

“Ngh...”

A barely audible grunt escaped from one of the girls’ lips. The meaning of the buzzer was immediately apparent. The four girls turned to look at the LCD monitor attached to the top of one of the elevator wall panels.

The screen indicated a weight limit of 330 pounds.

“.....”

It was difficult for Yuki to tell from their expressions alone how deeply the others understood the significance of that figure.

“...Ah...” Yuki sighed, beating the others to the punch. “For now, let’s all get out. *At the same time.*”

Everyone else nodded.

The four of them lined up horizontally and stepped out of the elevator in unison. Then they freely scattered around the small room.

“A limit of 330 pounds...” Beniya was the first to broach the subject. “That’s exactly enough for three of us.”

“Seems so,” Yuki responded. Despite the calmness of her remark, she was irritated at the situation. Regardless of whether the organizers had set the limit supposing an average weight of 110 pounds per person or they had simply chosen a semiround number, Yuki felt truly annoyed. “And it was displayed on a digital screen... I think the limit was adjusted to match the number of people in our group right now. If all six of us had made it here, it could’ve easily been 550 pounds instead.”

“Then we should ride it two at a time...right?” Momono suggested. She was clearly seeking agreement from the others. “If only three people can get on, there shouldn’t be a problem riding in groups of two, right?”

“Unfortunately,” Beniya replied, “the elevator will only work once.”

“How do you know that?”

“It’s written right there. ‘ONE TIME ONLY.’”

Beniya pointed to the wall next to the elevator. Those three simple words were written there in plain English. The implication was obvious—the elevator would operate once and only once.

“This elevator is only meant for three people to use.”

“...But then that means—” Momono cut herself off.

Her gaze had fallen not on the elevator but on the other door, which had slipped Yuki’s mind.

It was made of glass that was not frosted or wired, rendering the room inside visible. The room had tiered seating like that of a sauna—in fact, it probably *was* a sauna. The interior was lit with warm-colored lights, an unusual sight inside the monochrome mansion.

But more than the sauna itself, what caught Yuki’s eye were the walls, which were covered with a wide variety of *weapons* of all shapes and sizes. The room was a real-life manifestation of a weapons shop from a fantasy story. It was stocked with swords, blunt objects, projectiles, and spears. Perhaps for the best, there were no explosives or firearms. Toward one side was a hammer with 2 TONS engraved on it, lending the room a comical aura that offered a hint of reassurance that the room was a thing of fiction.

However, it was all real.

Four maids. An elevator that could only hold three people. Numerous weapons encouraging a brawl. Those elements implied the rules of the game were—

“—No, that’s not it.” Yuki shook her head. “We can’t jump to conclusions. It’s true the elevator’s weight limit corresponds to the load of three people, but

that doesn't mean we have to leave one of us behind. We just have to get rid of *the weight of one person.*"

".....?" Beniya looked puzzled. "What do you mean?"

"Well..." Yuki was understandably hesitant to lay it out in plain terms. She pointed at the sauna room with her thumb. "We have to slowly but surely *discard the weight of one person among the four of us.*"

(15/23)

A noticeable chill ran through the room.

"I only remember it vaguely...but I think each arm makes up less than five percent of your body weight." Yuki had learned that in a previous game. She continued searching her memory. "Each leg is slightly less than twenty percent. Water makes up around sixty percent of our body weight, and we can *sweat out* around ten percent of that, which makes six percent. Cutting off our hands and feet would add up to about five percent, so not as much... Surprisingly, hair isn't very heavy, so that would only chop off around a quarter of a pound. We can't forget about these maid outfits, either. They weigh at least several pounds, so we should trim them down as much as we're comfortable."

"You're kidding," Momono said. Her face was paler now than it had been at any previous point in the game. "Um... This is a joke, right? Please say it's a joke!"

"Leave the cutting to me," Yuki replied. "I'm no stranger to this. I promise to lop off any body part in a single swing."

"That doesn't make it any better!" Momono immediately crumpled to the floor.

"There's nothing to worry about, thanks to the Preservation Treatment," Yuki said, facing Momono's hair whorl. "As long as we don't do a horrible job severing what we need to, everything will be reattached."

"They better be..." Beniya said. She was leaning against the wall. "...Is there no way to resolve this less violently? Maybe we can find an alternative path forward, as you mentioned in the previous room."

“We’ll look around, of course, but you should prepare yourself for the possibility that we won’t find anything.”

“Dividing 110 pounds across the four of us means just over 25 pounds per person, right?” Momono persisted in her protest. “Don’t boxers cut up to 40 or so pounds before a fight? Can’t we try what they do...?”

“Well, they do that over the course of a month... We don’t have the time.”

That dealt the finishing blow to Momono, whose voice vanished from the air.

This could be bad, Yuki thought.

They would only have to temporarily leave behind parts of their bodies. Thanks to the Preservation Treatment, anything they cut off would be reattached after the game ended, and they didn’t have to be afraid of bleeding to death. Compared to the hexagonal room and the search for the key ring, this could be considered a far safer minigame.

However, Yuki hadn’t expected the others to react so strongly. This difference in opinion was the result of the others’ experience, or lack thereof, in death games. They weren’t used to treating their own body like a hand in a card game or as a pawn they could discard if the need arose. They had also only learned of the Preservation Treatment a short while ago and were likely not yet fully convinced of its implications.

In other words, they were resistant to the idea of chopping up their bodies.

That reluctance perhaps far eclipsed their resistance to murder. It wouldn’t be surprising if someone was entertaining the idea of killing one person to allow the three others to escape. Yuki clenched a fist inside the pocket of her maid outfit. If that came to pass, and one of them suddenly went on the attack, she would be forced to step in. She kept Momono, Beniya, and Kinko equally in her sights, so as to not miss the moment when one of them moved their legs. Yuki steeled herself, recognizing that the situation presented a critical juncture. She devoted her full attention to monitoring the other three—

“I...”

However...

...the next words that filled the air undermined Yuki's entire line of thought.

"I'll stay behind. You three, please go on ahead."

(16/23)

Those words caught Momono, Beniya, and even the veteran Yuki off guard. The three of them froze in place, and time inside the small room came to a momentary standstill.

Taking advantage of the pause, Kinko took off, her blond pigtails gently twirling in the air behind her.

".....! Wait!" shouted Yuki, the first to come to her senses.

However, it was too little, too late. After all, the small room was only several feet wide. Yuki had no chance of stopping Kinko from entering the sauna and closing the door behind her. A second later, Yuki grabbed the handle of the glass door but failed to make it in time, as the door refused to budge no matter how hard she tried to open it. Either it was locked or *something* was keeping it shut as a doorstop. Regardless, the outcome was the same.

Yuki started banging on the glass, but her efforts were in vain. It seemed sound failed to reach the other side, so there was no point even trying to call out. The only reaction Kinko showed was a glance, her eyes filled with overwhelming exhaustion. Moments later, she fell onto her bottom and grabbed her knees, though it was impossible to tell if she had collapsed or was simply sitting down.

She had barricaded herself inside.

"Um... Wh-what's going on?" Momono asked, flustered. "What just happened?"

"...Exactly what it looks like. Kinko's given up on escaping."

Yuki clutched her head in front of the door, but behind her appearance of distress, her heart rapidly grew cold. That could only mean one thing—the situation had taken a dire turn.

"Self-sacrifice. Heroism. That's one of the reasons beginners die."

It was a form of panic.

Mystery stories often featured a trope where a coward loses trust in everyone but themselves and holes up in a bedroom, only to be found in a grisly state the following morning. But in this case, it was the opposite. Excessive bravery. Abandoning one's life after getting caught in an extreme situation. Yuki had seen similar scenes play out countless times in the past. Right as a game was entering its final stages, players who had been mentally battered by the constant surprises on offer abandoned themselves to the mercy of the game and ended up throwing away their lives. The most they got out of it was the satisfaction of being able to die with a feeling of responsibility or guilt.

"I'm at fault for Aoi's death.

"I must atone with my life."

Yuki continued banging hard on the glass, convinced it would shatter. After all, the door was not a partition necessary for the game, so there was no reason for it to be indestructible. However, her throbbing fist made it clear that it was impossible to break through without tools. She needed something to break the glass. The weapons in the sauna room before her glimmered like holy swords, but they were useless as long as she couldn't get her hands on them. Yuki turned on her heel and motioned to exit the room.

The next moment, she felt a tug on her arm. Yuki turned around to find Momono standing there.

"Um... So..." The girl had a look of protest.

Beniya, who was standing a little farther into the room, had the same gaze.

Yuki subconsciously curled her lips into a smile.

Momono's and Beniya's eyes were doing the talking.

What's the problem? If she's willing to die, we should let her.

The three of us should escape.

"What?" Yuki intentionally asked.

Both Momono and Beniya were at a loss for words. They were waiting for Yuki to read the room. A wave of exhilaration washed over Yuki. The fact that

these two adorable maids were thinking something so atrocious seemed awfully impure. She didn't fault them for being despicable or cold-blooded, but instead simply found them endearing. Although it wasn't something she particularly wanted to think about—perhaps Yuki was only motivated to continue the game to chase this sensation of ecstasy.

Out of the corner of her eye, she spotted something moving.

Yuki turned her head. Kinko was taking a knife off the wall. There was little chance she was going to hand it over, which meant she was planning on using it herself. And there was only one thing nearby she could possibly use it on—her own body. That was the only plausible explanation: She was going to stab herself.

With the intention of taking her own life.

If that happened, the three of them would have no choice but to leave her behind. This was what Kinko had decided on doing after seeing Yuki and the other maids dragging their feet. Yuki's eyes widened in surprise. Fortunately, the knife in Kinko's quivering left hand was pointed at her right elbow. *How cute*, Yuki thought. A wound there wouldn't be fatal, with or without the Preservation Treatment.

But with Kinko taking action, time was running out. Yuki turned back to Momono.

"Momono, think about it." Yuki went for the clincher. "If Kinko dies here—"

It only took a few more words to convince them.

Upon hearing Yuki's explanation, Momono and even Beniya altered their expressions. Exactly—in their situation, there was a crystal clear reason why they couldn't let Kinko kill herself, one that had nothing to do with morality or their sanity. If Kinko died here, Yuki and the others would be backed into a corner. Although it was unlikely they would all lose their lives, it was possible they would sustain injuries that would never heal, not even with the Preservation Treatment. Yuki informed the other two of the reason behind that.

Momono loosened her grip.

"Can I go?" Yuki asked, staring straight into her eyes.

With little alternative, Momono nodded in resignation.

(17/23)

The hallway that led to the small room was a non-branching path.

As far as Yuki could remember, the hallway did not contain a single weapon. Still, she had a plan. A tool that could break a glass door? There were plenty of items in the mansion that would fit the bill.

Halfway down the path, she spotted a chest of drawers. It was a charming piece of furniture that stood at half Yuki's height, and its drawers alternated in color between white and black. She had occasionally seen similar items placed in hallways in video games and movies, but why did *this* hallway have any need for storage space? What could be lying inside? She would soon come to learn the answer. Steeling her nerves to the greatest extent possible, Yuki resolutely pulled open the top drawer, fully determined to avoid sustaining any mortal wounds.

Nothing happened.

Yuki alternated hands as she continued her assault on the chest of drawers. She opened the second drawer. And the third. And the fourth. The pull of the fifth drawer felt ever so slightly different. Immediately, she dove sideways and tumbled onto the hallway floor. A whiz echoed through the air, followed by the sound of something tearing through wood. Yuki steadied herself and looked up. As she had expected, a *metal rod* had lodged itself inside the chest of drawers, the same kind that had ended Kokuto's life some time ago.

It was one of the mansion's traps.

The rod was sharp and rather thick, like an ice pick or a screwdriver. Since it lacked a handle, it took some effort for Yuki to pull it out of the wood. She doubled back—or rather, tripled back down the path from which she came and returned to the small room.

"Yuki!" Momono called out.

"How's Kinko?" Yuki asked.

“Well, um, you see...”

“She’s gone completely limp.” Beniya, who was standing in front of the glass door, finished the sentence. On the other side, Kinko was lying face up on the floor. “I believe it’s mental fatigue, rather than a physical injury. It didn’t seem like she cut herself anywhere important.”

“Got it.”

Yuki leaped toward the glass door. She drove the newly obtained metal rod into the edge of the glass. A crack appeared. Yuki grinned. This was one of the primary methods of breaking glass, and the most optimal when using a small tool. After removing several shards from the door and opening a hole large enough to fit her arm through, she stuck her hand in and groped around for the handle. She felt a recess on the other side of the door. Yuki jiggled around with it, disengaged the lock, and pulled back her hand, causing a single piece of glass to go flying as her sleeve got caught.

The door opened.

The first thought that came to Yuki’s mind was that the interior was hot. It was no doubt a sauna. It made sense to have such a room, since they *had to shed body weight*. The heat felt even more oppressive than it would have normally due to her heavy maid outfit. Relieved that the Preservation Treatment meant she wouldn’t end up smelling sweaty, Yuki rushed over to Kinko and violently shook the collapsed girl’s shoulders.

“Kinko!”

The girl’s eyes fluttered open. No light resided in them. Not even someone who had locked themselves in a sauna for half a day would end up looking like that. In truth, Yuki had rarely ever witnessed such a face, since the vast majority of players died moments after falling into despair. Kinko’s expression was that of someone whose soul had drifted away from their corporeal body, lacking any will to keep on living.

Yuki carried the girl’s dainty body on her shoulder. She was light. So light, it was as though not a single organ was inside her body. So light that Yuki didn’t feel the need to carry the girl on her back. As if transporting a giant stuffed animal won from a crane game, Yuki held on to Kinko tightly and motioned to

leave the sauna.

“Why?” Kinko asked. “Why did you come in, Yuki?”

“Well, you wouldn’t come out,” Yuki answered nonchalantly.

“Didn’t I say to go on ahead?”

“And I said we’d try to clear this game with as many of us as possible.”

“...Just forget about me!” Her voice sounded strained. “I don’t care if I die! Please leave me behind!”

In times like these...

The most socially desirable thing to do would be to lecture the girl by calling her a fool, slapping her on the cheek, and eloquently championing how wonderful it was to live. But she couldn’t find it in herself to do so. After all, nobody valued life as little as Yuki did. She was a regular player of death games, and she wasn’t so shameless as to be able to set that fact aside and chastise someone. Besides, even outside of the games, Yuki also balked at the idea of using violence for the sake of intimidation. It was an impossible ask for her.

In light of that, would claiming that she didn’t need a reason to save the weak be the next best thing to do? That was also impossible, for it would be a lie. Yuki didn’t pride herself on having a pure soul. Her altruism was geared solely toward giving herself an advantage in the games. Betrayal. Insincerity. Lies. Subterfuge. It was her belief that relying on those sorts of tactics would cause one’s heart to grow vile and empty before eventually leading to self-destruction. At the end of the day, Yuki was a player to the bone—a resident of the world bordering between life and death. She couldn’t say anything that sentimental.

“I can’t let that happen.”

That was why, in the end, there was only one thing Yuki could say.

“Because, even without you, the three of us left would still be far over the weight limit.”

“...Huh?”

“Well, you know. Momono and Beniya are both *on the heavy side*, so we’d

still have to get rid of weight. *Without access to the sauna room, we'd be in big trouble.*"

(18/23)

The heights and builds of the four maids were as follows.

Kinko was the least blessed on both scales. Her back was around the length of a small stool. Her neck was so thin that it looked as if it would snap if you applied any amount of force to it. Her delicate body was apparent even beneath her maid outfit. After carrying her, Yuki got a better sense of her build. Numbers-wise, Kinko probably didn't even weigh sixty-five pounds, comparable to an elementary school student pre-growth spurt.

On the opposite side of the spectrum were Momono and Beniya. One had the ultimate voluptuous body. The other had a princely appearance with a height that seemed to pierce the heavens. But upon further reflection, Beniya wasn't the problem, as she was tall and had a toned physique. The issue was Momono. What was the deal with her—with those thighs? At the start of the game, Yuki had idly thought about wanting to touch them, but now just looking at them irritated her. Momono had such an outrageous body that asking for her weight would spark a sense of guilt.

Still, Yuki was in no place to find fault with the others. Although she was smaller than Momono and Beniya, her weight still certainly exceeded 110 pounds.

As such, everyone besides Kinko exceeded the average threshold.

Yuki estimated there were 45 pounds of excess weight between the three of them. Not 35, not 55, but 45. She theorized that, because the game used 330 pounds as the weight of three girls, the average weight of the starting six players must have been calibrated to match that of girls of similar ages—110 pounds. Neither of the girls who had passed away—Aoi and Kokuto—had extreme builds, so the weights of Yuki, Momono, and Beniya likely balanced out the lightness of Kinko. That was how Yuki came up with the number 45.

Forty-five pounds. Even if they had decided to leave Kinko behind, they would

have to shed that much weight. An average of 15 pounds per person. Some people believed it was possible to naturally lose that amount of weight through fasting alone, but that was a misconception. Fasting resulted in surprisingly little weight loss. The first day of fasting usually saw a sharp decrease in weight due to the loss of water weight, but the trend line immediately leveled out. One's basal metabolic rate only resulted in the loss of around a third of a pound per day. Yuki and the others would likely die of starvation before shedding 15 pounds, but even if they managed to succeed, there was still more of the game to go through. It would be a huge blunder to think they could clear the game when they were half dead. It was obvious they would have to resort to a more direct method.

Cutting off body parts.

What they needed were the formidable weapons inside the sauna room.

Yuki and Kinko returned to the small chamber. Yuki loosened her hold, and Kinko stepped onto the floor. Neither Momono nor Beniya rejoiced at her safe return, and they didn't greet or approach her, either. Instead, an off-putting silence fell as the four of them stood at an awkward distance from one another.

Yuki cast a sideways glance at Kinko. The girl was red in the face, likely because she had run off with the intent of self-sacrifice yet had now learned her actions had in fact driven her team into a greater predicament—not to mention she had failed to actually sacrifice herself. Her head was drooped low, her hands fidgeted idly, and her lips flapped about yet produced no words. Overall, she looked rather embarrassed. Just imagining Kinko's mental state caused Yuki's heart to pound, but since she couldn't stare at the girl forever, she gently patted her small back.

"For the record, Kinko, I think you can afford to be more dishonest."

Yuki realized that, at some point, she had started feeling less guarded around Kinko. Since when? From the very beginning? Yuki didn't recall ever feeling reserved around her, despite the fact that she had kept the other four maids at arm's length. Maybe she had instinctively looked down on Kinko because she was the shortest of the participants.

With nothing else to do, Yuki entered the sauna room by herself. She

gathered a number of blades that seemed capable of cutting human flesh, returned to the small room, and dropped them on the floor with a clang.

The sound naturally drew the others' attention.

"Dividing one hundred and ten equally among us means twenty-seven and a half pounds per person." Yuki adopted as casual a tone as she could muster, since she thought that would be the most effective. "But our weights are all different, so we should think about it in terms of percentages instead of pounds. We need to leave behind the weight of one person between the four of us, so we'll each have to shed a fourth of our body weight."

Gloom once again clouded the others' faces. The reality the earlier commotion had distracted them from returned to center stage.

"I'll leave the choice of body parts up to you, but I don't recommend the torso. It's hard to cut and harder to reattach. I suggest choosing between your arms and legs."

"Based on the percentages you mentioned," Beniya commented, "it seems the only real option is to cut off a leg."

Each arm made up around 5 percent of one's body weight, while each leg was about 20 percent. To reach 25 percent, there was only one sensible option.

"Yep." Yuki nodded. "That's why I propose we each cut off one leg, for twenty percent of our weight. Then we use the sauna to sweat out an additional five percent, which makes twenty-five percent. I think that's the most realistic plan that minimizes our losses."

"It'll have to be cut off pretty close to the hip, right?" Beniya looked down at her own legs. Yuki couldn't tell if they were slender or plump, as they were covered by the long maid outfit. "Will those blades really do the trick?"

"...I have experience with this. Though it'll be my first time amputating a live person, I'll do my best to ensure the process is...as quick and painless as possible."

Yuki glanced at Momono.

"Why are you looking at me?" Momono asked, hiding her thighs with her

hands. “And, um, everything will really get reattached, right?”

“Yep. That’s a guarantee.”

“I find it quite hard to imagine *that* will fully heal.” Beniya shot a glance at Momono.

“...Stop it! Don’t look at me!”

“There’s no problem,” Yuki said. “Just think about it like gaining the body of a zombie or a stuffed animal. As long as all parts remain intact, no injury is too severe to be healed. My arms and legs are proof of that.”

After saying that, Yuki stretched out her arms. This was her twenty-eighth game, so her limbs had been severed countless times before, and she had often suffered worse injuries than that. Yet she was still able to remain active as a player. That was the ultimate proof of the power of the Preservation Treatment.

“Is that really true?” Beniya asked, still showing some skepticism. “Can you prove that to us right now?”

“Huh...? How would I do that?”

“Take your clothes off.” Her tone was gravely serious. “Show us visible proof those arms and legs are really yours.”

(19/23)

Some of the details of the subsequent events will be omitted.

The scenes that followed were difficult to watch. This had nothing to do with Yuki stripping down and everything to do with the elements of spatter horror. While Yuki had promised to carry out everything as painlessly as possible, dismemberment was dismemberment. And what would dismemberment be without screams of agony? Although the maids were players in a death game, they still had a claim to dignity. And so Yuki completely wiped from memory everything they had screamed during the procedure, the way they thrashed around, and their reactions to losing a leg, leaving only the objective facts of the situation.

As the first order of business, the group searched for an alternative path. Even with the reassurance of the Preservation Treatment, they wanted to avoid *sustaining unnecessary losses* at all costs. Were they mistaken about something? Had they misread the weight limit? Could there be a hidden passageway somewhere? Was there anything they could do to disguise their weights? Were there simpler and more effective ways of getting rid of the extra weight? At any rate, with plenty of things to consider, they conducted a thorough search as if completely removed from reality, but to no avail. There was truly no way forward besides dismemberment. Although they came up empty-handed, their efforts were not entirely in vain, for the search wound up strengthening their resolve.

The dismembering occurred in the order of Yuki, Kinko, then Beniya, with Momono last. Yuki needed to go first to prevent a scenario where the three noninjured participants would band together to kill the already-maimed person to satisfy the weight limit of 330 pounds and escape. With Yuki starting off, there was no worry of that possibility. Maybe it was her pride speaking, but even with one leg down, she had no intention of losing to a group of three beginners.

The fact that it was physically impossible for Yuki to chop off her own leg presented the biggest issue. In line with her character, Kinko offered to do the deed out of a sense of guilt, but she fundamentally lacked the strength to do so. Yuki indicated her appreciation of the thought and instead selected Momono. At first glance, the princely Beniya seemed calmer and more capable of handling the task, but Yuki deduced she was the kind of person to get queasy at the first hint of gore, as evidenced by her reaction to Aoi's death. That left Momono, the one among them who seemed most ill-suited to wield a blade, and, well, she did the best she could with the duty thrust upon her. That took care of Yuki.

Kinko's turn ended without much fanfare. Her legs were so thin that it seemed like someone could rip them off with their bare hands. Still, Yuki gripped the blade and aimed for the girl's groin while Momono and Beniya pinned down Kinko's arms and legs to the floor. Yuki was able to fully overcome her hesitation to perform the procedure. In fact, she felt an almost guilty

pleasure at the sight of two maids physically restraining Kinko. Similarly, she chopped off Beniya's leg without any difficulty. The problem was *her*.

Yuki placed her hand on Momono's thigh. She'd never imagined that this was how her wish would come to fruition. She felt greatly troubled, but at the same time, the thought that the deed had to be done lit a fire in her. Perhaps this was how art restorers felt about their jobs. She did the amputation beautifully, without leaving a single scratch.

Once that was over with, the group fashioned some of the many rod-shaped weapons in the sauna room into makeshift crutches. After sweating as much as possible to reduce the water content in their bodies, they had no qualms about cutting up their maid outfits as much as they could, even knowing they were being recorded. Despite all this, they still exceeded the weight limit, so each of the girls cut their hair short, and Yuki ended up carrying Kinko on her back to get rid of the weight of a crutch. With that, the group managed to fall under the 330-pound weight limit.

The elevator began to move.

Upon processing this, they all collapsed to the floor. Since they each only had one leg, it would likely be a challenge to get back up after sitting down, but still, they sat. Even if some miracle fully restored their legs in that moment, Yuki thought they wouldn't be able to get back on their feet for a while. That was how significant a milestone they had crossed.

She looked around at the other girls. No longer were they maids. They had taken off their aprons, wearing only dresses that had been trimmed short. The girls exchanged glances and smiled. They felt camaraderie at having gone through an initiation. The bitter struggles they shared had given rise to a sense of unity. Though she understood that this may have been an illusion that would soon vanish, Yuki basked in the comfortable feeling. It was wonderful. She even thought that she wouldn't mind if the elevator continued moving for eternity, without ever reaching its destination.

(20/23)

Ideally, the elevator would lead directly to the exit. Considering the number

of obstacles they had overcome, Yuki felt there was a good chance of that being the case, but her theory missed the mark. The doors opened to reveal a large space that resembled an entrance hall. They would have to walk a little bit farther. Yuki pushed herself up off the floor.

“Let’s go,” she said. “These games sometimes raise your hopes only to dash them, so stay on your guard until the end.”

The girls stepped out of the elevator. None of them was accustomed to walking with a crutch, but compared to the struggles they had faced earlier, this was nothing. Soon, they spotted what seemed to be an exit and, despite their slow speed, proceeded straight toward it.

“It’s quite irritating that the exit is right in front of us, yet still feels so far away,” Beniya said, her eyes fixed on the goal. Their pace was leagues slower than it had ever been.

“I guess so,” Yuki said. “Why don’t we talk about something? We’ve spent a lot of time in silence, so there’s plenty we have to chat about.”

“Chat about? Like what?”

“Like the first thing we want to do after escaping.”

“...Won’t that bring bad luck?” Momono asked from beside them. “Isn’t that a death flag, where whoever talks about that will die?”

“Not at all. It can even have the opposite effect. This might sound like a cliché, but people who have a reason to live survive more easily.” Since Yuki brought up the topic, she decided to kick things off. “Personally, I’ve been thinking I really need to throw out my trash soon, or else I’ll be in a pickle.”

“You sure have it easy...”

“No, I’m serious. I have two full bags of plastic trash in my apartment. Since *this* is how I make a living, I’m never sure what day of the week it is, so I always miss out on the chance to throw stuff out. Tomorrow’s Friday, right?”

“Well, we don’t know what day it is today. Who knows how long we were knocked out for.”

“We shouldn’t have skipped any days...so today should be Thursday. Oh, but

our legs need to get reattached, so I won't have time tomorrow..." Yuki frowned.

After staring at Yuki for a while, Momono spoke up next. "...I want to eat ramen. If I make it out alive, I'll chow down until my stomach's about to explode."

"You like ramen?"

"Well, it's not my absolute favorite or anything. It's just, since coming here, I've only eaten sweet stuff."

"Ah..." That was understandable.

"How about you, Beniya?" Momono asked, turning her head.

Beniya replied, "Well, first, I'll have to pay off what I owe."

Right, she had incurred debt—or as she had put it, "liabilities."

"And after that?" Yuki asked.

"I'll study some more."

"Study?"

"The prize money from this game likely *won't be enough for me*. I'll prepare myself so I can survive *next time*."

"Are you that much in debt?" Momono looked shocked. "Actually, hang on—how much is the prize money anyway?"

"It's typically in the ballpark of three million for your first game," Yuki answered.

Of course, that figure was in Japanese yen. It was difficult to judge whether that was a large amount of money. On one hand, it felt like a paltry sum for risking one's life, but on the other hand, it felt like far too much for at most half a day's work that simply involved putting one's life on the line, with no experience, certifications, or academic qualifications required. Regardless, three million was three million.

"It's not easy playing in back-to-back games," continued the veteran Yuki.

"How long should I wait before doing another?"

“It differs by person, but for me, less than a week is too risky. But my body starts getting rusty if I wait too long, so I try to join at least one game per month. So I’d suggest anywhere between a week and a month.”

“Okay...”

“What about you, Kinko?” Yuki asked, directing her voice to her back. “Will the prize money be enough for you?”

“.....” After a brief pause, she answered, “It will.”

“Great. What do you want to do after getting home?”

“I haven’t thought about it. I’ll pay off the debt, and then...” She paused for a few moments to think. “I don’t know. I’m really not sure.”

Her response lacked any sense of self-direction.

During the game, Kinko had decisively acted off her individual judgment, but Yuki sensed no inconsistencies with her current attitude. Most likely, she was someone who could only truly be independent within clearly established frameworks. The kind of person who did well on tests but had a hard time putting things into practice. The kind who got along with coworkers and bosses but had trouble communicating with family. The kind who excelled at death games but lacked life skills.

She, like Yuki, had the qualities of a player.

“There’s nothing you have to fret about,” Yuki said encouragingly. “What happened to Aoi isn’t your fault. The game killed her. Nobody has any right to blame you, legally or morally. You should go back to your old life with your head held high.”

Kinko gave no response.

“This goes back to what I was saying before,” Yuki continued, “but I think you should be more dishonest. Having some meanness inside is what gives depth to people. Isn’t that right, Momono?”

“Why are you asking me?” Momono asked with a troubled expression. “I mean... What choice did I have? It was what the situation called for.”

Her response was remarkably candid. Yuki grinned.

Yuki hadn't said that to offer momentary comfort. It was what she believed deep down. Death games shined light on the vile side of humans. That was evident in how the four of them were contentedly walking down the hallway despite having failed to save Kokuto or Aoi, how they seemed like they would be friends forever despite having desperately fought over the key ring, and how Momono was trying to play down her behavior despite having wanted to abandon Kinko. However, Yuki didn't think those qualities were immoral, insincere, or anything that should be purified. They were what made the girls adorable.

"...Do you really think so?" Kinko muttered.

"Yeah. One hundred percent."

"Then if I survive...I'll do my best to be that way."

That brought the conversation to an end.

The four girls finally reached what appeared to be the exit.

It was a set of large double doors. Yuki took the lead once again, grabbed the handles of both doors, and pushed hard. They didn't budge. Then she tried pulling them, but just like before, they stayed put.

Yuki looked up. Three light bulbs were lined up in a row above the doors.

(21/23)

The position of the bulbs reminded Yuki of the floor display above an elevator. But since they had just taken one, it was unlikely they would run into another so soon. Two of the bulbs were lit, and it was easy to conclude the door would open once the third activated.

And the most notable point of interest was that each of the three bulbs was shaped like a *human silhouette* with an X mark over it.

"....." Someone let out an audible gulp.

It was as if someone had drawn human body diagrams onto red traffic lights. There were three lined up in a row. Two were lit. Anyone would naturally conclude that the door would open once the last one turned on.

But—what exactly did that mean?

“Ha!” Somebody laughed. It was Momono. “Let’s not get the wrong idea. Just because they’re shaped like people doesn’t mean *that*. There should be some way around this.”

She shot a glance at Yuki, who offered no response.

“Maybe these represent the number of obstacles,” Beniya added. “The hexagonal room and that elevator make two, so this means we need to face a third. I wonder if there’s one somewhere in this hall.”

Yuki thought that unlikely. Three obstacles were too many for a game with only six players, and that theory offered no explanation for the X marks on the bulbs. While the games often pulled tricks on players, they would never deliberately cause misunderstanding. The shape of the bulbs had to hold an important meaning.

So what, exactly?

There was only one reasonable explanation.

Yuki didn’t immediately act on her thoughts because a new question sprang to mind. Considering the typical survival rate of 70 percent, the setup of this game was too unforgiving. However, she quickly realized why that was the case. This game was filled with first-time players, and the survival rate of newbies was lower than that of veterans. Thus, when calculating the odds for everyone individually, only allowing three out of six players to survive was well within the expected range. As Yuki had suspected, the strange imbalance of player experience was deliberate. She had, by chance, stumbled upon the explanation that resolved every one of her doubts, and since it neatly explained everything, she felt no need to search for a different interpretation.

The temperature of Yuki’s heart fell below freezing.

She threw Kinko to the ground.

“Ow...”

The girl rolled on the floor and stopped on her back. She directed her gaze at Yuki, eyes filled with equal parts bewilderment and optimism that she had been

dropped by accident. Her stare showed no hint of criticism.

She's a good girl, Yuki thought, before resting the tip of her crutch on that innocent face.

The next moment, she pressed her weight against it.

Snap! A sharp, audible sound reverberated through the air. It came from Kinko's neck. Her neck, her oh so thin and fragile neck, had snapped. As Kinko had already been running on fumes from having shed so much water from her body, she offered no resistance. She didn't even let out a whimper. Since Kinko hadn't sustained any visible injuries, there was no need for the Preservation Treatment to kick in. And so, a few seconds later, under only several pounds of force, Kinko passed away.

The third bulb lit up.

The door swung open. Due to the difference in air pressure, a light, refreshing breeze blew in. The pleasant blue sky and a lush, verdant garden came into view. It was an unwritten rule that the game ended as soon as one exited the building. If she reached the garden, Yuki could freely doze off on the ground. An employee would likely come greet her immediately. Just a few more steps. While hobbling forward on her crutch and remaining leg, Yuki realized she heard no footsteps other than her own and turned around.

Two girls stood frozen in place behind her. Their eyes indicated they had witnessed something unspeakable.

It was as if they had, quite literally, seen a ghost.

Yuki stepped out of the building. She had cleared the game. And now that the game was over, she could finally say it. That was her rule. She looked down, fixing her gaze on Kinko's silent remains.

And then she spoke.

"Sorry."

(22/23)

She hadn't deceived anyone.

Yuki had truly been aiming to clear the game while keeping as many players alive as possible. Although her attempt could by no means be construed as a success, in her heart of hearts, she'd been earnest in her efforts. She'd acted against Kinko because she had no other choice. She knew the game wouldn't end until it claimed its third victim.

Yuki hadn't targeted Kinko because she was easy to kill. Nor was it because Kinko had mentioned wanting to die or because Yuki had harbored a special hatred for her. Yuki had chosen her because she was physically the closest. Whenever it became necessary to kill someone during a game, Yuki always chose the person who was nearest to her at the time. That was what she had decided. She'd established this rule to reduce, by however amount, her hesitation at taking another's life. Rules granted her strength. And in this case, they'd given her the courage to kill with her own hands someone she had saved, someone to whom she had offered words of encouragement.

In the end, Yuki failed to make it in time for garbage day.

After being carried by an employee into an ambulance, she lost consciousness, and the next time she woke, she was in her apartment. She grabbed the cell phone next to her pillow. To her dismay, it was noon on Friday. She set a timer for three minutes, closed her eyes, and clasped her hands together.

This was her post-game ritual—a *prayer*.

Since Yuki was not familiar with any religion, it was in her own style. The term *prayer* may have been an inapt description; she was not offering an apology to the girls who had perished during the game, nor was she expressing sorrow. She simply devoted those three minutes to thinking about them.

Perhaps it was foolish to offer a prayer to someone she had killed herself, but at the very least, Yuki felt no inconsistency with doing so. When the default timer sound went off, she opened her eyes. She switched off the timer, tossed her cell phone on the floor, and removed her clothes to check her body. There were no wounds to be found, nor was there any issue with her mobility. Checking to see if her body had been fully restored was the second ritual she did after coming back from a game.

She rose on two legs and began her third ritual. She went over and opened the double closet doors that came with her apartment.

The inside was a mess.

Hanging on the far right was a cheerleader uniform. That was the outfit used in her twenty-seventh game. Left of that was a kimono, which was used in her twenty-sixth game. And to the left of that hung a school swimsuit, graveclothes, an army uniform, gym clothes, a cheongsam, and more. On the far left was a sailor-style uniform. However, that was not the outfit used in her first game. Yuki would occasionally take out outfits to reflect on her past games, so the order had been shuffled.

Yuki turned around. The maid costume was neatly folded beside her pillow. Once a game ended, the outfit used would be presented to her as a gift. Even though she had cut it into shreds in front of the elevator, it had been restored to its original state. Feeling grateful, she hung it up in the far right of the closet as a memento of her twenty-eighth game.

That was her third important ritual. And the time for the fourth was approaching. Since her mistakes had been on full display for the audience to witness this time, the ritual would likely take longer than usual. Yuki went to lie down on her mattress and wrapped herself in a nearby blanket. Cocooned in that warmth, she began to reflect on her most recent game.

(23/23)

Guide for New Players

The number of participants (i.e., players) varies by game. Some games may have more than one hundred players, while others have five or fewer. Game duration also varies. Some games take over a week to complete, while others end in less than an hour.

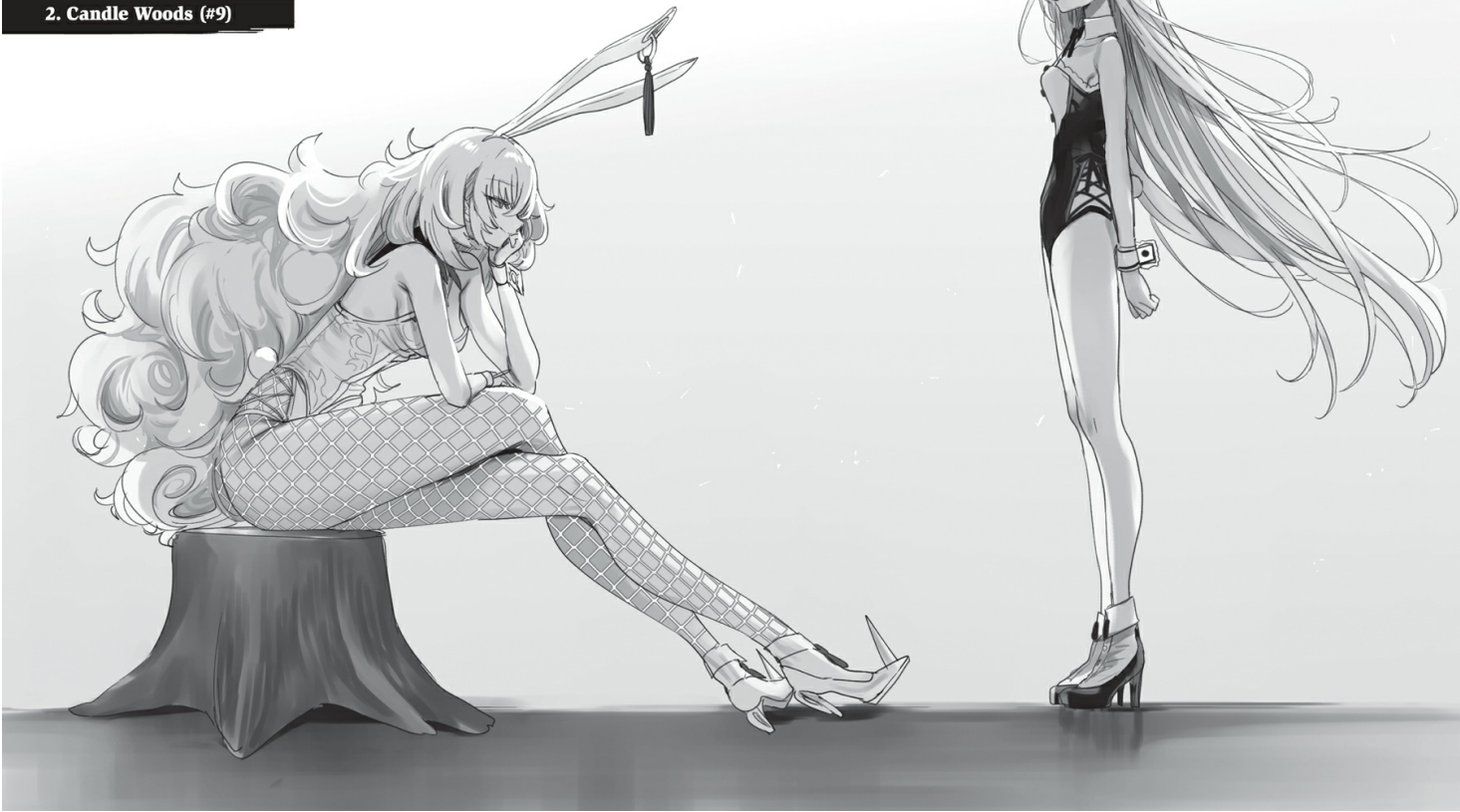
Each game has a different set of rules, but risk of death is always guaranteed.

Players are made to wear a designated outfit. This also varies by game, but it is often some kind of themed costume. Since countless surveillance cameras are set up in game venues, there is likely an audience of spectators.

Players will earn prize money for clearing a game. It is thought that the money comes from the amount wagered by the audience regarding which players will survive, although this has not been confirmed.

Players must not mention the games to ordinary civilians. Additionally, players must not investigate the organization running the games. As long as players observe those two rules, the organizers will offer them full support. Any injuries the survivors sustain—be they blown-off limbs or cut-up torsos—will be treated following the end of a game.

2. Candle Woods (#9)



(0/43)

“Don’t fight against a hardened killer.”

That was a lesson Yuki had been taught once upon a time.

“This industry attracts plenty of bad apples. There may come a time when you have a run-in with a bloodthirsty psychopath...but don’t even think about engaging with them. Do everything in your power to avoid a direct confrontation.”

Those words had come from—to use a conventional term—her *mentor*.

Even in a profession as deadly as Yuki’s, mentor-protégé relationships existed. Just like any veteran in the business, Yuki had been shown the ropes at one point in time.

“Amount of game experience, the specs of your gear—none of that stuff matters. The moment players like you or me enter a battle against a crazed psychopath, our chances of victory fall to zero.”

“...I don’t follow,” Yuki protested. “Even I’ve taken lives with my own two hands before. Not to mention, I’ve survived plenty of games that involved player-on-player combat. That’s more than enough for me to be seen as a coldhearted killer in the eyes of society, yet you’re saying I can’t win against one?”

“You can’t. In fact, your experience puts you at an even greater disadvantage. You’re built for survival, not killing. It’s a completely separate set of skills. Think of it like the difference between a manga artist and an illustrator. A bodybuilder and an athlete. A martial artist and a gangster. The aim of these games is not to kill—it’s to survive. We’ve trained our bodies and minds around that very goal, so our skills won’t be useful on a different playing field. Nobody can hope to compete with someone who specializes in murder. Not even top death-game

pros like us stand a chance against an amateur player who's murdered someone in the heat of the moment. There's no path to victory, so avoid a fight at all costs."

"What if I'm left with no other choice?" Yuki asked. "And it's the only way to clear the game. What should I do then?"

"Accept your fate." The answer was cold and heartless. "You can only pray that you never find yourself in that situation."

(1/43)

Yuki awoke on top of a familiar mattress.

(2/43)

She knew this bed, which meant no new game had begun. Its familiarity served as proof that Yuki lay inside Apartment 107 of a thirty-year-old reinforced-concrete residential building located a fifteen-minute walk away from the nearest train station, a studio apartment that cost her thirty-five thousand yen a month, maintenance fees included. She sat up, feeling disappointed, as though she had been ripped away from a pleasant dream.

The room was pitch-black.

It was nighttime. Yuki reached out and groped around, making contact with the floor several times before successfully grabbing her phone. After pressing a button to breathe life into the screen, she checked the time.

The display read 2:07.

She glanced over to the curtainless window. Little was visible beyond the pane of glass. Apart from streetlights that dotted the distant scenery, everything was shrouded in darkness. Had it been afternoon, the screen would have displayed 14:07, so Yuki had no choice but to accept that the time was just after two o'clock in the morning.

She reflected on her memories of the previous day. After taking a late lunch, she had dozed off in the early evening. A spell of drowsiness had come over her

—quite possibly the result of a blood sugar spike—so lacking the will to do anything, she'd slipped under the covers and closed her eyes. Calculating backward from the current time, she discovered that approximately eight hours had passed since then.

The rhythm of her life had fallen into disarray.

Yuki stood up, clutching her still-heavy head.

She turned on the lights, illuminating the entirety of her horrific studio apartment.

Horrific point number one: There were more full trash bags in her place than there were pieces of furniture. Three bags of burnable garbage and five bags of plastic trash lay on the floor. In comparison, the only objects that could be considered furniture consisted of a set of bedding, a refrigerator, and a small case for valuables. Yuki owned neither table nor pan nor knife nor any other kitchen utensil.

Horrific point number two: A mountain of cardboard boxes lay in a corner of the room. Yuki had not been collecting them; rather, she simply had no idea of how to dispose of them in her municipality.

Horrific point number three: Mold was growing on all four walls. Yuki was clueless as to how to deal with it. Was it a naturally occurring thing that couldn't be removed? Or maybe, if she picked up some life skills, would the mold pay deference to her and disappear?

Horrific point number four: The only clothes lying around were tracksuits. That was no surprise, as Yuki currently owned no other type of clothing, besides a few costumes from previous games. She had thrown everything else away because of the aforementioned mold issue. Since she felt too self-conscious about being seen in a tracksuit, she'd taken to going outside exclusively at night.

Beyond those, there were many other horrific elements to note—strands of hair strewn across the floor, the fact that she couldn't say whether she'd taken a bath, and so forth—but as the list would go on endlessly, nothing else shall be named.

Yuki's stomach began to complain of hunger.

She opened the fridge to look for food but came up empty. That did not mean the fridge contained nothing inside. In fact, it was stocked to the brim—empty milk cartons she had long neglected to dispose of, canned food waste she had feared leaving out at room temperature, a cabbage she had shoved inside at some unknown point in the past, a small bag of condiments that her frugality had prevented her from tossing, cheese slices that had surely come to possess magical powers by now, and plenty more. Yuki closed the door to protect her sanity from the dreadful sight.

She changed out of her tracksuit for sleeping and into the one she used for outings. It was the same kind of tracksuit, and to be perfectly frank, they differed little in terms of cleanliness. Still, Yuki always followed that habit. Despite not even taking a bath every day, she would be dissatisfied if she didn't at least keep to that routine. She slipped her bare feet into a pair of shoes and left her apartment. Thanks to the Preservation Treatment, she had no reason to worry about scratching her feet.

After walking for five minutes, she reached a convenience store. Yet for some reason, her hunger had subsided in that short amount of time. Despite having lost her appetite, she'd already walked all that way, so she grabbed some ice cream that caught her eye while wandering the aisles and made her way to the cash register. She took out her cell phone and paid 220 yen with electronic money.

Afterward, she waited for a few moments with the ice cream resting on the counter.

“.....?”

She glanced at the cashier, who stared back at her in confusion.

“Oh, a bag, too, please.”

Right. Yuki had forgotten that plastic bags had stopped being free some time ago. She wouldn't get one unless she asked. It had been three days since she'd said a word, so her voice was not entirely clear, but it seemed her message got across. After paying another three yen with e-money, she left the convenience store with her plastic bag in hand.

While walking the evening road, Yuki took out her ice cream. It was the kind on a stick. She had no reservations about eating it while walking.

The moment she unwrapped the ice cream, Yuki realized she had no need for a plastic bag in the first place. Not a moment later, she remembered that she needed to restock her nearly depleted supply of trash bags, so she turned around but only took several steps before stopping. She had already unwrapped her ice cream and felt embarrassed at the thought of facing the same store clerk again, so she gave up on the idea.

Yuki ate the ice cream. It was delicious. She had finished it before making it halfway home, slipping the stick back into the wrapping before tossing the wrapper into the plastic bag. She hooked the bag onto her finger and spun it around while walking, but just as she was crossing a bridge, the bag slipped off her finger and flew through the railing into the river, before being carried away by the current to a spot too far out to retrieve. Although the situation was beyond her control, Yuki felt incredibly guilty for littering.

It was then she remembered that burnable garbage would be collected tomorrow. She had to throw out the three bags that had collected in her room, but found that too much of a hassle. *If that plastic bag hadn't been swept away by the river or...* While coming up with excuses, she plodded back to her apartment.

However, she didn't return to her room, for a car was stopped in front of her building.

The window on the driver's side was open, and someone spoke to her from inside. "Apologies for coming at such a late hour."

It was Yuki's *agent*.

After Yuki had completed her third or fourth game, she was assigned an exclusive agent. And due to her nocturnal lifestyle, her agent would typically arrive in the middle of the night.

"You have been invited to participate in Candle Woods. Are your preparations complete?"

It was a strange question. She was wearing a tracksuit and coming back from

the convenience store, so it was obvious she had not made any “preparations.” But this was nothing new. Each and every time this happened, she would accept the invitation in whatever outfit she had on, so her agent must have figured this occasion would be no different.

And Yuki had no intention of betraying that expectation.

“Yes. Please take me there immediately,” she answered.

She broke into a smile.

(3/43)

Game start.

Yuki awoke in the middle of a forest.

(4/43)

She was in the middle of a forest. Yuki opened her eyes to find rays of light shining down on her through the trees. Although she always had trouble waking up at the start of a game, the sunlight quickly roused her. She sat up and scanned her surroundings. The next moment, she realized it was a mistake to think it was an ordinary forest.

She was in a *synthetic* forest.

These were no planted woods. They were *manufactured by human hands*. The artificial landscape around her seemed like the interior of a themed café or an area of an amusement park that sought to replicate the nature of the ancient world.

Yuki found herself inside a small room, similar in size to her 120-square-foot apartment. Fake trees and leaves lined the walls and ground, while only the ceiling was left partially uncovered. Light streamed in from between branches, and the blue sky that stretched out beyond showed no signs of artificiality. The sunshine was likely real.

The room was devoid of any other objects. Yuki was all alone. She stood up, rustling the leaves. After taking a good hard look at her clothes, a sound

escaped her lips.

“Urgh...”

Yuki had been made to wear *a bunny-girl costume*.

Only a small percentage of people had likely ever seen such an outfit in real life. It was the kind of costume rumored to be common in casinos or nightclubs, and it was composed of the following elements: a headband with bunny ears; a top consisting of only sleeves, a collar, and a ribbon; a suit that highlighted the contours of her body to the theoretical maximum extent; and heels that were uncomfortable to walk in. Both of Yuki’s legs were fully exposed.

In a way, wearing it was more embarrassing than being in the nude.

While touching the fluffy white pom-pom attached near her bottom, Yuki let out another groan.

“Ugh...”

The costume gods had forsaken her. Player outfits varied based on the game, and while they were usually guaranteed to be some kind of costume, the exact variety heavily affected the mental state of its wearer. Out of Yuki’s entire history as a player, this took the crown for worst outfit. Even the school swimsuit from three games prior would be a significant upgrade over this. She wondered if the audience was truly happy about the view. No costume more clearly demonstrated the stark difference between fantasy and reality. Since Yuki couldn’t see her full body, she escaped with minimal damage to her sanity, but she knew the surveillance cameras hidden somewhere in the room were recording a horrifying sight. Was that truly okay? Did the terrifying nature of the game make that okay?

Yuki left the room. She stepped into a narrow passageway no more than four inches wider than her shoulders and repeatedly ran into corners every several yards. The space reminded her of one of those giant mazes often found in amusement parks in the countryside. Perhaps that was what this place had used to be. Yuki got the impression that these mazes were remnants of the economic bubble era. To refurbish one into the setting for a death game was an act of unparalleled greed.

Yuki continued traversing the labyrinth. There was a strategy for solving mazes known as the “left-hand rule,” which stated that following the left wall always led to the exit. Even someone as uneducated as Yuki knew this, but in this instance, she elected to forgo that strategy. That was because she saw which direction she needed to go.

To be precise, she *heard* where she needed to go. After she had wandered the maze for a short while, the murmuring of a large group of people mixed in with the sounds of the synthetic forest reached her ears. The noise was reminiscent of a morning classroom before the school bell rang, or a theater before the start of a movie. Judging by the volume of the sound, the game was most likely...

Her suspicions were confirmed the moment the scene came into view.

She stood before a large room—one with a few hundred bunnies inside.

(5/43)

In sharp contrast to the passageway, the room was quite spacious. The sheer size of the space made the word *room* seem far too inadequate a description. Perhaps it would be better described as a *hall* or a *plaza*. Semantics aside, the vast space contained enough rabbits to fill an elementary school.

Of course, none of them were *real* rabbits—they were cosplay rabbits. Like Yuki, they were girls in humiliating outfits. However, Yuki got the impression that everyone was pulling off the look quite well, having transformed into magnificent bunnies. Did the outfit look bad on her and her alone? Or perhaps, like bangs during puberty, did it look perfectly fine on her from an outside perspective? Hoping the latter was true, Yuki stepped into the room.

A number of the bunnies turned to look at her. On account of being a heavy sleeper, Yuki was no stranger to showing up late at the start of a game and drawing the stares of countless players. Much to her relief, not everyone had turned her way, sparing her the awkwardness of being the one and only center of attention. Ignoring the stares, she made her way to a bunny seated atop a fake stump deeper in the room.

“Good morning, Master,” greeted Yuki. “That outfit’s totally unflattering on

you.”

Yuki stood before a white rabbit who had wavy white hair that looked like cotton candy. Her complexion was quite pale, lacking the slightest hint of color. Her slender frame was accentuated by the bunny-girl outfit, and Yuki knew that her body was not frail but rather *toned* as a result of having trimmed down all unnecessary mass.

Her name was Hakushi. She was Yuki’s mentor, the most experienced death-game player alive.

“I can say the same for you,” Hakushi replied in a low voice. Although her voice was on the softer side, it carried quite well. “It’s been what, three months? How’s it going? No strange injuries?”

“Everything’s fine, I guess. It’s been smooth sailing.”

“What number are you on now?”

“Six or seven or eight. Pretty sure I haven’t reached ten yet.”

That had nothing to do with Yuki’s age; it was the number of games she had played in.

“Start keeping track already,” her mentor said, narrowing her eyes. “I’ve told you a million times. Keep a record of the games you play.”

“What does it matter? I haven’t had any need to.”

“You won’t be able to keep this up for long with an attitude like that. You’ll fall short of thirty.”

“Master, how have things been for you?” Yuki asked, commandeering the conversation. “Three months would mean another three or four games. Don’t tell me—have you reached ninety-nine already?”

“Nope.” Hakushi crossed her long legs. “I’m on number ninety-six. I haven’t played since that pool game.”

“...You’re sure taking it easy.”

Yuki tilted her head to one side. “That pool game” was the last time the two of them had seen each other, meaning her mentor had taken a three-month

hiatus.

“Doesn’t hurt to be careful,” Hakushi replied. “I’m four away. I won’t be able to rest in peace if I die because I was insufficiently prepared.”

To say Yuki had no objections would be a lie. Yuki believed keeping up a rhythm was more important than recovering one’s form. This was the only place to hone one’s skills for these death games—outside of the ordinary world. The most important thing was to not leave a large gap between games. She had heard countless stories of players dying in their first game after returning from an extended hiatus, and Hakushi should have been well aware of those tales as well. Despite Yuki’s concern—

“I see.” That was all Yuki said in response. She felt no desire to criticize her mentor’s judgment. “So? Do you think your preparations were worth it?”

“Who knows. No way to find out until this game is over.”

Hakushi turned to a spot in the distance. There, a mascot modeled after a Japanese raccoon dog was lying on the ground. It had been destroyed, and electronic parts were jutting out from its open abdomen.

“What’s that?”

“The game’s explainer. Everyone ganged up on it.”

Some games had an explainer; some games didn’t. This was Yuki’s third time encountering such a character. Occasionally, if a game had complex rules or was difficult to intuitively understand, an explainer would make an appearance at the start. For some unknown reason, the explainer always took the form of a mascot character, instead of an actual human filling the role or the explanation being simply conducted via a disembodied voice or in writing.

“That had to take a lot of courage,” Yuki commented. “You’d think attacking something like that would lead to some kind of punishment.”

“I doubt they’d have destroyed it had it been a turtle or wolf. It’s because the explainer was a raccoon dog. It could’ve been hiding an item.”

“.....? It’s okay to destroy a raccoon dog?”

“You know that old folktale ‘Kachi-Kachi Mountain,’ right? The one where the

rabbit kills the raccoon dog. Goes to show rabbits are superior.”

“Is that what that story’s about?”

“Anyway, they didn’t find anything in particular.” Hakushi seemed unwilling to engage with Yuki’s ignorance.

“...So what’s the game this time?” Yuki asked.

“Hide-and-seek, in a nutshell. Players on the Bunny Team clear the game by surviving for a week. Players on the Stump Team—the seekers—clear the game by killing at least five Bunnies. The explainer didn’t mention it, but I imagine the Stumps have access to some kind of equipment.”

“Aren’t stumps supposed to be dead?”

“But they still kill rabbits. Have you not heard that old saying about rabbits running into stumps?”

“Of course I have.” In truth, that was a bluff, as Yuki had no idea what her mentor was referring to. “The game hasn’t started yet, right? How much longer will we have to wait?”

“Wasn’t in the explanation, but probably another six hours.”

“How do you know?”

“There’s a digital timer over there. A red one like the kind you’d find strapped to a bomb.”

Yuki looked in the direction Hakushi had pointed with her thumb. A group of Bunnies was blocking the view.

“As you can see,” Hakushi continued, “it’ll reach zero in six hours.”

“I can’t see anything with all those people in the way.”

“You have two feet. Use them.”

“Still, this is a huge number of players. Do you know how many are in this game?”

“Three hundred Bunnies and thirty Stumps. This is the biggest one I’ve ever been in.”

Naturally, it was the biggest game Yuki had been in, too. Forget three hundred; she had hardly any experience with player counts exceeding one hundred.

“I’m shocked there are so many,” Yuki said. “I guess most of them are beginners...”

“Guess again. Look, the only fresh faces are in that group over there.”

Hakushi used her chin to point to a corner of the room where a cluster of around thirty players had formed. It was a gathering of novices.

“Most of the others I’ve seen before,” she continued. “I never thought much about it, but these games have more than two hundred regular players. Kind of surprising.”

“Huh. I didn’t know there were so many fools willing to risk their lives just for a few million yen in prize money.”

“Like you’re one to talk.”

Outsiders would likely think players joined these games for earnest, urgent, and compelling reasons—facing trouble with loan sharks, being demanded ransom money, or wanting to support children in an orphanage, for instance. But that was far from the truth. Although one-and-done players sometimes participated for those reasons, anyone making a living as a regular of these games, whose risks far outweighed the benefits, had to be not quite right in the head. The most common reason people became regulars was a desire to savor the thrill of a life-and-death situation. There was also a fairly large contingent of players who had resolved to die by suicide and decided to join for the heck of it. Sometimes, ruthless psychopaths took advantage of the games as ideal opportunities to go on a killing spree with no legal consequences. Regardless of the rationale, it was better to have a clear-cut reason; while it may be difficult to believe, plenty of players simply settled into the games for no particular reason whatsoever.

Yuki was one of them.

It wasn’t that she didn’t have a reason. She had little shot of finding an ordinary job as someone lacking the skills necessary to make it in society. She

felt pride in having something she was at least somewhat good at. She had made a number of connections with players like Hakushi. She felt comfortable as a player. And she also found enjoyment in the games themselves. However, all those justifications were flimsy, even when combined. Yuki had no choice but to acknowledge that she herself was not quite right in the head. Surprisingly, she had the greatest difficulty making sense of her own feelings. More chaos roared in her heart than in her refrigerator back home.

To put it in words, she was filled with self-abandonment. Lacking the will to live, she had been playing in the games with the same mindset as she'd have gulping down a fistful of sleeping pills.

"You're the one I understand least, Master," Yuki said. "Ninety-nine games? It's not like you'll get a trophy or bonus money for getting that far, right?"

"Yeah, it'll just be a new record. But honestly, that's not even a guarantee. To the best of my knowledge, ninety-eight is the longest streak."

"I'm surprised you can cling to that."

"I want a goal." Hakushi stood up. "Eventually, you'll come to realize that yourself, too."

Yuki fell silent.

A record of ninety-nine consecutive games.

That was what her mentor sought to attain. Of all the difficult-to-empathize-with reasons regulars had, Hakushi's was far more puzzling than the rest. First of all, the level of difficulty was unimaginable. Ninety-nine games, each with a survival rate around 70 percent. Yuki hadn't tried calculating the odds, but it had to be an astronomically small number. The danger was also unimaginable, of course. Breaking the streak meant death. How did Hakushi possibly summon the motivation to risk her life? And, as she had just mentioned, the actual record was unconfirmed. Ninety-nine games may not have been enough, or maybe she had already entered uncharted territory upon completing her ninety-fifth game. Yuki figured there was a substantial chance the latter was true, in which case her mentor was the dictionary definition of a fool.

Still, a goal was a goal. Just having one made Hakushi worthier than her

student. Yuki had no intention of mocking Hakushi; in fact, she even felt a sense of inferiority toward her. Much to her embarrassment, she couldn't empathize with the attitude of pushing bravely onward toward a goal.

However ridiculous a goal it may be, she thought, it's far better to have one than to drift through life like I am.

(6/43)

Shortly afterward, Hakushi was designated leader of the Bunny Team. Even with more than two hundred regular players present, none had the level of experience she did.

The Bunnies held their strategy meeting. The game shared similar rules to hide-and-seek, but considering the one-week duration, it was unrealistic to continue running from the Stumps. If each of the thirty Stumps met the victory condition of five kills, half of the three hundred Bunnies would die, placing the survival rate at only around 50 percent.

Naturally, the idea of an offensive strategy was floated around, one that involved stealing and using the weapons the Stumps likely possessed to kill them instead. The more Stumps the Bunnies picked off, the more members of their team could avoid death, thereby raising the survival rate. Theoretically, it would be possible for the Bunny Team to finish the game with no casualties by wiping out the Stump Team. That would be the highest possible score of this game and, for the Bunnies, the ideal form of victory.

The problem with the strategy was that someone would have to challenge the armed Stumps. Yuki wondered who would take on that role, but Hakushi and a majority of the regular players willingly volunteered. Successfully swiping a weapon would greatly boost that Bunny's odds of survival, as a Stump had no reason to intentionally go after an armed Bunny when plenty of others lacked weapons. Leaping into danger would thereby increase one's chance of survival. It was a risky strategy entirely befitting of death-game regulars.

Yuki decided not to adopt those tactics, thinking it was fine to leave that work to the veterans. Instead, she chose to remain in the large room like other cautious players who opted against fighting the Stumps, along with the band of

beginners. With her eyes on the group of combative Bunnies led by Hakushi discussing the best formation for traversing the maze, Yuki pondered something that had nothing to do with the game itself—the costumes.

She knew the Bunny Team had on bunny-girl outfits.

What, then, were the Stumps wearing?

(7/43)

Game start.

Moegi awoke in the middle of a forest.

(8/43)

For Moegi, the worst moment of a game was right at the very start. That was because her head would always be pounding. Her headaches lamented inadequate sleep, like the kind that would crop up after an overly long nap or during the morning after an all-nighter. Moegi blamed the medicine used to put players to sleep. Perhaps it was entirely incompatible with her, or maybe the other players all had pounding headaches, too, but were pushing through the pain. She had always planned on asking the other girls, but every time, the start of the game would quickly deprive her of the opportunity, and this time would likely be no different. Feeling half-resigned, Moegi opened her eyes.

Game start. Moegi awoke in the middle of a forest.

Immediately, she realized it was not a real forest, as she felt her back resting on something perfectly flat that could only be man-made. She got up off the floor, scattering fake leaves with the texture of cellophane into the air.

She found herself inside a classroom-size space designed to mimic a natural environment.

The image of a classroom came to mind because there were a few dozen others around who, like Moegi, all looked to be girls in their teens. And despite the lack of concrete evidence, she knew they had to be middle school or high school students. In this country, anyone of high school age or under emanated

an aura noticeably different from that of college students and working adults.

The others had already woken up, and they turned to look at the sleepyhead.

“...Hello,” Moegi greeted, feeling somewhat embarrassed. “I’m Moegi. Nice to meet you.”

Several girls responded with greetings of their own.

“So...it looks like I’m the last to wake. Have the rules already been explained?”

She hoped to get the conversation going with some small talk, but contrary to her expectations, the other girls displayed great reluctance.

“Um, hello?” Moegi called out to everyone, but again, they showed little reaction.

Finding it strange, she scanned the entire room. There were around thirty players in total—probably exactly thirty, including Moegi. They seemed to be nervously sizing up the room, like the first class of a new school term. That implied they were unaccustomed to being in this situation.

A theory popped into Moegi’s head, and she couldn’t help but voice it out loud.

“...Don’t tell me... Is this everyone’s first time?” After nobody showed any visible response, Moegi rephrased her question. “...Um... Are you all confused as to why you’re here?”

The other girls looked around to gauge one another’s reactions, and soon each of them began bobbing their heads at different timings. Although hesitation colored their movements, no matter how uncoordinated the chorus of heads was, there could only be one possible interpretation: They were expressing nods of affirmation.

They were all inexperienced.

They were all first-time players.

Excluding Moegi, each and every one of them was a beginner.

“.....” She clutched her head. “This is bad...”

“Excuse me...” One of the girls raised her hand.

“What is it?” Moegi asked.

“By ‘first time,’ does that mean you have experience with whatever this is, Moegi? Do you know what’s going on?”

“...I do.” Moegi cast a sideways glance at the girl. “But look, you don’t need me to spell it out for you. I think all of you have some idea already. Let your adolescent imaginations run free, and what comes of that is the answer. I’m sure you’ve at least heard of this before.”

The other girl fell silent.

Moegi added, “This isn’t a prank show or a promotional stunt for a movie, by the way.”

She took another look around.

Besides the fact that the room was modeled after a forest, two things stood out to her as unusual.

The first was a door that led outside. It was made of rugged steel and had an imposing aura that screamed “*You shall not pass.*” As a matter of fact, it was locked. Beside the door was a small LCD panel with red numbers that decreased with each passing second. The display read 06:12:56 when Moegi glanced at it, suggesting that something would happen in another six hours.

The second was a mascot character in one of the corners of the room. It was a tree unlike any other in the room, one that was three feet tall and didn’t try to hide its artificiality. The face of an old man was carved into its trunk. Moegi figured the human-faced tree was the game’s explainer. She gently touched the upper part of the tree, as if rubbing its head.

A laugh rang out, and an electronic noise began to play.

(9/43)

The explanation given by the tree will be slightly condensed.

That was necessary because explainers always rambled on for far too long. They would make provocative statements against players, speak in circles, cackle with grating voices, and be all around unpleasant in a myriad of ways.

Moegi simply couldn't bear listening to them. She mentally filtered out around 80 percent of what the tree had to say and organized the remaining information as follows:

This was a game of hide-and-seek, and Moegi's team would be the seekers. When the countdown by the door reached zero, the game would officially begin. Their team would have to hunt the three hundred Bunnies on the other side of the door. The game would last for one week, during which time each of them needed to kill five Bunnies. Any seekers—the explainer had called them “Stumps”—who did not meet that quota would be killed by a contraption that had been implanted in their bodies.

There were some more detailed rules. The condition for clearing the game would be assessed individually for each Stump. In other words, this was *not* a team match. The Stumps were free to work with one another, but it was essentially every seeker for herself. Only the number of Bunnies killed would count toward the clear condition; any killings between Stumps or between Bunnies would not result in any positive outcome. If multiple Stumps worked together to finish off a Bunny, the kill would only count for the Stump who landed the finishing blow. A seeker could check their individual kill count by touching the explainer. Furthermore, the game would only end after a week had passed, and any Stumps who satisfied their quota early would have to wait until then. They were also advised to be wary of retaliation from the Bunny Team.

Once the explainer finished its spiel, one of the walls flipped around. On the other side hung three different kinds of weapons.

The first was modeled after a morning-glory flower. It had a trumpet-shaped muzzle, as well as a barrel, trigger, hand grip, and hammer. The weapon was in a miniature size that fit well in the hand of a girl. Didn't morning-glory seeds contain hallucinogenic chemicals? If so, then whatever this flower fired out would likely render a person unconscious. Moegi grabbed one and noticed that the weapon felt familiar—it must have been repurposed from a past game. Based on what she remembered, it could be fired eight times, but since its magazine couldn't be reloaded, it was useless once empty of ammo.

The second looked like a bamboo leaf. There was an account of some

historical figure having used a bamboo leaf as a weapon, but that was apparently completely fabricated. Still, the leaves on the wall were magnificently sharp. The *blade* appeared to be over six inches long, and it was as light as a real bamboo leaf. Swinging it around resulted in a satisfying swish through the air, leaving Moegi with the immoral feeling of wanting to test it out in combat.

The third resembled a pine cone. It was small enough to be cradled in one hand, but unlike the other two weapons, it boasted quite a hefty weight. The pine cone had been painted entirely brown, and the pin at its tip was made with a transparent material, perhaps to maintain the illusion. The pine ones would surely be highly flammable, but with nothing inside the room to offer shelter from a blaze, Moegi felt no inclination to test that theory.

These weapons were their forest friends. And they posed great threat, with no hint of mercy.

The wall held ten of each weapon, for thirty in total, enough for everyone on their team to wield one.

Moegi scooped up all ten of the bamboo leaves and began tossing them to different Stumps. Some girls skillfully caught them, while others picked them up after they had embedded themselves into the ground. Regardless, nobody seemed to doubt they were real weapons, as short yelps rang out one after another.

“Want to check if the others are real, too?” Moegi pointed to the morning glories and pine cones.

Nobody answered her. Moegi interpreted the silence to mean there was no need.

“Everything the tree explained is the truth,” she continued. “In six hours, that door will swing open, and the game will begin. Each of us needs to kill five people over the next week.”

Nobody reacted. Moegi ignored the silence and continued.

“There are three hundred Bunnies in total. Since there are thirty of us, we need to kill one hundred and fifty in total if every single one of us is going to

meet the quota. If we handle things well, we can all survive together. Let's join hands and do our best."

"Let's do it"—said not a soul. All that filled the room was the unique, awkward silence that arose when a crowd of people were meeting one another for the first time.

One of the Stumps raised her hand.

"What is it?" Moegi asked.

"...Is this actually for real?" The girl's voice was quivering. "You're in on it, aren't you? I mean, it's odd you're the only one who knows anything..."

"....."

It was pointless. Moegi knew that full well.

That applied to many different aspects of the situation. First of all, it was going to be impossible to convince these girls of the reality of the game. After all, there were a full twenty-nine beginners among the thirty of them. Indeed, if she were in the others' shoes, Moegi would have a hard time believing it herself. The chances she could convince them by herself were slim to none.

Even if she could, that would only get her team to the start line. The game was a competition between Bunnies and Stumps, and it was hard to imagine a group of beginners could pull through. To make matters worse, they had to hunt down the other team. Unlike the Bunnies, who simply had to run, the Stumps needed to take decisive action to survive.

Maybe I'll abandon them and go at it alone.

That thought crossed Moegi's mind. However, it was also impractical. The idea of navigating the game on her own was dangerous, reckless even.

The explainer had made it sound like their team would be slaughtering the Bunnies, but that was not likely to be the case. Moegi understood the core of this game was *mutual killing*. There was no way the Bunnies would go down without a fight, and it was more than possible they would steal the weapons in a struggle and counterattack. The explainer hadn't mentioned any rules protecting the Stumps, which meant they, too, were at risk of death. Besides, a

counterattack was not even the worst-case scenario—a significant number of Bunnies had to be preparing to launch an all-out offensive. It made sense—reducing the number of Stumps would increase the number of Bunnies who could survive. Death-game players took great pleasure in those kinds of risky strategies; that was something Moegi had learned in her past two games.

Moegi was not so capable as to emerge victorious in a clash against the Bunnies all by herself. She had been commanding her team as if she were a seasoned veteran, but this was only her third game. She was still painstakingly learning the ropes under her mentor. And although her team had the advantage of weapons, it would be far too reckless for her to walk around alone, when the three hundred Bunnies could make use of their numbers to launch an attack. Ideally, the Stumps would coordinate as a group, too.

But dragging along a disorganized gaggle of players would prove worthless. If the others could understand this was a game of life and death and learn to handle their weapons, however unskillfully, they could take another's life. It would be hopeless unless they could manage that much. In the next six hours, Moegi had to guide her teammates to reach that level.

No matter the means.

Fortunately, she had an idea, as she herself had been trained to get accustomed to the games in a short period of time. She could replicate the lesson her mentor had given her on how to kill. The issue was her level of resolve—to do *that*. Was she really going to do it here? The next thing she knew, her heart had started racing. She touched her hand to her chest at an angle out of sight from the other girls, and she gathered herself together, at least on the exterior.

The next moment, Moegi grabbed one of the morning glories from the wall.

“We’re running out of time.” She turned to the crowd. “I won’t try to convince you with words anymore. See it. Hear it. Feel it.”

She pointed the barrel of the morning glory at a random girl—

And fired it thrice.

Seeds came flying out of the flower, piercing the girl's legs and her torso. The Preservation Treatment went on full display as a fluffy white substance puffed out from her wounds. Although the bleeding ceased immediately, no human would be able to remain standing after taking bullets to both legs—the girl fell to her knees. The leaves on the ground cushioned her fall.

Moments later, she began wailing like a baby. Her voice wasn't very loud. Similar to how real-life gunshots were said to be softer than ones in movies, actual screams never quite reached high volumes, which meant Moegi could easily be heard over her cries.

"Kill her. This will be practice. All of you, kill her."

The same expression formed on all the other Stumps' faces.

Moegi pointed the muzzle of the gun at another girl. "What's your name?"

"Um, I-I'm Kabane."

"Okay. Well, Kabane, stab that girl if you don't want to get shot." Moegi glanced at the bamboo leaf in Kabane's right hand. "Use that weapon."

"Twice per person—that's the quota. Stab through to at least the center of the blade. Ideally, aim for a vital point."

"Um... But..."

"We're done for unless each of you can stomach stabbing someone," Moegi grumbled, her frustration growing by the second. "You hear me? This game is not about hunting Bunnies—it's a *battle to the death*. With each Stump who dies, more of the Bunnies can survive, so they're sure to come for us. Show any weakness, and you'll get your weapon stolen by a Bunny and be killed. Not only is that bad for you, but it'll also hurt our team, too. We won't have a chance unless you can swing around a blade without any reservations."

Even after that additional explanation, Kabane remained reluctant to act.

Guess I'll make another example, Moegi thought. Three more shots rang through the air. All three seeds went through Kabane's torso, and she collapsed

onto the ground like a puppet with its strings cut. A number of the girls simultaneously gasped, causing a whoosh of air to fill the room.

“Let this be a warning,” Moegi said. “I’m perfectly happy to kill five or six of you if I have to.” She leaned against the wall of weapons. “I’ll take a group of twenty-five hastily trained fighters over thirty bumbling amateurs any day of the week. You’ll need to get used to taking lives as soon as possible, and some sacrifices are necessary to make that happen.”

No matter what you were doing, the first time was always the hardest. That was because doing something for the first time represented an act of turning into someone new—an act of transforming from someone who *didn’t* into someone who *did*. Carrying out any action always built on the first time. The same reasoning applied to why mobile games offered new players special *gacha* pulls when starting out, why electronic money services gave steep discounts to first-time users, and why food delivery apps provided bountiful coupons on sign-up. Once someone cleared the first hurdle, anything afterward would be a breeze. The act of murder was no exception; anyone would see rapid improvement after their first kill. That was why Moegi’s priority was setting the right mood and laying the groundwork to bring others across that hurdle, without regard for appearances.

Weakening the prey in advance. Threatening others by putting the morning glory to their head. And on top of that, working the crowd with smooth talk.

“What’s your name?”

Moegi pointed the morning glory at a random girl for the third time. On this occasion, she had chosen someone who seemed comparatively more relaxed.

A second later, the girl replied, “...Hikawa.”

“Stab one of them. I don’t care which.”

As to be expected, the girl didn’t immediately react.

Moegi added, “Would you rather cry on the floor like that baby over there? Or will you take up a weapon to survive?”

The false dilemma fallacy: a rhetorical technique in which presenting two extreme choices made it seem as if no other option existed. It was pure

sophistry, but that didn't stop Moegi from trying it. She had decided to use anything she could.

"You have three seconds," she said. "One. Two—"

There was no need to count to three. Bamboo leaf in hand, Hikawa switched to an underhand grip and stabbed Kabane in the thigh. The girl's scream grew louder.

After waiting for the noise to die down, Moegi said, "One more time."

This time, she didn't even need to count. A second stab wound appeared four inches away from the first. The scream that filled the room was quieter than the previous one, only reinforcing the theory that the first time for anything was the hardest.

"Great. Now, hand the leaf to whoever you like. They'll go next."

Hikawa did as instructed.

Moegi pointed the morning glory at the next girl. "Three seconds."

(11/43)

The lesson progressed smoothly.

Once the mood began to shift, the rest came easy. The only issues of note were that Moegi had repeated the phrase *three seconds* so many times that she had developed a strange accent, and that despite the many successes, only Kabane was stabbed. She expired before the other girl—the one Moegi had shot first—had even been stabbed once. That was because everyone simply followed the example of whoever went before them. Stabbing a corpse didn't amount to killing, so Moegi instructed the rest of the players to stab the girl who was still alive. The remaining girls showed reluctance, so Moegi had to make another example of someone to force them to change their target.

Combined with the two from earlier, that made three sacrifices in total. Soon, the Stumps concluded their lesson.

Three could be considered a fairly small number. Moegi had intended to kill five or six Stumps if the need arose and had even steeled herself for the

possibility that she would have to take out more. She'd been prepared to continue culling their numbers—be it down to twenty, ten, or even two—until the other girls finally found their resolve. It was a stroke of good fortune to only need three sacrifices, and deep down, Moegi felt a twinge of joy.

Still, it had been three losses.

Moegi didn't frame it as having saved twenty-six lives. She saw it as three girls getting killed. Although other Stumps had personally delivered the finishing blows, she was the instigator of the operation. Any court of law would adjudicate it as such. Moegi had murdered three people—and not even as part of the main game; it was only for the purpose of organizing her team. To say that her heart was in pain didn't begin to cover it. Moegi wasn't the kind of person who was unsympathetic to the suffering of others. She was a member of the lower-middle class, and she would feel guilty even over things like getting too much allowance. She couldn't adopt the same mentality as her mentor. Her head felt heavy. The thought of opening a hole in it to make it lighter even crossed her mind.

Nevertheless, things had gone well, and she gave herself credit for that. A strong person who cared not for appearances—someone like her mentor—would have done everything the same. Moegi felt proud of the previous several dozen minutes, during which she was able to present herself as such. That was her goal, after all. She would sacrifice anything to be able to act like that around the clock.

A mighty human who never had the slightest hesitation.

A strong individual who cared not for appearances.

Until she could be that person, she was prepared to overcome death however many times it took.

(12/43)

The Stumps wore jumper dresses.

(13/43)

The game finally began.

The moment the countdown timer inside the room reached zero, the earsplitting noise of a door unlocking rang out, like the sound of prison gates opening. As decided in their strategy meeting, the Bunnies traversed the giant maze in groups of six.

The Bunnies had surveyed the entire maze before the game started, but there were a number of contradictions in their scout reports. Some walls that had previously been reported had now vanished. Apparently, there was also a camouflaged door set in one of the walls, and the Bunnies knew the noise they'd heard moments ago was of that door opening, thereby signaling the official start of the game.

Beyond the door was an even larger maze. Due to its narrow corridors and many twists and turns that made it difficult for two people to pass each other, the players' field of view was severely constrained. Although they weren't sure of the exact dimensions of the maze, they had determined the venue was about half the size of a soccer field before the door had opened. A theory emerged that, combined with the newly accessible section, the labyrinth now covered the area of a full soccer field. That was more than large enough for a maze but undeniably insufficient to stay hidden for a week, granting more legitimacy to the strategy of actively eliminating Stumps.

The newly open area contained rooms with food, water, baths, and toilets, ensuring the players' daily needs would be met for a week. The girls secretly felt great relief to know they would not have to eat their own droppings like actual rabbits, and they soon proceeded farther into the maze in search of members of the opposing team.

The Stumps wore jumper dresses.

Based on the team's name, Yuki had imagined the Stumps would look like tree characters from a preschool play, but her theory was off the mark. They were wearing brown pinafore dresses with a black blouse and a green ribbon around the chest. The image made some degree of sense, if only because she had been given the word *stump* ahead of time. The outfit was split into an upper and a lower half by a belt like a school uniform, and since the players

wearing it were around middle school age, it didn't exactly bring to mind the idea of a costume. From her position as a Bunny, Yuki felt nothing but envy.

Soon, the first encounter between Bunnies and Stumps occurred.

That signaled the true start to the game. Two Bunnies died. And in exchange, their team successfully captured one of the Stumps.

(14/43)

“Ha! Ah-ha-ha! Ha... Ha-ha!”

A girl was laughing. However, her voice kept cutting out, over and over again. That was partly because she lacked the oxygen to sustain her laughter but also because of psychological resistance to laughing in the enemy base.

“Ha-ha! Ah-ha-ha-ha!”

She was being interrogated.

Upon capturing an enemy, interrogation was a must. Standing around the lone Stump were thirty or so Bunnies. They were some of the “fresh faces” Hakushi had mentioned: members of the group of beginners. Since they couldn't go out on the front lines, they were left to handle the behind-the-scenes work.

They were in a spacious room, the same one all three hundred Bunnies had gathered in during the prelude to the game. It had become their team's base camp. Inside it were one captured Stump, around thirty Bunnies belonging to the group of beginners, forty or so cautious Bunnies who had chosen not to fight, and around ten Bunnies who had returned from the maze to take a quick breather, for a grand total of more than eighty players.

Among them was Yuki.

She was on surveillance duty, watching the beginners interrogate the Stump from a distance to make sure the girls didn't go overboard. In Yuki's experience, interrogations conducted by beginners slowly but surely devolved into violence. She was ready to jump in if any of their smiles displayed the slightest hint of barbarity, but at the moment, the interrogation still seemed quite adorable.

There were no issues.

“We often did that to boys in preschool,” Yuki said. “But now I can’t remember what was so fun about it.”

“Just kids fooling around,” replied a voice from beside her.

Yuki turned to look in that direction. Standing there was a player by the name of Sumiyaka.

Sumiyaka was another regular player and one of Yuki’s acquaintances. Her roguish appearance suggested she had been a troublemaker in the past, and her chronically hoarse voice was the result of alcohol and smoking. She was the very image of a delinquent. Sumiyaka had been on her twenty-third game the last time they had met, so she was far more experienced than Yuki. And like Yuki, she was one of the Bunnies adopting a cautious approach, opting to stay behind at the base camp.

“I can think of plenty of faster ways to get the job done. They’re making it hard on themselves.”

“Well, they *were* told not to resort to violence,” Yuki replied.

Both Yuki and Sumiyaka were quite competent players, and both knew many ways to conduct an effective interrogation—methods that were faster and involved far more pain. However, the leader of the Bunnies, Hakushi, had strictly prohibited such methods, as they would be disastrous to employ in a game with a large number of players. According to her, violence would cause morals to disintegrate and eventually lead to the group’s downfall.

“Besides, the way they’re handling it isn’t that ridiculous. You’ve never been tickled by that many people, have you, Sumiyaka?”

“Well, no...” Sumiyaka shot a sideways glance at Yuki.

The next instant, she disappeared from Yuki’s field of vision. Her movements were natural, so natural that Yuki had no time to react.

Moments later, Yuki felt a touch on both of her underarms.

“Wah!” Yuki leaped up, just like a bunny. “Sumiyaka, stop it.”

“Ha-ha, you’re right. It’s not that ridiculous.”

Sumiyaka's attack didn't end there. Instead of letting go of Yuki's armpits, she held firm with all her fingers and began to tickle.

"No doubt about it," she continued. "After all, it *is* what the ninety-five-game veteran ordered. Following her instructions won't lead us astray."

"She *is* amazing..." Yuki managed to squeak out while squirming about. Even though she was getting tickled-tortured, her words were filled with respect.

Hakushi was playing in her ninety-sixth game. In other words, she had ninety-five consecutive wins under her belt.

Of all the players Yuki had met, her mentor had the best undefeated record by far. The average survival rate of a game was 70 percent. Yuki couldn't quite calculate the odds of clearing ninety-five games, but she fully understood just how impressive the record was. It was a superhuman feat. In comparison, a record of six or seven or even twenty-three games seemed completely trivial, but both Yuki and Sumiyaka were well within the category of advanced players. Especially Sumiyaka, who could be considered one of the top five active players. Still, compared to the two of them, Hakushi was in a league of her own. A god among heavyweights—that was the position she occupied.

"Amazing doesn't cover it. You know the chances of clearing ninety-five games in a row?"

"Huh...?" Yuki gave it some thought. "I dunno, around one in a thousand?"

"Way off. Try one in five hundred trillion."

Yuki was shocked. "You're joking."

"It's true. Math it out when you get home. No one on Earth compares to her. She's more talented than anyone in history. She's built different. Meanwhile, I'm here worrying about making it to thirty."

The number thirty stuck out to Yuki. When they had last met, Sumiyaka had cleared her twenty-third game. Did that mean she was within range of thirty now?

Before Yuki could ask about her current record, the physical stimulation on her underarms grew stronger.

“So any success?” Sumiyaka asked, changing the subject. “From the interrogation, I mean. The girl mention anything?”

“No... Nothing of note.” Yuki shook her head. “All they got out of her were some names.”

“What names?”

“Well, her name is Kushieda, and her team’s leader is... Hey, can you let go of me already?” Yuki slapped Sumiyaka by the palms, which were still on her underarms.

“Fine,” she replied. Yuki expected Sumiyaka to let go of her entire body, but all she did was move her hands forward to cuddle Yuki from behind.

“Come on...”

“Get over it. Let me hug you. This is number twenty-nine for me, so I’m feeling nervous.”

Twenty-nine.

“Hitting the Wall of Thirty, are you?” Yuki asked. “Isn’t that just a myth?”

The Wall of Thirty.

The term had nothing to do with the age of marriage; it referred to the number of games a player had cleared. It was a phenomenon wherein a player’s chances of survival dropped dramatically around their thirtieth game, one of many superstitions that had arisen within the industry. Normally, a player’s survival rate was lowest in their first game and gradually rose as they cleared more and more, gaining experience along the way, but for some reason, that pattern didn’t hold around number thirty.

“It’s no myth. How else can you explain the fact that so few players have crossed thirty? The phenomenon exists. The Wall of Thirty is the real deal.”

“Are the organizers involved in some way? Like maybe they get frustrated when a player reaches thirty?”

“No way. Surely they want star players to be born; it only benefits them. I just know there has to be *something*, though. Something that separates a mere veteran like me from top players like the ninety-five-game superstar.”

“Like what?”

“I wouldn’t be this nervous if I knew the answer.”

The discussion ended there.

“What were we even talking about...?” Yuki wondered out loud.

“The interrogation. You said something about learning names.”

“Oh, right. The other team is led by someone named Moegi. That Stump seems extremely frightened of her, so she quickly shut up after that. She probably won’t reveal anything else, even if the interrogation continues.”

“Frightened?”

“Rule by fear.” Yuki leaned backward. “Their leader is taking a different approach from us.”

The Stump being interrogated, Kushieda, was a first-time player. According to the Bunnies who had encountered her group, the two others with her also seemed inexperienced. It was unusual for a squad to be composed entirely of beginners, so Yuki figured that the majority of the Stumps—or perhaps even all of them—were first-time players. This “Moegi” must have been one of the few experienced players on their team. Either that, or she possessed the innate talent to reign as a despot, managing to organize her side in a short period of time through terrifying tactics. That had to be it.

“If I were in her shoes, I’d have probably done the same,” Yuki continued. “That’s the only way to push beginners to action.”

“So, what? Based on Hakushi’s theory, does that mean our side is better organized?”

“Yes. In theory, at least.” Yuki agreed on that point. “But that’s no reason to relax... Even if we’re better organized, that won’t necessarily translate to an advantage. The other team may have weapons we aren’t aware of.”

“We know about two kinds so far, right?”

“Right. A knife resembling a bamboo leaf and a pistol made to look like a morning glory. Sadly, we couldn’t get our hands on the latter.”

“It wouldn’t be surprising if their team had a third.”

“Hey, is a pistol better than a knife?” Yuki asked. “I’ve heard stuff about how guns aren’t useful in close combat and how they aren’t a threat in the hands of a beginner.”

“Don’t know. I’m no pro.”

“But what’s your opinion?”

“Firearms have their pros and cons. But with the Preservation Treatment, wouldn’t a knife be somewhat better? It’s easier to aim for the vitals,” Sumiyaka said, swinging her hand around. Judging by her grip, she was committing air murder with an air knife. “Also, the pistols in the game are easy for beginners and girls to use.”

“How do you know?”

“These games always reuse the same weapons. The organizers only change how they look. The pistols hold eight rounds and can’t be reloaded. They’re sized for women and fit comfortably in our hands.”

“Sounds a bit excessive to call them ‘sized for women’...”

Yuki pictured the weapon. Since it couldn’t be reloaded, once eight shots were fired, it would be no more dangerous than a real morning glory. That information would be important to keep in mind when fighting a Stump. Sumiyaka’s assessment about how a knife would be somewhat better seemed to take the weapons’ specs into consideration.

It was possible the pistols had been upgraded to hold twelve rounds, and the enemy could always set a trap by pretending to have run out of bullets while they were hiding another on their person. Regardless, there was no harm in committing to memory the information Sumiyaka had offered.

“.....”

No. That wasn’t necessarily true.

At present, Yuki had no role to play. She was only able to enjoy these peaceful moments in a death game because there were plenty of players who were more experienced than her. The veterans were going to fight the Stumps and turn the

tide of battle in their favor. All Yuki had to do was stand still in this room like a phantom. She didn't need any information about the enemy's weapons.

"Huh?" The voice belonged to Sumiyaka. "Where did that girl go?"

Sumiyaka had leaned forward, her ample chest pressing against Yuki's back.

"Who?"

"That girl with long caramel-colored hair. She was with the pack of first-timers."

Yuki looked over to the group of beginners. Since they were surrounding the Stump, half of them had their backs to Yuki, but it wasn't difficult for her to check their hair color.

She spotted a girl with brown hair and pointed. "Is that her?"

"No, dummy. That's *brown* hair. I'm talking about someone with caramel-colored hair."

"What's the difference?"

"You know, caramel's a lighter and gentler shade."

Although it was impossible to paint a vivid picture off that description alone, none of the girls seemed to fit the bill.

"Sure it wasn't your imagination?" Yuki asked. "When did you see her? Was she just here?"

"When our whole team was gathered together at the start. I could've sworn she was in that cluster."

"Could she be an experienced player? There wasn't any rule saying beginners had to stick together, right?"

"Hmm...", Sumiyaka grumbled. "I definitely saw her."

Yuki thought she was awfully fixated on the girl. It could easily be explained away as a mistake, and even if that wasn't the case, Yuki didn't see the problem.

Before long, Sumiyaka opened her mouth again. "Yuki, I'm gonna go ask them about—"

Her sentence was cut short.

A loud voice had interrupted her.

(15/43)

“Everyone!”

A single noun. There was no “*Look over here!*” or “*Listen!*” that followed. Still, since the voice carried well, everyone in the room turned in its direction.

It had come from the entrance.

The room had no doors. The inside and outside were connected directly by an empty space the size of a door, and standing there, blocking off the path, was none other than the leader of the Bunnies, Hakushi. The superhuman who had survived ninety-five death games.

She had no visible injuries. In her right hand was the morning-glory weapon that had come up in Yuki and Sumiyaka’s conversation. That meant Hakushi had encountered a Stump with a gun and successfully stolen the weapon without sustaining any injuries. But despite her achievement, she was panting, and her face was stricken with panic.

“All of you, get up!” Hakushi’s expression remained frenzied. “Run away! We’re calling the strategy off! Someone on the Bunnies is a—”

(16/43)

Moegi had been backed into a corner.

Their difference in strength was crystal clear.

(17/43)

Moegi had no clue what the ideal formation would be. She had no military experience, nor was she particularly interested in such matters. The best she could come up with was squads of three, as she thought the groups shouldn’t be too large or too small. With too few players, they would be at risk of being

overpowered by the opponent's numbers, while too many players would reduce each individual's sense of autonomy and effectively cut their strength in half. She determined squads of three to be an appropriate arrangement.

She didn't know if that had been the best decision.

Regardless, the reality was that the game progressed with the Stumps at a constant disadvantage. Moegi's prediction about the Bunny Team going on the offensive hit the bull's-eye. After only thirty minutes, the first squad returned to report about Kushieda's capture, and things quickly went downhill from there. During the first six hours of the game, the Stumps were reduced to less than half. By contrast, the Bunnies had lost roughly the same number or fewer. With both teams shedding players at the same rate, even a goblin could calculate which team would be the first to be wiped out if things continued.

The silver lining was that all the Stumps were fighting to the best of their ability. Their team had managed to avoid the worst-case scenario of not being able to kill a single player. That meant Moegi's lesson had been somewhat successful, and while she could say she did her best on that front, these games awarded no honorable mentions.

She had to do something soon, or else death would be inevitable.

While that would happen if the Stumps lost to the Bunnies, at this stage of the game, Moegi also feared her teammates. After all, the world was not so forgiving to allow an incompetent leader to rule until the end of time. Considering that no reign of terror ever lasted for long, Moegi's life was in great danger.

What to do? What was she to do?

She was in the base camp of the Stump Team. It was the classroom-size room where all of them had woken up. Moegi leaned against the empty wall that had previously held three varieties of weapons and began to think.

What would a strong person do in these circumstances?

If she were a strong person who didn't care for appearances, if she were in her mentor's shoes, what should she do? Moegi couldn't come up with an answer. No, actually, she *did* have an answer: They would never have gotten

themselves into this situation to begin with. They would have used their superior leadership to better coordinate their forces and nearly decimate the entire Bunny Team by now. That was the answer. With how things were currently, not even her mentor would be able to turn things around. It was too late. The moment someone dug themselves into a disadvantageous position, they lost the claim to being a strong person. When both Napoleon and the Roman Empire suffered defeat, they'd lost quite handily. It was over. Moegi's fate was already set in stone.

Those thoughts ran through her head.

She could only wait for the inevitable reality to come crashing down.

It was the first time in her life that fear gripped her from within. She was like a death-row inmate ascending the stairs for the last time. An entrepreneur on the brink of bankruptcy. A laborer with no aspirations of building a career. Moegi had seen scenes in movies where military commanders killed themselves upon being surrounded by the enemy, and she had innocently wondered why they didn't fight until the end, but now she knew. It was because the time spent waiting for death was far more frightening than death itself. Facing the certainty of death sparked pure, unadulterated fear.

"Excuse me."

Moegi's right hand quivered. In it was one of the morning glories, the one she had used during the lesson. She had shot the first girl three times, the second girl three times, and the third girl once, so one bullet remained inside.

A thought crossed her mind that was too frightening to voice out loud: *What would it actually be like?* Would she pass away painlessly? Because of the Preservation Treatment and the small diameter of the gun barrel, she might suffer quite a bit. But regardless of the means, the outcome wouldn't change. Even if it was painful, she still thought it to be a viable option.

Moegi slowly raised her right hand—

"Excuse me!"

It was like she had been splashed with water.

She was taken aback. Her head snapped back up after having drooped

downward at some point.

Before her stood a Stump.

The girl's name was Airi, and she had beautiful indigo eyes. She was one of the players who had quickly adapted to Moegi's lesson, and she had already successfully killed four Bunnies.

In her hand was a bamboo leaf.

Moegi's heart jumped out of her chest. A terrifying thought crossed her mind, and she froze in place. Her right arm ceased its ascent in a strange position. She was completely paralyzed.

Whether or not she realized she was in a position to freely toy with the girl in front of her, Airi moved her lips. "I have something to report."

It took a whole three seconds for Moegi to respond. That was the amount of time she needed to grab on to her soul, which had leaped into the air.

"...What?"

"I...discovered something strange."

Vigor returned to Moegi's body. Her right arm resumed its course and hit her chest.

"...Ah... I... I see."

"Would you care to hear? It's not so important that you need to..."

"Go on. What is it?"

"I found a corpse whose clothes had been stripped off," Airi said. "It belonged to one of the Stumps. And beside the body was a bunny-girl outfit, which means..."

"...Someone disguised themselves," Moegi said before Airi could finish.

There were no rules prohibiting such an act. Doing so wouldn't alter one's team, nor would it alter the conditions for clearing the game. Still, players were free to change their clothes as they wished. It went without saying that changing out of an embarrassing bunny-girl outfit into a comparatively less embarrassing jumper dress would bring positive mental effects, but there was

also a strategic purpose to doing so.

It blurred the line between friend and foe.

Airi continued, “Since there were only thirty of us to begin with, I don’t think we would mistake an enemy, even if they swapped clothes...but I figured it was best to report back.”

“Thanks. That’s good to know.”

“There was also something odd about the corpse that you should know...” Airi covered her mouth with her hand. “It was heavily *mutilated*. I think someone messed with it after death.”

“Mutilated?” Moegi repeated. “Can you be more specific?”

“It’s not pleasant to the ears...”

“Go on.”

“The body was cut open.” Airi’s face turned pale as she spoke. “Its organs, everything, had been pulled out. Could that mean there’s someone who kills for pleasure on the other team? Even though we do have the Preservation Treatment, I can’t imagine someone doing that to another human being.”

(18/43)

A chill ran through Moegi’s body. Not because Airi’s report was frightening—sure, it *was* frightening, but Moegi feared something else.

“What did you say?” she asked, her lips cold. “By ‘cut open,’ do you mean filleted like a fish...?”

“...If I had to make a comparison, that would be it.”

“And the dead girl was stripped of her clothes?”

“Yes.”

Moegi looked down at her outfit. She had on a brown jumper dress modeled after a tree stump. Compared to the bunny-girl outfit, it was fairly loose-fitting.

A memory came back to her.

That girl had mentioned a distaste for tight clothing.

It was possible. It was entirely possible *she* would have that desire.

“Whose body was it?” Moegi asked.

“I don’t know who she was...”

“Then how tall was the body?”

“Huh?”

“Was it around five foot seven?”

Airi looked puzzled. “Is that relevant?”

“Just answer me.”

“...The dead girl was on the taller side, but I’m not quite sure of her exact height.”

That settled it. Moegi rested her back against the wall.

Is she here? In this game? In that case, if she killed one person like that, then...

“Airi.”

“Yes?”

“Get out of here immediately.”

Airi stared blankly. Moegi could see the entirety of her beautiful indigo eyes.

Moegi stammered, “...N-no... Hang on... Then clearing the game... But that will take away from us...”

“Um, what are you talking about?” Airi asked. “One of the Bunnies disguised herself as a Stump. Is there anything more to it than that?”

“Sorry, Airi. I’m at a total loss...”

“Can you tell me what’s going on?”

“Just listen to me and run away!!” Her voice was unnaturally loud. The energy drained from Moegi’s body, and she collapsed to the ground, but that didn’t stop her from straining her voice even further. “Killing is the same as drinking seawater to her! Once she starts, she can’t stop! The teams don’t matter

anymore! At this rate, no one will be left alive!”

However, not even half of what she said seemed to reach Airi. Moegi rephrased her explanation so it was easier to understand. “Listen—!”

(19/43)

“Someone on the Bunnies is a homicidal maniac! She has agarwood-colored hair!”

(20/43)

Just after Hakushi shouted, two objects came flying over her head.

Both of the items were around the size of a fist and shaped like pine cones. No matter how much Yuki stared at them, she couldn’t process them as anything but pine cones. Thanks to her previous knowledge of the morning glories and bamboo leaves, however, it was clear these objects weren’t simply decorations. Everyone in the room, the beginners included, must have thought the same.

Everyone took cover on the ground. They were expecting an explosion.

Their prediction was half right. While there was indeed a blast, it posed no danger to their lives. What spread across the room was not hot air or pine-cone shards but gray smoke. The smoke expanded unexpectedly far, considering the size of the pine cones. In the blink of an eye, two small objects had overwhelmed a room of three hundred people.

Yuki’s vision went hazy, but in exchange, her hearing became more sensitive.

“Ngh...”

A voice reached Yuki’s ears, one that seemed rather hoarse for a girl. Yuki intuitively understood that it was the sound of the agony of death. A girl’s vocal cords were quivering in an unintended way after she had been injured by, say, a stab to the stomach.

Countless thoughts raced through Yuki’s mind. Who was responsible for the stabbing? Who had gotten hurt? Could that have been Hakushi’s voice? Had

that “psycho killer” gotten to her? No way. Would a superhuman who had beaten one-in-five-hundred-trillion odds fall so easily? No. What in the world was even going on? The killer whom Hakushi mentioned had probably tossed the pine cones, but that would mean her mentor had been tailed. Impossible. There was no way a ninety-five-game veteran would make a blunder like that. But no other explanation made sense—

Yuki slapped her cheeks.

No, her heart cried out. None of that would be of any help. She had wasted several precious seconds. Her limited experience with death games had reared its ugly head. No—none of that mattered. This wasn’t the time to think about that. She needed to figure out what she had to focus her mind on. What she needed to think about in that moment. The most important thing. What was that?

—How to survive.

Right. That makes sense. What do you need to do?

—Get away from here.

Sensible. It’d be wise to follow Hakushi’s instructions. So why aren’t you doing that?

—Because there’s a smoke screen.

Exactly. But you remember where the exit is. The problem is the killer may be lying in ambush. So what should you wait for?

—A sound.

Correct. The killer activated the smoke so she could hunt. Wait here, and she’ll surely attack someone again. And that girl will let out a scream of agony in her final moments, signaling that the coast is clear.

Although it was possible Yuki herself would be that pitiful victim, this was the best strategy she could come up with in the limited amount of time she had to think. And so she waited for that moment without moving a muscle. As she endured the sensation that was like lying on a surgical bed—

“Arf...”

She heard a silly groan of death, like the cry of a fur seal. Since it came from the opposite direction of the exit, Yuki sprinted for dear life.

(21/43)

Moegi set out into the gigantic maze.

She was going to hunt some Bunnies.

(22/43)

The interior of the labyrinth was like a picture of hell. Every time she turned a corner, she ran into a new corpse. A Bunny with her face blasted by a morning glory. Two Stumps who had collapsed on the ground in each other's arms. A Bunny who had crawled as far as she could in her final moments, leaving behind a trail of white fluff in the passageway. There was also a Stump who *she* had probably killed, whose insides were pulled out of her body.

The passages of the giant maze were narrow, so whenever Moegi ran into a corpse, she had to cross over it. However, she felt some reluctance at doing so, due to the superstition that stepping over a person would cause them to stop growing. The fact that these were dead bodies didn't change her hesitation, and she became frustrated with herself for feeling guilt over such a trifling thing.

Only the weak felt guilt. She couldn't let herself be weighed down by it.

Moegi traversed the giant maze in hopes of killing Bunnies. That was the condition for clearing the game and her immediate priority. Although more than six days remained before time was up, if things continued at this rate, there would be no more Bunnies for her to kill.

That was because the homicidal maniac, Kyara—Moegi's mentor—was on the prowl. Three hundred Bunnies would be child's play for the girl with agarwood-colored hair. The entire Bunny Team would be wiped out soon. The same would go for the Stumps. That would make it impossible to meet the victory condition, and everyone, Bunnies and Stumps alike, would be killed by her hand before the game ended.

Everyone would be wiped out. There would be no survivors.

Even Moegi wasn't safe as Kyara's protégé. She knew far too well how *unpredictable* her mentor could be. It was more than possible Moegi would be killed after Kyara got swept up in things. Even if that didn't happen, her mentor didn't know that Moegi was part of the Stump Team, so there was no way she would leave five Bunnies alive for Moegi to meet her quota.

Although this was an irregular situation, it was do-or-die. She had to kill five Bunnies as soon as possible.

Despite her haste, Moegi still hadn't slain any members of the opposing team yet. Everywhere she walked, all she ran into were corpses. She lifted the collapsed Bunnies to see if they were truly dead, felt the corpses' temperatures to estimate how much time had elapsed since they were killed, and chose which direction to go based on that, but it was all for naught.

Maybe everyone had already been murdered—

Just as that thought ballooned inside her mind into a size too large to be ignored, Moegi finally ran into a survivor.

It wasn't a Bunny.

"Ah..."

Both girls voiced their surprise upon encountering each other.

It was a Stump. Moegi remembered the other girl's name: Hikawa. She had been the first to complete Moegi's lesson.

"Moegi!" Hikawa said with an expression of relief. "I'm glad to see you. You're still alive?"

"....." Moegi paused for a second before responding. "Yeah."

"Um, you hear about it? The killer among the Bunnies, so there's more to worry about than the game. There may be running out of survivors to kill..." The girl's grammar had started faltering, but her message got across.

"Yeah," Moegi replied.

"I was scared being alone, so I'm glad I found you. Things are crazy, but let's

survive together.” Hikawa’s words were filled with zeal.

“Yeah,” Moegi replied.

“Um... I don’t want to be a bother, but can I ask a favor?”

“What?”

“I’m out of weapons.” Hikawa pulled a morning glory out of her jumper pocket. She pulled the trigger two, three times, but nothing came out. “No bullets. If you have anything to spare, I’d appreciate it...”

“Okay,” Moegi responded. She pulled out the morning glory she had kept concealed behind her back. “One shot good enough?”

(23/43)

Upon looting Hikawa’s corpse, Moegi discovered one bamboo leaf and one pine cone. The girl had egregiously lied about not having any weapons. Maybe she wanted to stock up on as many as possible, or perhaps she had been planning to stab Moegi in the back the moment she saw an opening. If Hikawa’s morning glory hadn’t run out of bullets, Moegi could very well have been the one lying dead.

Moegi had intended to kill Hikawa from the very start. She had decided to kill anyone she came across, Bunny or Stump. Although killing fellow Stumps made no progress toward clearing the game, there were not enough Bunnies to go around. As things stood, fellow Stumps were rivals fighting over pieces of a small pie.

Currently, Moegi had on her three morning glories, two bamboo leaves, and three pine cones. She had taken each of them from a Stump. Although she had yet to kill any Bunnies, her Stump kill count already exceeded five. To prevent anyone else from culling more Bunnies and to get her hands on as much equipment as possible, Moegi had mowed down her teammates with ruthless determination.

That was what she thought strong people who didn’t care about appearances would do. That was what she *had* to do to become someone like that.

An asinine idea was gaining traction in society, touting that true strength was measured not by physical prowess but by mental fortitude. Moegi dismissed that as complete and utter nonsense. It was no more than a pretense crafted by pathetic fools who refused to admit they had no skills of their own as a way to legitimize themselves.

True strength.

True strength was nothing but the ability to get things done. The power to selfishly express one's desires. The attitude of not caring about appearances. Accepting violence as a means to an end. Taken from another angle, the "mental fortitude" to suck it up in any situation while spouting complaints was good for absolutely nothing. Ethics, morals, respect for the law—all of that was loathsome. It was precisely the ability to get things done that embodied the ethics of the new era, and anyone who lacked that ability was not human. Good girls would lose everything—that was the most important lesson Moegi had learned in her sixteen years of life. That was why Moegi was playing in these games and why she'd become Kyara's protégé. It was all so she could be reborn as a new person.

She despised the Moegi who cried all the time. She was going to change into someone without any weaknesses.

She was going to become strong.

Moegi ran into a Bunny.

(24/43)

The girl had the aura of a phantom. Her pale skin gave the impression that she hadn't ever been in the sun, and her lifeless face made it seem as if she had lost a fortune on stocks. She belonged to the Bunny Team and wore a bunny-girl outfit, but perhaps due to the aura of death that radiated from her body, the costume was surprisingly unflattering on her.

They were standing at a corner. They had both been trying to turn in each other's direction. It reminded Moegi of the situation where a cute girl with toast in her mouth bumped into a handsome boy. In this instance, however, there

was no toast, nor did they bump into each other. There was less than a foot of distance between them.

Time stopped. The two girls froze in place, in close view of each other.

“.....!”

Awkwardness hung in the air.

Unable to proceed forward, Moegi stepped back instead. While securing some distance, she aimed the muzzle of the morning glory at the phantom girl's chest. But every action has an equal and opposite reaction, so the phantom girl pulled back and disappeared beyond the corner.

A gunshot rang out—followed by recoil. Moegi's terrible firing posture came back to bite her. She staggered backward on teetering legs and fell on her bottom. Although she felt no pain because the leaves on the ground cushioned her fall, it took some time for her to get back on her feet.

In hopes of chasing after the phantom girl, Moegi turned the corner. The girl was already halfway around another corner, but Moegi shot her in the back. Or rather, she pulled the trigger to fire a shot at the girl's back but missed and hit the wall instead. Cursing at herself for her incompetence, Moegi continued the chase.

She rounded the next corner, morning glory in hand. However, her target was nowhere to be found. The only thing in view was an empty passageway enveloped in silence.

Moegi had lost sight of her.

She lowered the morning glory and rested her back against the wall. Although she had only run a short distance, she was out of breath, and her heart was racing. Moegi took a few deep breaths to calm down each organ in her body.

Then she pricked her ears. There was a faint rustling.

It was the phantom girl's footsteps. She had stepped on some leaves. The laws of nature dictated that the act of moving around would generate sound. Since Moegi herself had been moving around just a moment ago, the sound of their footsteps had overlapped and kept her from realizing the girl was drawing

near, but the game was designed to allow players to detect anyone nearby. Despite thinking it pointless, Moegi crept forward as quietly as possible, following the noise.

She turned another three or four corners before she found herself at a crossroads. Moegi dashed forward in the direction of the sound. And there...

“...Huh...?”

There, lying on the ground, was a pair of rabbit ears. A headband and nothing else. The ears were hopping forward in a consistent rhythm. That was the source of the rustling Moegi had mistaken for footsteps.

Of course, the headband was not moving of its own volition. At the apex of the arced band connecting the two ears was a knot, tied from the ribbon that had adorned the Bunnies’ outfit as a bow around their necks.

The ribbon continued farther down the passageway. It appeared to be fashioned out of ribbons taken from corpses lying around, as there were knots tied at set intervals. Moegi couldn’t see what was at the end of it as it led around the corner, but it was logical to think the hairband was moving due to the force of someone pulling on it.

To sum up that extended explanation into four words: It was a decoy.

Just then, Moegi felt a strong force around her neck. She was being strangled from behind by something with a silky-smooth texture, and she quickly realized it was another ribbon—or rather, a rope fashioned out of multiple ribbons. Moegi tottered backward but ran up against someone’s body. It was immediately obvious whose it was.

Moegi brought the morning glory in her right hand close to her ear. Positioning it as if she were making a phone call, she fired one shot at the phantom girl behind her, but the effort backfired. The gunshot rang in her ear. She felt a spark in her head, as though she’d injected caffeine directly into her brain. She dropped the morning glory out of shock, and the gun fell to the ground before sliding forward in a shower of leaves. The phantom girl had kicked it away.

Even after Moegi had fired the pistol, the force around her throat remained.

That was proof the bullet had failed to find its mark. Moegi grabbed a bamboo leaf and severed the ribbon around her neck. While that would normally be too frightening an act to perform, fortunately, the lack of blood flow to her brain had deprived her of common sense. On reflex, she thrust her newly freed neck and head forward.

Moegi simultaneously looked up and spun around. In a series of smooth movements, she raised her bamboo leaf and swung without any time to fix her aim.

A hand grabbed her wrist.

The blade stopped right in front of the phantom girl's eyes and nose.

The two of them stood face-to-face. Moegi couldn't tell for how many seconds they stayed in that position, but the entire time, she was desperate to shove the bamboo leaf another four inches forward. Alas, she came to regret that the moment a kick slammed into the pit of her stomach.

"Ah—"

A sound halfway resembling a groan escaped her lips. She took one step back to put some distance between them. Now that the phantom girl was creeping closer, Moegi attempted to intimidate her, flailing the bamboo leaf that was somehow still in her hand.

Then she retreated backward.

It was both a physical and psychological retreat. The gap in their skill levels had been made clear. Their amount of game experience differed. Moegi had no chance of winning in close combat. Absorbed by the amateurish thought that she had no choice but to target the girl from afar with the morning glory, Moegi threw aside the bamboo leaf and pulled out the two remaining morning glories from her jumper pockets.

She fired, both guns blazing.

However, that was when she remembered they were standing in the middle of a crossroads. The phantom girl only had to take one measly step to the side to dodge the barrage of bullets. She disappeared out of view, leaving Moegi all alone once again.

A stream of countless thoughts paraded through Moegi's mind. Her breathing grew irregular. Her right ear still pounded. Her blouse was stained with sweat. The handle of the morning glory absorbed as much of her body heat as it could. The entire area around her neck stung with pain, possibly having been nicked when she severed the ribbon.

No footsteps echoed in the air. The phantom girl was still lying in wait around the corner.

There was no way her foe was paralyzed with fear. She must have thought it would be advantageous to keep still. After all, with Moegi wielding two pistols, it would be dangerous to make a haphazard attempt at escape. There were still plenty of ways the phantom girl could turn the situation into a battle at close quarters.

Moegi lacked the courage to step forward. A moment ago, she had made a pathetic showing. She would lose if they started grappling with each other. Regardless of the logic, her legs simply wouldn't move. There was nothing she could do but stand there with the morning glory in hand, waiting for her foe to commit a blunder and reappear.

As the seconds ticked by, Moegi grew increasingly panicked.

She still hadn't killed any Bunnies. As she stood dragging her feet, her mentor, Kyara, was probably mowing down other players. *Zero*. The phantom girl would be her first. Moegi bit her lip, frustrated at the difficulty of killing even a single person. In all honesty, she had thought things would go much more smoothly. She'd underestimated things because she was wielding firearms against an unarmed opponent, believing she could finish the task with just the simple pull of a trigger.

So what? How did I end up in a position where one wrong move means death? Do I really have to do this four more times? A stupid buffoon like me will never—

Stop it.

Stop it. Stop it, stop it. Stop giving in to feelings of worthlessness. A strong person would never do that. This is no time to be drowning in cowardly thoughts. This is a trial, a ritual to be reborn as my ideal self. That girl is simply a stepping stone, a source of experience, fodder for a story of overcoming

hardship I can tell in the future. Exactly. The gods only give us trials we can conquer. Hard work will pay off. Life is a zero-sum game, and I'll give everyone who ridiculed me in the past what they deserve.

"I won't be beaten," Moegi voiced out loud.

She continued, "I won't be beaten here! I am Kyara's protégé! Hear me roar!!"

There was no response.

Instead, the phantom girl tossed *an object* in Moegi's direction.

(25/43)

It was a pine cone: a smoke grenade. Tentacles of smoke vigorously filled the crossroads and extended to where Moegi was standing. At the same speed, Moegi retreated backward.

She looked down at herself, at her jumper dress. She had been using its belt to carry around pine cones, and although she had started with three, she now realized that only one was currently attached. The phantom girl had stolen not just one but *two* during their fight.

As if having waited for Moegi to come to that realization, the second pine cone appeared from the cloud of smoke, somersaulting through the air past Moegi. It exploded behind her, causing smoke to billow up and block her escape route.

She was sandwiched between two walls of gray.

Of course, smoke was something she could easily slip through, and that should have been Moegi's immediate priority. There was no need to deliberate over what she had to do in that moment: Escape the smoke and distance herself from the phantom girl. It wasn't running away—she simply needed to distance herself. Whether or not she was going to give up on the phantom girl, being blocked on both sides by smoke was not a favorable environment. She should have swiftly escaped.

In reality, Moegi remained locked in place. That was because she feared

rushing into smoke, into a space where her field of vision would be obstructed. The idea of slipping through the smoke screen didn't even cross her mind.

The two walls of gray combined to form a single whole and enveloped Moegi. Her vision was reduced to nothing.

She heard frantic footsteps.

Moegi instinctively pulled the trigger of the morning glory, firing twice into the crossroads. The shots didn't result in any groans, and she realized that the footsteps were not approaching her—they were heading away. The phantom girl was running deeper into the maze.

She's getting away...

It took no more than a few seconds for that thought to be refuted. The footsteps once again got closer, but they were approaching from a different direction. The girl must have circled around to try to attack Moegi from behind. Unwilling to let that happen, Moegi spun around.

A larger rustling sound echoed out from nearby. Moegi remembered there was a hairband connected to ribbons on the ground, so she knew not to mistake that noise for the phantom girl's footsteps. No matter how distracted she was, she could tell them apart. *Exactly*. Whether or not there was a smoke screen or the enemy was circling around behind her, it didn't change the fact that Moegi had the advantage of standing in a straight passageway. After all, their attack range was completely different. No person, however experienced, could go up against two firearms completely unarmed—

“—Ah!” A noise escaped her mouth.

All the warmth drained from her body in an instant.

She remembered—at the start of the battle, she had been carrying three morning glories.

She remembered—she had dropped the first after firing it next to her ear.

She remembered—the phantom girl had kicked it away.

So where was it now?

Consecutive gunshots rang out.

Half of them came from Moegi, while the other half came from someone else.

Moegi was in the middle of a narrow passageway, one so cramped that it was impossible to get around a corpse without stepping over it and even more impossible to evade an attack. With both girls now wielding morning glories, the tables had turned. One of them stood in the center of a passageway barely wide enough to shuffle around. The other stood by a corner, where it would be a simple task to conceal her body. It was as plain as day which of them would win the shoot-out.

Moegi took bullets to her shoulder, stomach, and right leg.

She couldn't even adopt a defensive posture when she fell over.

If there was anything she deserved praise for, it would be that she didn't let the pain show in her voice. However, she couldn't hide the fact that she had collapsed. She took another bullet. She couldn't tell where she had been shot anymore. Pain coursed through the entirety of her body, as if every part was vying for attention.

A searing sensation assaulted her nerves. Her entire being felt on the verge of exploding.

Two thoughts filled every nook and cranny of her brain. The first was that she was in pain. The second was that she wanted to escape the pain. But in the back of her mind, she knew that even if she tried to run, she wouldn't be able to escape. Moegi used both of her hands to grope around for the morning glory she had dropped.

The next moment, a high heel trampled on her right hand.

The muzzle of a gun appeared before her eyes.

“.....”

Although smoke still filled the area, it had already begun to dissipate, and there was no mistaking anything from point-blank range. She looked at the face

of the phantom girl behind the morning glory. The girl had a stern face. Was there malice in her eyes? Or was it disgust at the act of killing?

Moegi focused her gaze on the morning glory pointed at her face. It was the one she had dropped. If memory served, there was still one bullet inside. Even if it was empty, the girl would simply switch to striking her with the body of the gun.

It was over. Moegi no longer had to keep up a strong facade.

She felt a feeling in the corners of her eyes that she hadn't experienced in a long time. The girl holding the morning glory pulled the trigger, firing a bullet that had sufficient killing power to pierce a human skull. In the brief moment it took for the bullet to travel the less than a foot of distance between the barrel of the gun and Moegi's face—in the final moments of her life—Moegi was unmistakably in tears.

(27/43)

The smoke cleared.

(28/43)

Yuki waited for the smoke to fade before retrieving the weapons.

The Stump still had two pistols, one additional pine cone, and probably at least one bamboo leaf as well. To fight against a psycho killer, Yuki's immediate priority was to procure weapons. As the smoke had already thinned by the time she killed the Stump, her view was unobstructed, and she could have already begun to loot the corpse, but she opted to keep still for a while.

The moment the smoke fully cleared, Yuki began to move.

She pounded against the wall with all her might. It was hard. It didn't even budge. That didn't surprise her, since it was part of the set of the game. Yuki had no intention of destroying the wall. No, she simply wanted to vent her frustration, and she would have even settled for beating the Stump's corpse.

That was because the girl lying on the ground before her had ticked her off.

“...Boasting about being all strong and grown-up...,” Yuki muttered with reproach in her voice. “A girl like you isn’t cut out for these games! You’re better off in the real world!!”

The Stump had posed no threat whatsoever. She had no talent. Yuki had nothing else to say. The girl hadn’t shown the slightest hint of good judgment. Apparently, she was the protégé of that psychopath, but if that poor showing was all she could muster, there was no hope for her. During their fight, Yuki hadn’t felt any danger to her life. Even if the world reset itself one hundred times over, nothing could have kept Yuki from winning that battle.

On the surface, she had achieved a convincing victory. However, Yuki had seen it. The face of the girl in her last moments. It was one hell of a parting gift. Up until now, Yuki had seen the dying faces of countless players, but unlike theirs, this Stump’s wasn’t filled with fear, despair, or animosity driven by a still-blazing will to fight. Nor had it displayed a foolish look born out of unwillingness to accept death.

The girl’s face had been colored with *exasperation*. It was the emotion that resulted from putting one’s entire body and soul into something yet still coming up short. The compensation to a poor person who had devoted everything they had to life yet still failing to achieve commensurate results. The honorable-mention prize of these death games. Yuki had no idea as to what was behind that expression, and even if she found out, she would not be able to empathize. Still, there was *something* there, something different from Yuki’s flimsy reasons for joining these games. Something different from the motives of one-and-done players. This girl had wanted to accomplish something by continuing to participate.

Whatever it was, Yuki had killed all chance of that happening. As someone merely drifting through life, she had trampled over it with her innate instincts.

(29/43)

Even after Yuki finished looting the body, her emotions remained clouded. Even after obtaining two morning glories, two bamboo leaves, and one pine cone, and even after leaving the Stump’s corpse, she still felt the same way.

What had taken root inside of Yuki was something that wouldn't heal on its own, and she felt it slowly but surely growing larger within her soul.

She continued walking through the giant maze, making her way toward the Bunny Team base camp without a particular plan in mind. If she wanted to increase her chances of survival, she should have continued to explore the maze. Hakushi had instructed everyone to keep running from the homicidal maniac, and Yuki would need to secure food and water to survive for a week. By returning to camp, she risked running right into the psychopath, like a moth flying into a flame. The act went far beyond foolish.

Still, she had a desire to go back. She wanted to see if Hakushi was safe and sound. Although she had no idea whether that psychopath was lingering at the base camp, she felt confident her mentor would be there.

Be it dead or alive.

Ideally, Hakushi would still be alive. Yuki had previously been taught that it was impossible to defeat a hardened murderer, but perhaps her mentor may have achieved an easy victory. Maybe Hakushi had gathered all the surviving Bunnies and was celebrating in the base camp right about now. Alternatively, things would be also be fine if she were dead. What Yuki needed was to figure out what had happened. She despised wandering around without knowing who was alive or dead—without knowing anything about the situation in general.

As she neared her destination, the number of corpses littering the path grew. There appeared to be about twice as many bodies as there had been earlier. Heaps of them were strewn across the floor. Thanks to the Preservation Treatment, Yuki was spared the sight of them covered in red. Around one in every ten corpses had been heavily mutilated, and she immediately understood that was the special handiwork of the homicidal maniac.

Lying among the corpses was someone she knew—Sumiyaka.

Her body was part of the *nine* in every ten—a normal corpse. Countless stab wounds littered her chest, ones that had been inflicted with the same intensity as drilling holes in a machine to make it lighter. One of them had been the killing blow. Her vocal cords, which had grown hoarse from alcohol and smoking, vibrated no more, and her hands, which had assaulted Yuki's

underarms some time ago, showed no signs of life. Upon touching her body, Yuki felt no hint of warmth. Sumiyaka's soul had traveled so far away that it could no longer be recovered.

She had been killed by the psychopath. The woman with agarwood-colored hair, who, according to Sumiyaka, had been among the group of beginners. The woman who had vanished without Yuki noticing.

If Yuki hadn't overlooked her, or perhaps if she had—

Yuki immediately dismissed those thoughts as they entered her mind. Hakushi had taught her to not take any responsibility for what happened in a game. Yuki had gone through much training to steel her heart. After taking one or two slow, deep breaths, she succeeded in wiping away her memories like a politician standing before members of the press.

However, even that technique failed to clear her clouded feelings. She felt as though a needle was piercing her chest.

She couldn't get the dying face of the Stump off her mind. It was the face of someone clearly being shown their standing as a human. Yuki even felt that something was wrong with her own heartbeat. Based on her personal rules, that Stump had been superior to her, and Yuki couldn't fully accept the reality that the girl had died while she herself remained alive.

In these games where everyone was teetering on the brink of death, that mentality was a deadly one.

Yuki understood that, in her current state of mind, she would die if she ran into the homicidal manic.

(30/43)

Yuki arrived at the base camp.

Lying there was Hakushi's corpse.

(31/43)

Her body was part of the *one* in ten. The corpse had been so thoroughly

mutilated beyond recognition that Yuki felt she deserved praise at having identified it as Hakushi's. She had made the judgment based on the body's height, build, and the color of its few remaining strands of hair, but the corpse, or at least a few of its constituent parts, could have very well belonged to a complete stranger.

Where to begin putting the scene into words?

First of all, there was the matter of the body's location. It had been placed in a conspicuous manner in the middle of a vast hall that could hold three hundred Bunnies, as though it were a moon rock on display. And in fact, the body *was* comparable in value to a moon rock, as it belonged to someone who had lived through ninety-five death games. Both the corpse and the entire game venue that currently housed it could very well qualify as holy relics.

Hakushi's body—her head, abdomen, arms and legs, even each individual finger and strand of hair—had been thoroughly disfigured. Blood that had transformed into white fluff by the Preservation Treatment covered nearly every inch of her flesh. Even the inside of the body had been mutilated. Around the corpse, rib bones had been placed like graduations on an analog clock, the small intestine was spread out in the shape of an aerial view of a race-car track, and organs were scattered about like rocks dotting a landscape garden. Suspense stories had a common trope in which corpses conveyed some grotesque message, but as far as Yuki could tell, there was no indication of the psychopath trying to grab attention or convey anything. Instead, she concluded that the scene was simply the result of a murderer wanting to mutilate a corpse.

Maybe, just maybe, the body was still breathing.

"Amazing, isn't it?"

A voice came from one side of the room.

There sat a woman holding her knees.

(32/43)

The woman had agarwood-colored hair.

Caramel-colored hair.

Yuki didn't know the color of agarwood, so she assumed it was the same as the hue of the woman's hair. Based on what the Stump had said earlier, the woman was named Kyara.

At first glance, she resembled Hakushi, with long hair and a tall build. However, her demeanor was completely different from that of Yuki's mentor.

The woman's face was difficult to describe. She simultaneously looked like a grouchy legendary swordsmith who was reluctant to accept requests, an old man so obsessed with pachinko that his eyes had started to resemble pachinko balls, a cram school instructor who had a strange manner of lecturing, a tsundere heroine who became more ladylike after hitting her head, and an android who had only just been equipped with a program granting it the faculty of emotions. Yet, at the same time, none of those descriptions felt quite accurate, either. Yuki had never met anyone remotely like this woman. Consequently, the more she tried to organize her thoughts into words, the further she felt she was straying from the truth.

This woman...

Was it her?

"Was it you?" Yuki's first remark took the form of a stupid question. "Did you do this?"

"Yep." Kyara nodded.

And just like that, they struck up a conversation.

A homicidal maniac. The woman who had taken down Hakushi, a veteran player in her ninety-sixth game.

"Why are you wearing a Stump outfit?"

As indicated by Yuki's question, Kyara had on a jumper dress. According to Hakushi and Sumiyaka, the woman should have been on the Bunny Team, but since she had on a Stump costume...

"I prefer loose-fitting clothing." The answer came out of left field. Kyara stared at Yuki. "Let me ask you, aren't you embarrassed wearing *that*?"

“...I am.” Yuki touched the ribbon at the base of her neck.

The Stump outfit the woman had on was far too clean to have been stripped from a corpse. Still, Yuki tried not to think too deeply into it.

“So you were pretending to be a beginner?” Yuki continued.

“Yep. But I still think of myself as a novice. This is only my tenth game, after all.”

“I’d say that’s a lot. At least, it’s more than me.”

“Really?”

“With three hundred players around, how did nobody recognize you?” Yuki asked. “If you have ten games under your belt, surely some people knew what you look like.”

“Not likely.” A cynical smile spread across Kyara’s face. “I mean, I’ve killed every other player in every game I’ve been in.”

“...What did you say?” Yuki’s eyes widened.

“No, scratch that. My second game was an exception.” Kyara backtracked. “I let Moegi live. A good girl, that one.”

Moegi. That was the name of the enemy team’s leader, and most likely the name of *that* Stump.

“I’m pretty sure I’ve met her,” Yuki replied.

“Oh? How did she seem?”

“She’s dead.” Yuki left out the fact that she had been the one to end her life. “Why take things this far? Why do you always kill everyone? None of the games require it. Like here, you only had to target the Stumps, you know? Was it because Moegi was on the Stump Team? Were you lending her a hand?”

“Nope.”

“Do you get bonus prize money for every person you kill?”

“Nope.”

“Then why? Do you think you’ll become some kind of hero after killing a

million people or something?”

“I told you—I just wanted these clothes.” Kyara pulled on one of her sleeves. “I had to kill the previous owner without injuring her to keep this outfit in pristine condition, you know. That ended up being harder than I thought it would. She resisted quite a lot...so I got fed up.”

Yuki furrowed her eyebrows. “You got fed up...and?”

“That’s all.”

None of this made sense to Yuki. “I don’t see how that relates to you going on a killing spree.”

“Oh?” Kyara snorted. “Right.”

She shot a glance at Yuki.

One simple glance.

A chill ran through Yuki’s body, down to her fingertips.

(33/43)

Yuki was frozen to the core. Her soul was frozen, too. Her body grew cold, as though blood was spilling out of her from somewhere, and as if to compensate for that, her head grew warm. Her brain went into overdrive. A wave of information flooded into her mind, as though she had grown four new eyes. The Bunny Team base camp. The synthetic forest. The face-down raccoon dog mascot. Hakushi’s corpse. The state of the room littered with so many bodies that she hadn’t paid any attention to them. The psychopath—the only other living person in the base camp—leaning against the wall and relaxing as if she were in the comfort of her own living room. The way she sat, wrapping her arms around her legs. The eyes that glittered from beneath those bangs. The phrase *looks that can kill* popped into Yuki’s head, followed by a voice that began chastising her that the idiom didn’t mean what she thought it meant.

The air stirred, and a split second later, an aura of bloodlust filled the room.

“You don’t understand?” Kyara slowly got to her feet. Her trademark agarwood-colored hair swayed left and right. “Really? You’ve played in these

games, so surely you've had an opportunity to kill people, right? Even if you didn't go that far, you've at least taken out frustration on people or objects, right? I can't imagine how you don't get it."

The psychopath began to move. By contrast, Yuki's legs stayed locked in place.

"Killing doesn't lift your spirits, you know," Kyara continued. "All it does is delude the self. You go on a rampage and tire yourself out until nothing makes sense anymore, and that carries you through until your anger naturally subsides. It's the same as drinking away your worries about the future. No matter how many lives you take, it never fixes the root issue."

Kyara shot another glance at Yuki.

"That's it." The psychopath was wearing a look of rage. "Those eyes. Every single person looks down on me when they hear I'm a killer. It pisses me off to no end. If you ask me, everyone is setting me up to be a murderer. They all intentionally incite bloodlust. There's not a single person I've killed because I wanted to deep down. I'm a product of my environment. If you want to live, then you better straighten yourself out like Moegi."

Kyara reached into her pocket and immediately pulled out an object—a bamboo leaf.

"I don't care if you don't get it." Kyara began to walk at a hurried, brisk pace.

Yuki repeatedly tried commanding her legs to move. *Move. Move. Move. Move.* But they wouldn't listen. They showed no signs of budging.

If she wasn't able to move, then she had no option but to stop the other woman in her tracks.

"—No way," Yuki said. "Are you saying *she* lost to your venting?!"

Although Yuki didn't refer to her mentor by name, Kyara understood she was referring to Hakushi.

"Huh?" she responded in a casual tone. "Can't you see the answer with your own two eyes?"

"But she's the most experienced player around! This was her ninety-sixth

game!”

“She seemed weak to me.” Those words came readily out of the psychopath’s mouth. “Besides, her body moved all wrong.”

(34/43)

At this point, not only was Yuki frozen, but the chill had also reached her head. As she stood there in a trance, the psychopath’s voice reached her ears.

“Just look inside her. Strange, isn’t it?” Kyara glanced to the side, and as if connected to her gaze by a string, Yuki’s eyes followed suit.

They landed on Hakushi’s gruesome corpse. The sight was so disgusting that the term *corpse* sounded out of place. The body had been cut into so many pieces, doubt arose as to whether such a heavily mutilated object would even constitute a cadaver under national laws.

Yuki focused her eyes on each individual body part.

She couldn’t tell just by staring whether the sight was “strange.” She didn’t know what the inside of a healthy person’s body looked like, but now that Kyara had mentioned it, some elements did seem off. The rib bones were so thin that they looked like carrots that had been painstakingly cultivated in an apocalyptic wasteland, and the organs had turned dark, like tanned boys on a soccer team. Additionally, the number of organs strewn across the ground seemed rather low, considering that everything had been pulled out. If Yuki recalled correctly, the human mannequin in her old science classroom had more organs than this.

“Well, she had almost reached one hundred games, you know,” Kyara said. “It’s only natural she’d grow frail.”

Yuki remembered that Hakushi had taken a three-month hiatus after her previous game. That seemed like far too long just to make preparations. What was the reason?

“She should’ve stopped playing after raking in all that dough,” the woman continued. “Who knows, maybe she was addicted.”

Hakushi’s objective of clearing ninety-nine games was difficult to understand

to begin with, but now it was even more incomprehensible. After her body became like *that*, did it never cross her mind that it was time to stop? Kyara's theory that Hakushi was addicted was the only thing that made a lick of sense. Was the goal of clearing ninety-nine games so appealing that it was worth straining her already-worn body to its limits?

Yuki was speechless.

The image of that Stump's dying face surfaced in her mind. The sound of screeching insects filled her head.

"Satisfied?" Kyara asked.

That was as far as the distraction went. Kyara began to move once again.

"Anyway, she was no match for me. Not just her; that goes for everyone." She quickened her pace. "And I'm sure you won't be any different."

(35/43)

Amusingly, even in this situation, Yuki remained frozen in place. She watched blankly as Kyara sped up from walking to dashing with a stern look on her face, pointing the tip of the bamboo leaf at Yuki. If Yuki were watching this scene play out via a screen, she would have had a much stronger reaction. Upon thinking that the game was being broadcast somewhere, she felt ashamed at her inability to act.

Her hand twitched, as if signaling to her this was no time to be standing still.

In it was a morning glory.

Yuki quickly raised her arm.

Three gunshots rang out in succession. She was confident that all three had hit her target. Although she had little experience wielding a firearm, the accuracy of her shots could be attributed to either the gun being, as Sumiyaka put it, in a "women's size," or her being a natural. All three bullets lodged themselves inside Kyara's head, and the woman's vigorous movements became a thing of the past. Kyara's body bent so far backward that Yuki could clearly see the contours of her chin and neck. Slipping ever so slightly forward, the

killer fell onto her back.

A flurry of leaves swirled around in the air with a rustle. A moment later, all sound vanished from the room. It was quiet enough for Yuki to hear the beating of her own heart.

As the smell of gunpowder tickled her nose, Yuki looked over at Kyara. The woman had collapsed on the ground, full stop. Blood streamed out from her head, immediately transforming into gobs of white fluff upon coming in contact with the air. One of her legs was bent at an angle like that of the person on an emergency exit sign, and her hands were flung upward as if in a celebratory pose. It was a pathetic sight. Although her right hand still clung to the bamboo leaf, that had to be the result of rigor mortis or some other effect; Kyara was in no state to maintain her grip. She had taken three bullets to the head. Not even Hakushi would be able to survive that.

Regardless, Yuki thought she needed to check just to be sure.

She lowered the morning glory. It had run out of bullets. She tossed it aside and replaced it with the second pistol she had taken from Moegi.

However, she didn't raise it up. Yuki approached the corpse unguardedly.

That was her biggest mistake.

Kyara snapped upward like a mousetrap.

A bamboo leaf came flying in Yuki's direction.

Even though it had momentum, considering Kyara's posture and the fact that it wasn't a throwing knife, it didn't quite pick up enough speed to be called fast. Nevertheless, it caught Yuki off guard. She'd had lingering doubts over whether Kyara was dead, but she had not at all imagined the woman would counterattack so quickly. Yuki had been careless.

And the price she paid was the right half of her vision.

The wound that formed ran quite deep, and she pressed against it with her hand. Either her eyeball or some spot around it had been sliced, but she couldn't pinpoint the exact location because the entire area throbbed in pain. Without any time to assess her condition, Yuki focused her left eye on her

enemy.

The psychopath had gotten to her feet. Even now, blood streamed from her head.

Yuki looked at where her bullets had landed. Flesh, blood, agarwood-colored hair, and white fluff all blended together to the point where it was difficult to differentiate one thing from another, but mixed in was an unexpected color that corresponded to none of the aforementioned components—*silver*.

Beneath the skin of Kyara's head was something with a silver sheen.

"What...?" Yuki couldn't help but voice her confusion. "What is that?"

"Can't you tell?" Kyara knocked against the part that had become exposed, resulting in a *metallic clang*. "Armor. It's embedded all over my body. To protect me from bullets, of course."

Yuki was speechless. She had thought herself accustomed to things beyond the realm of common sense. Death games. The Preservation Treatment. Regular players who joined these games for no particular reason. There was never a moment in this industry where you weren't face-to-face with the unbelievable, so Yuki had assumed she had the nerves to remain unfazed by most things.

But this? This was on a whole other level of ridiculousness. There was only one way to react to something like this—

"Are you *crazy*?! That's like turning yourself into a cyborg!"

"Don't put it like that. The armor only covers part of me. The majority of my body is still human."

"That goes against the rules—"

"Please. If this violates the rules, then so do silver fillings. Let me ask you, how can you possibly be willing to play with a defenseless human body? Why did it never occur to you to modify yourself to gain an edge? I can't wrap my head around it."

Yuki raised her morning glory. But she had no idea where to aim. Kyara had mentioned that the armor was embedded all over her body. Was it right to

assume her every vital spot was protected? In which case, Kyara's legs would be good targets. But it was possible she had also reinforced the bottom half of her body to maintain balance. From her swift movements earlier, it was unlikely every last inch of her flesh was guarded—

Of course, Kyara had no reason to wait for Yuki to organize her thoughts. The psychopath broke into a dash, clutching a second bamboo leaf that had seemingly appeared out of thin air.

Whatever, Yuki thought. She aimed for the center of the woman's chest and pulled the trigger. Her shot missed—or rather, Kyara had dodged out of the way. Just because she had armor didn't mean she had any reason to take every single hit. Belatedly, it occurred to Yuki that she had allowed Kyara to calculate the right time to dodge by making it obvious where she was aiming.

For her second shot, Yuki fired her gun like a cowboy in a Wild West-style duel. Hit. The bullet grazed the side of Kyara's stomach but failed to stop the woman's charge. At this point, Yuki had finally gotten the hang of things. Next, she decided to shoot at Kyara's stomach and repeated the same action as earlier, but nothing came out. The gun had run out of bullets. Moegi had only shot five bullets from this morning glory during their fight, so Yuki immediately realized she must have fired another shot prior to their encounter. Regardless, the gun was empty.

She held the morning glory sideways and used the body of the firearm to parry the oncoming bamboo leaf. But their weapons did not lock together. Kyara immediately pulled back her bamboo leaf and thrust it forward. Yuki dodged. Since she had no armor under her skin, she had the advantage in mobility. While continuing to evade the onslaught of attacks, she grabbed her own bamboo leaf and transitioned to offense.

Yuki's first strike was absorbed. Not by a bamboo leaf—*by the woman's neck*. The weapon directly struck one of Kyara's vital spots, but it did nothing more than slice a thin layer of skin. Not even an old man's Adam's apple would offer that much resistance. A shiver ran down Yuki's spine as it dawned on her that her opponent had embedded armor in a spot that likely affected her day-to-day life.

Since Yuki had struck metal, her hand went numb for an instant, something that did not go unnoticed by her enemy. In that split second, Kyara stabbed Yuki three or four times.

“.....! Aaah!” Yuki gave a pathetic shout.

After letting it all out, Yuki opened up some distance. She glanced down for a quick second. White fluff was pouring from her body. She didn’t care about where and where and where and where she had been stabbed. For now, her limbs were still functional, and that was the only thing she needed to be concerned about.

“Ha-ha!” laughed the psychopath maniacally. “Coming for my neck, huh? I like your spunk! You’ve got leagues more sense than any of those weaklings on the ground!”

Kyara pointed her bamboo leaf at a bunch of bodies lying nearby. Among them was Hakushi’s corpse.

For some reason, that filled Yuki with blinding fury.

“Stop enjoying this!” she yelled, discarding the last remaining shreds of civility she had been showing the woman. “What, you’re a battle junkie in this day and age? Get with the times!”

“That’s rich coming from you!”

“What do you know about me?!”

“One look tells me everything I need to know! You’re an open book!” Kyara raised her voice even louder. “You’re the same as me! You find this world comfortable, don’t you?!”

A sensation assaulted Yuki, one that felt like her heart contracting. One that felt like she had lost her sense of balance or like her self-worth was falling apart. It was something she hadn’t experienced since elementary school, a sensation that had not once washed over her since she had stopped associating with people and society.

It was the feeling of finding herself on the back foot in an argument.

Kyara continued, ““This place is just the best! There’s not a single rule I

disagree with! I can kill anyone who rubs me the wrong way! Not only can I do what I want with no repercussions, but sometimes adorable girls even fawn over me, too! After experiencing this paradise, I can't bear to go back to the normal world! This is the only place for us! I dream of dying here!' That's what you think deep down inside!"

No.

Yuki wanted to refute it. She wanted to say that this wasn't the only place for her. That she didn't dream of dying here. That she had chosen this path of her own volition. That she had decided for herself to live in this world. It irritated her to be labeled as someone who'd fled here on account of failing to assimilate into the real world. She wanted to assert that she was proud of her life, that she was different from the psychopath in front of her, who acted on impulse alone.

But that would be a lie. Yuki lacked what was necessary to make those claims.

To win—to survive—she needed a *story*.

Yuki yelled out, "Don't lump me in with you!!"

(36/43)

Yuki spoke without much thought.

But as though words had the power to alter reality, the moment the statement flowed out of her mouth, a feeling of satisfaction washed over her. Her entire body was wrapped in a comforting illusion, one that signaled, however surprisingly, that she had perhaps truly believed what she said.

Yuki understood what her mentor had meant about wanting a goal.

What she needed was a script. A coherent narrative.

Why would I win against this psychopath? Why did I survive instead of that Stump? Yuki needed to prepare an explanation that tied everything together. It had nothing to do with strategy. It had to do with her spirit, her mind. Before thinking about actual tactics, she first needed to talk some sense into her heart, which currently wallowed in inferiority. She couldn't fight while harboring weakness. She didn't need Hakushi to tell her that.

And there was a suitable explanation sitting right in the palm of her hand.

Still, Yuki had no need to choose that explanation in particular. There was no problem with going with a story about avenging her mentor by making the killer pay, or about wanting to prove her strength as a human. But choosing *that* explanation gave birth to a certain sense of pride, as it allowed her to set a path for herself of her own volition.

It was a declaration to lead her to victory. A calculated act. Yet for a forced explanation, it felt strangely natural. Perhaps it was true. From the moment she had laid her eyes on Hakushi's corpse, or maybe, just maybe, from the moment she had met her mentor, *that desire* lay somewhere inside her.

Yuki didn't know the truth herself.

But regardless, she voiced it out loud.

(37/43)

"I'm *her* protégé!" Yuki shouted. "I'll inherit her will! I'm going to clear ninety-nine games! And there's no way I'll lose to a punk like you!!"

(38/43)

She kicked herself off the ground, charging forward in desperation.

While running, Yuki touched the blade of the bamboo leaf with her fingertips, confirming that it was still sharp. She didn't double-check with her eyes, for her gaze was fixed solely on Kyara.

Kyara twisted her lips into a slight grin. Her smile was not one of condescension, nor was she expressing ridicule at Yuki for having given an impassioned statement that wouldn't even be found in a popular modern shonen manga series. Rather, Kyara's smile hinted at *interest*, suggesting that she was excited that things had unexpectedly developed in a fascinating way. Yuki didn't truly know why Kyara was smiling, nor did she try to find out. Her enemy was a homicidal maniac. It was obvious Yuki would get stuck in an abyss if she tried to peek into the woman's head.

Yuki used her free hand to toss an object—a pine cone.

A cloud of smoke formed between the two of them.

Since Yuki had thrown the pine cone herself, she kept moving. She ran straight into the smoke without a second thought. She accurately remembered the distance between her and the killer, and as she had envisioned in advance, she pushed forward, stepping left, right, left, throwing her entire weight into one thrust of the bamboo leaf at the spot where Kyara should have been standing.

The blade cut through empty air.

Yuki spotted the brown color of a jumper dress out of the corner of her right eye.

The next moment, a stinging pain ran through her shoulder. She let out a wail but didn't stop moving. While nearly dropping the bamboo leaf in the process of applying pressure to her shoulder, she kept running, slipped past Kyara, and dashed out from the smoke screen.

Her goal wasn't to ambush Kyara. After all, Yuki wasn't like Moegi, and she knew a simple smoke screen wouldn't be enough to paralyze her opponent. She had thrown in an attack thinking there was an off chance she could have landed a lucky hit, but her main objective lay beyond where Kyara had stood.

Yuki wasn't running away. She was dashing forward until she reached *that*.

With her hands on *that object*, Yuki crouched down. She turned to find Kyara coming out of the smoke screen.

A moment later, Kyara's eyes widened in surprise. That was to be expected, as the object Yuki had her hands on was no weapon or anything of the sort.

It was the raccoon dog mascot—the explainer of the game.

(39/43)

Yuki had found it strange. Hakushi had taught her to avoid fighting hardened killers because a player like Yuki was a pro at survival, not killing. Yuki had only just now realized the weight of her mentor's words. She could tell she wasn't

capable of making any headway in a head-on battle.

However, Kyara had said that Hakushi “seemed weak.” Yuki had thought she was referring to Hakushi’s worn-down body after clearing ninety-five games. The impact of hearing her mentor being called weak had overwhelmed Yuki so much that she hadn’t realized it sooner, but upon further reflection, she found Kyara’s statement odd.

That was because it implied Hakushi had *fought* against Kyara, a hardened killer. With a body she couldn’t win with. Against an opponent she had no chance against.

The reality was that Hakushi’s corpse lay on the ground. The fact that it had been completely dismantled likely meant she had angered Kyara to a considerable extent. A battle had unmistakably taken place. That was the unshakable truth, no matter how odd Yuki found it to be.

And Hakushi would never enter an unwinnable fight.

Considering those reasons, Yuki wondered—was there any chance Hakushi had left something behind in this room? Hakushi had realized she wouldn’t be able to win with her body, so could she have instead left behind a gift for whoever came by the base camp to ensure victory against Kyara?

Maybe Yuki was grasping at straws. Maybe it was simply what she wanted to believe. However, after scanning the hall with that theory in mind, one spot in particular stood out. *The raccoon dog mascot*. Yuki had only heard about it after waking up late, but apparently, it had been the explainer for the Bunny Team. Its abdomen had been torn open, and electronic parts jutted out from it. Hakushi had mentioned how the Bunnies ganged up to give it a thrashing.

The fact that Yuki had been able to see the mascot’s abdomen meant that it had been lying face up, but at this present moment, the mascot was *in a face-down position*. As the raccoon dog was unlikely to be attached to the floor, it was possible someone had simply kicked it since then, but there was an undeniable possibility that hadn’t been the case.

That was because Hakushi had also said the following:

“Everyone ganged up on it.

“It could’ve been hiding an item.”

While paying no heed to the surprised Kyara, Yuki flipped the raccoon dog onto its back.

As she expected, concealed inside the mascot’s abdomen, on top of the circuitry, was a single morning glory.

(40/43)

Yuki readied the gun and fixed her aim on Kyara. Since her right eye had been damaged, she only had half her normal field of vision, but even what she could see appeared blurry. Although she hadn’t shed any tears, she felt like she was about to.

Yuki was moved by her mentor’s deed.

How had Hakushi felt when she hid the weapon?

Her mentor could have easily used the gun for herself. Just because her body wasn’t in the best condition didn’t mean she couldn’t aim at a target and pull the trigger. That would have increased her chances of victory, however slightly. Yet she had intentionally concealed the weapon. To prevent it from falling into Kyara’s hands. For the sake of whoever came into this room at some point in the future. In hopes that whoever it was could take advantage of a fortuitous opportunity and catch the psychopath off guard.

Most likely, the gun still had all eight bullets.

Yuki fired three shots in rapid succession. She had already decided where to target—Kyara’s shoulder, stomach, and right leg. The same locations where she had shot Moegi. Yuki surmised that even though that Stump didn’t seem to have had any armor beneath her face, she could have had embedded some under other body parts, since she was Kyara’s protégé. As Moegi had left those three body parts unguarded, Yuki hazarded a guess that the same applied to Kyara.

Yuki had no idea if her theory was correct, but at the very least, the bullets hit where she had intended.

Kyara's legs stopped, and she toppled over. As she hit the ground with her knees, she made a motion with her right arm—to throw the bamboo leaf. However, Yuki stood there unflinching with the gun, not caring where Kyara would aim.

Yuki fired three more rounds.

Her fourth shot missed. That was because Kyara had lowered her body.

Her fifth shot hit Kyara in the head. That was because Kyara had fallen forward.

Yuki fired her sixth shot at the same time Kyara threw the bamboo leaf. Since their respective positions made it difficult for Yuki to aim for the stomach, Yuki settled for shooting the woman's left thigh. The bullet hit. While that was fortunate, Yuki had no time to dodge the projectile thrown at her. The bamboo leaf came flying at her chest—

—but failed to pierce her skin. Instead, it hit the button of the bunny-girl costume before falling lifelessly to her feet.

Yuki chuckled. Maybe her costume wasn't half bad after all.

She fired a seventh shot. It hit Kyara's right eye, which had opened wide in surprise at the unexpected unforced error. An eye for an eye. No matter how strong an enemy's defenses, their eyes and mouth would always be unguarded. Remembering that bit of common sense from a battle manga series, Yuki fired an eighth bullet into the woman's mouth. It hit its target. Yuki tried pulling the trigger again on the off chance a ninth bullet may have fired out of some stroke of luck, but it was pointless. Instead, she picked up the bamboo leaf Kyara had tossed at her.

Yuki approached the psychopath, who was lying face down on the ground.

She stabbed her. In the face. In the chest. In the hands and feet. Exactly how someone would stab in a fit of unbridled rage. Kyara appeared to have run out of bamboo leaves of her own and began resisting with her fingernails, but Yuki wasn't scared. She stabbed again. Now she was less concerned about inflicting damage and more concerned with delivering a finishing blow, so she gradually switched to targeting the woman's vital spots. To little surprise, there was a

metal plate under Kyara's chest, so she instead went for cutting up the woman's abdomen and guts. Yuki stabbed and stabbed and stabbed and stabbed, plunging her weapon so deep that her whole fist sank deep inside the woman's stomach.

Finally, she noticed that Kyara had breathed her last.

(41/43)

Yuki's field of vision widened. She stopped moving her hand and calmed her breathing, finally becoming able to see what she had done. Before her lay Kyara's corpse—its stomach had been ripped to shreds. Although it didn't compare to the far more gruesome state of Hakushi's body, it was undoubtedly a corpse, with zero odds for a bet to the contrary.

Yuki looked at her left hand, which was wrapped around the bamboo leaf. It had not been stained with blood. Due to the Preservation Treatment, any blood would turn into white fluff. Her hand was clean, to the point where nobody could imagine she had just committed murder. The sleeves of her bunny-girl costume didn't have a single stain, either.

The bamboo leaf fell out of her hand.

Yuki sprawled out on the ground.

Her guard was completely down. It certainly was not the best action to take. After all, one of the people she'd assumed was dead earlier had turned out to be alive. The game was still ongoing. A surviving Stump could very well have been hiding in the shadows, waiting for the chance to pounce on her while she was wounded. Yuki understood that possibility existed but couldn't act on it. Physically and mentally, she was overcome with a fatigue that trumped anything she had felt in past games.

It was exhaustion derived from fulfillment.

Yuki let out a deep sigh. Light streamed in from between a synthetic cluster of trees. Her body grew lighter and lighter, as if undergoing photosynthesis, and if nothing disturbed her, she might have fallen asleep right then and there.

That was no more than a hypothetical, however. In reality, she sat up when

she heard the echoing of footsteps.

Standing at the entrance to the room was a Stump. A girl with dazzling indigo eyes. Exhaustion showed on her face. Her hands were clasped as if praying to the gods, and between her hands was a bamboo leaf.

A Bunny versus a Stump. A standoff the game had originally intended.

The girl stood there for a while, paralyzed.

“Are you going to kill me?” Yuki called out.

“...No.” The girl raised her hands, allowing the bamboo leaf to fall to the ground. “I’ve already killed five. I’m done.”

“Huh.” Yuki felt surprised. “That’s impressive.”

“I’ve had enough. I never want to be involved with another of these games ever again.”

A bashful smile formed on Yuki’s face. The tightening of her skin hurt her right eye. “I can imagine.”

(42/43)

And so the game came to an end.

Candle Woods broke the record for the game with the greatest number of players, as well as the record for the lowest rate of survival. Out of 330 players, 298 Bunnies and 29 Stumps perished. Only a mere 3 players survived.

Player name: Yuki. Real name: Yuki Sorimachi.

Player name: Airi. Real name: Airi Hitose.

Player name: Hakushi. Real name: Manami Shiratsugawa.

(43/43)



3. A Lifetime Job

(0/7)

Yuki awoke inside her 120-square-foot studio apartment.

(1/7)

This was the moment Yuki despised most about the games: seeing the all-too-familiar view of the ceiling of her tiny, run-down apartment. The scene beat into her groggy head that the fun times spent in a death game, on the one and only stage in the world where she could thrive, had ended. Yuki always wound up in a sour mood moments after waking.

She sat up and got off her mattress. Her mobility was back to normal. Her right eye had also been healed, and no issues with her depth perception lingered. She took off her clothes to check her body and found that all her stab wounds had vanished. She had been fully restored. Yuki praised the ability of the organizers to heal everything, even down to her eyeball.

She grabbed the phone next to her pillow. It was five o'clock in the afternoon. Yuki then realized the scenery outside the window had a reddish glow. She hadn't needed to check the time—it was clearly around sunset.

It was still too early for Yuki to stir. She was a night owl at her core. She always fell asleep at seven in the morning and woke up at seven at night, for a shocking grand total of twelve hours of sleep. That was the natural outcome of her having continued to lead a directionless lifestyle since graduating middle school, and it was also why she thought of herself as a shameful person who couldn't face society. She couldn't leave her apartment during the day, out of fear of being seen in public.

Guess I'll doze off, she thought. Two more hours until it's my time of day.

Since her drowsiness had completely faded, she probably wouldn't be able to

fall to sleep again, but she could at least lie on her back and stare off into space. Or she could be like an unhealthy teen and kill time on her phone. Either way, just two more hours. Yuki threw the covers she had once removed over herself and went to lie down.

The next moment, an uneasy feeling took form inside her heart. It resembled discontentment, or perhaps more so guilt. A voice in her mind questioned if she was okay with doing this. Yuki had returned to sleep after waking up on countless occasions, but this was the first time anything like this had happened. While fidgeting around under her covers, she searched for the reason.

Immediately, she stumbled across the answer—it was because she had inherited the will of her mentor.

The words Yuki had blurted out without thinking to survive Candle Woods were having a much more profound impact on her than she expected. It was quite surprising, but a mentality had slowly started to sprout within her that she needed to get her act together, that she needed to behave like a proper successor to Hakushi.

As time went on, her unease rapidly expanded.

“Ahhh...” Yuki sighed and removed the covers, which could no longer repress her feelings. “I just need to get up, right?” she mumbled to herself before stepping outside.

(2/7)

The only place for her to go was the convenience store a five-minute walk away.

Yuki worried that a new voice would enter her head instructing her to fix her dietary habits, but those fears were unfounded. While carrying a ready-made convenience store meal packed full of sugar, sodium, fat, and preservatives, she returned to her apartment.

Buying food was always a challenge for Yuki. That was because her appetite would take control of her, forcing her to inhale anything she bought. Unusually, Yuki set down the meal and let it rest on the floor this time. She went to open

the door to her closet, took out clothes that had been folded—or rather, balled up—in the corner, and laid them out on the floor.

They were the outfits she had worn in past games.

The previous costume was that of a shrine maiden. Before that was a delinquent's outfit. Prior to that was a school swimsuit, and so on. All in all, six outfits lay spread out on the floor. In addition to those, Yuki remembered she had thrown out two other costumes due to mold, making eight in total. Combined with the bunny-girl outfit from the most recent game, that made nine.

That was Yuki's current record.

Nine games. Ninety more to go before she reached ninety-nine. Her goal was a long way off. Yuki had never reflected on any past games, but she clearly remembered one or two predicaments she had been in. She felt proud at having been able to fight through hell and back. After surviving especially perilous situations in her previous two games and, of course, Candle Woods, she had only managed to string together a streak of nine victories. She would have to replicate that winning streak ten more times to reach ninety-nine.

Yuki once again realized just how insane her mentor had been—and just how ambitious her bluff was.

Still, in a mighty tone, she said, "Fine, I'll get it done, dammit!"

(3/7)

Going back in time...

(4/7)

The Candle Woods game had ended.

After the threat of the psycho killer had been eliminated, the few survivors—Yuki and Airi—stayed in a room furnished with living necessities that had been set up in the maze. As the organizers determined the game had reached an equilibrium and had no reason to continue, it was terminated early on the third

day. After retrieving the two players, employees of the organization running the game bustled about to clean up the venue.

Among them was an employee who'd entered the large room that had served as the Bunny Team base camp. The place where three hundred Bunnies had first gathered, where Hakushi had been killed, and where Yuki and Kyara had held their fatal showdown. The employee stood before Hakushi's body, which had been left in its gruesome state.

"I have come to pick you up," the employee said to the corpse. "The game is over. *You no longer need to play dead.*"

After a short while...

...a single creak echoed out.

Moments later, the grating sound multiplied. *Creak, creak, creak, creak, creak, creak, creak, creak, creak, creak, creak, creak, creak, creak, creak, creak, creak, creak, creak, creak.*

When it had finally ceased, the gruesome corpse, in all its grisliness, *was on its feet*. Even though its bones, its muscles, its entrails, and its every last part had been destroyed, even though it had been personally dismantled by the psycho killer, the body stood, covered entirely with white fluff. It resembled a Halloween costume.

"You never change," said the employee, Hakushi's personal agent. "I think this every time, but how in the world do you do that?"

Hakushi didn't respond. The employee wondered if the woman couldn't speak in her current state.

The employee had no idea what made *that* possible. Hakushi had undergone a body modification procedure not officially sanctioned by the game organizers. Compared to the Preservation Treatment and the psycho killer, who had embedded armor inside her head, what Hakushi was capable of was out of this world. It was physically impossible for a human body to stand without muscles or bones. Her revival could only be explained by some mechanism that transcended the laws of physics—perhaps it was even a form of sorcery.

Yet, it wasn't impossible. She was a one-in-five-hundred-trillion superhuman,

after all. It wouldn't be strange for her to have been possessed by one or two gods.

"Congratulations. This makes ninety-six games." The employee clapped. "Three more to go. I look forward to your performance."

Those words were genuine. In these games where human lives were entirely dispensable, clearing ninety-nine games was nothing short of a miraculous accomplishment. Anyone would want to witness such a feat if they could.

However, Hakushi shook her head.

".....?" The employee looked puzzled.

"I'm retiring," Hakushi responded in her own voice. She seemed utterly monstrous. "I've toyed with so much of my body, it's finally catching up to me. Since I couldn't keep up with *her*, I don't see how I can do another game."

"I beg to differ."

"No, I can tell. Call it a woman's intuition," Hakushi remarked with an old-fashioned phrase.

"Um, would that be because you passed on your will to your protégé, Yuki?"

"Yep. It's exactly as she said to that killer."

"Her words seemed to please Kyara, oddly enough."

"Probably because that woman had protégés of her own. Must have resonated with her."

"Were you expecting Yuki to say what she did?"

"I didn't think she'd express it *that* clearly. Wonder what happened."

"Would you like to view the archived footage? If you are intent on retiring, I will invite you into our club."

"No, I'll pass. I'm not a fan of peeping." In a way, her words were a total rebuke of these death games.

The employee grinned. "I suppose you are worried about whether she will be able to cross thirty games."

“The Wall of Thirty, huh?”

The phenomenon where veterans who had cleared games with ease suddenly experienced a rapid decline in their chances of survival around their thirtieth game. It served as a kind of ritual to distinguish mere veterans from top players.

“That brings me back,” Hakushi continued. “I still think about my thirtieth from time to time.”

“I am overjoyed to hear that. There is nothing that encourages us more than players reminiscing over our creations.”

“I might as well ask now, but what’s the truth behind the wall? Do the organizers intervene?”

“Of course not. It brings us great delight to witness the birth of new star players. While we may adjust game design to allow for more survivors, we never make it harder to survive.”

“Really...?” Even without a mouth, Hakushi seemed to let out a sigh. “Well, I don’t need to worry about Yuuki. She’s not the kind of player who would stumble at the thirtieth game.”

“Oh? Why is that?”

“What do *you* think?”

“Could you have figured out a trick for overcoming the Wall of Thirty and conveyed that to your protégé?”

“Guess again. The Wall of Thirty is a *curse*. And there’s no surefire way to beat a curse.”

“Then does your protégé have extraordinary skills? Perhaps on your level or even greater?”

“Nope. Sure, she’s above average in her instincts, but she’s no better than Sumiyaka in that respect.”

“Despite her appearances, could she be an extremely hard worker?”

“Please. She’s the laziest girl in the world. Just ask her agent.”

“Then has she undergone the same body modification as you?”

“I haven’t said a word to her about this, nor do I plan to.”

“...Then I haven’t the foggiest. Why?”

Part of Hakushi’s face contorted. She was smiling.

In a joking tone, she said, “Because she’s a phantom. Curses don’t work on phantoms.”

(5/7)

Back to the present.

(6/7)

Yuki spent some time thinking—what did she need to do to survive ninety-nine games?

She did everything she thought of. First, she cleaned her room. She even took out her garbage. She bought a notebook and pen and finished reflecting on all her past games. She also bought a large quantity of clothes hangers and hung her game outfits in her closet. She even improved her eating habits and decided to work on fixing her inactive lifestyle, one step at a time.

At last, she had reached the final thing.

“...This isn’t embarrassing at all in the games, so why do I feel like this...?”

Yuki touched her warm cheek. Her uneasy face was captured by the front-facing camera of her cell phone and reflected on the screen. The reason for her discomfort could be found below her neck. What currently adorned her body was not her indoor tracksuit nor her outdoor tracksuit.

It was a marvelous schoolgirl sailor-style outfit.

She had bought the outfit online, and it was designed to resemble a school uniform. There wasn’t a particular reason she needed it to be a uniform, but since Yuki lacked the fashion sense to dress herself well, she went with this option. And now Yuki felt immense regret for her decision. Age-wise, she would pass for a high school student, so it shouldn’t have felt like wearing a costume,

but for some reason, her brain found it extremely embarrassing.

Nevertheless, as the time to depart was approaching, she had no leeway to prepare a different outfit. Nor could she afford not to go. In order to survive ninety-nine games, she had a desperate need for *knowledge*. After all, a girl who had no idea what the story of “Kachi-Kachi Mountain” was about, who couldn’t even calculate the odds of surviving ninety-nine games, had no shot at becoming a top player.

Yuki slipped on a pair of loafers she had also bought online and left her apartment.

The sky was tinged with red. It was the evening. The hour of day when an ordinary school would have long adjourned already, but that was no problem, as Yuki was going to attend evening classes.

Her cell phone indicated she didn’t have much time, so she ran. As the phantom girl sprinted off, her skirt fluttering in the air, many passersby turned their gazes to her, but Yuki didn’t feel the least bit embarrassed. Her feet hit the pavement more strongly than they ever had before, and no matter how far she ran, exhaustion never crept up on her. She figured it must have been because she was following her own path. The *goal* that now existed in the very core of her being had imbued every inch of her body with strength.

From now on, I’m going to live as a player—and play death games to put food on the table.

(7/7)

Commentary

[nigozyu](#)

“A work that is not for everyone and divides readers.” Occasionally, there are novels sold under that kind of tagline. In practice, stories produced outside of mainstream trends play a significant role in expanding the breadth of genres available on the market. I would say it’s even more preferable for such works to win a Newcomer Award, as this one did. That is because there are already plenty of talented, well-renowned authors creating novels that stick to mainstream trends.

However, at the same time, I find myself thinking the following: “A work that is not for everyone and divides readers”—do those words not also serve as an excuse to silence criticism of a piece’s quality? “This novel is not for everyone, so it’s perfectly natural if it fails to reach a large audience.” “Even if it doesn’t resonate with nine out of ten readers, it’s fine if it deeply resonates with the remaining one.”

As someone with the responsibility to delight as many people as possible by introducing works of entertainment into the world, I find those beliefs and attitudes to be somewhat insincere. “It’s fine if this work reaches even one person who needs it...”—it shouldn’t be. When penning a work of entertainment, there is no reason to slack off on trying to delight as many readers as possible.

Now, taking that into consideration, how should this light novel—one that sharply divided judges of the MF Bunko J Newcomer Award—be assessed? At the very least, I believe it has not sacrificed quality for the sake of being branded divisive. From the introduction all the way through to the final sentence, I felt a prevailing intention of wanting to entertain as many readers as possible.

For example, this novel does not rely on the impact of overly grotesque descriptions typical of death-game stories. Rather, it intentionally leaves shocking scenes to the reader's imagination and, in some instances, makes use of a unique mechanism in the Preservation Treatment to avoid unnecessarily graphic depictions, thereby reducing instinctive responses of disgust in readers.

This work has also been written with the visuals of a light novel in mind, with girls participating in death games wearing maid outfits or bunny-girl costumes. So much contributes to raising the quality of this novel—a speedy tempo that keeps the reader on the edge of their seat, a moderate amount of perspective switching, a nonlinear narrative to build on the story within this single volume, and so on. It is sharpened in the ways it should be, without compromising the story, world-building, structure, or prose.

So, then, how will this work be received by the world? I suspect it will truly divide readers. There is likely only one major element that will draw mixed opinions—the protagonist, Yuki. Will readers accept her or not? I look forward to seeing lively discussions among a wide range of readers over social media and other websites.

Commentary

Takemachi

My honest impression upon reading this novel? “Wow, that was vulgar.”

There have been plenty of works in the past involving so-called death games. Those include films like *Cube*, as well as novels like *Battle Royale*, *The Crimson Labyrinth*, and *The Incite Mill*. As a more recent example, the drama series *Squid Game* has also generated considerable buzz. The plethora of works in this genre has led to the birth of a certain formula that anyone can easily enjoy, one that many modern death-game-themed stories follow. Namely, “Someone casually joins or is abruptly thrust into a game of death, and after one flustered participant dies, panic ensues”—or something along those lines.

At first, I began reading this novel expecting something like that. And I was surprised. Astonished, even.

This is a mysterious work that completely shuns the common tropes of death games.

First of all, the protagonist has no earnest reason to participate. She isn’t driven by a motive that people can easily empathize with, like a desire to get rich or to return to her ordinary life. Nor are there elements of panic in the early passages. Among the uneasy participants, the protagonist remains calm and collected, and even begins to politely explain what she knows about the games to the other players.

I can fully understand how this work received mixed reviews during the final stage of the MF Bunko J Newcomer Award judging process. But hang on a second. Things get completely absurd, even in the first half. Wouldn’t changing the story to the following be a better fit for a work of this genre?

“Girl X woke up and found herself lying in the dining room of an unfamiliar mansion. Upon looking around, she saw five other girls like her. They all start

panicking, claiming to know nothing about the situation, but amid the confusion, they work together in an attempt to escape the building. But nefarious traps stand in their way and claim the lives of half the group. Still, they make it within arm's reach of the exit. Suddenly, Girl X betrays her companions and escapes all by herself. In reality, she was an experienced death-game player and simply pretended to be a beginner in order to survive.”

After writing that much, it suddenly hit me: My revised version was far more boring.

Although this novel is undoubtedly absurd, changing any of that absurdity would cause it to lose its appeal. (Or perhaps, I simply lack the writing sense to do it well.)

At the very least, I was unable to understand the protagonist's frame of mind. However, that inability to understand—the fact that it didn't fit within my framework of thought—was extremely appealing. That means the way to enjoy this novel is simple: Savor everything about the absurdity on offer. It was a mistake for me to try to understand.

The absurdity accelerates in the second half. A psychopath appears and starts killing anyone and everyone while completely ignoring the game. And in the end, Yuki's mentor comes back to life via some mysterious mechanism. “What in the world is going on?!”

Although these impressions of mine may seem more like words of rage than praise, it would be boring otherwise. What is expected of Newcomer Award recipients is not the skill to faithfully follow a template. It's the power to break accepted formulas and eschew common sense. Unique qualities that cause some readers to frown at reckless developments and others to turn the pages in eager anticipation. The power to inspire an entirely distinctive impression in readers is unmistakably present in this novel.

Afterword

...Please allow me to explain...

Hello, this is Yushi Ukai. Although my comments do not compare to those of the preceding two authors, I am in charge of this section.

First, I would like to express my gratitude to all the readers who have made it this far. In this day and age, reading an entire book is no easy feat. Time is more precious today than at any other point in the history of humankind, and there are plenty of forms of entertainment that are more accessible than novels. I have nothing but gratitude for you for having chosen to spend your precious time reading this work. Thank you very much.

Now, for the readers who have completed this volume...I believe all of you shared a certain sentiment while reading. It is one I have heard expressed in many different ways, from the day I received the Newcomer Award until today, and even on the preceding commentary pages.

“What on earth is this?”

“Does this concept really work as a story?”

“What in the world convinced this dude to write something so dreadful?”

...I say this again, but please allow me to explain.

The year was 2021. My life had rotted away into an ugly state. Perhaps it was because I felt no prospect of making any progress in my life of submitting drafts, or maybe because I had quit my part-time job knowing that I lack proper life skills, or maybe because the state of the world made it far too easy to come across distressing news, or maybe because of the low atmospheric pressure.

(As the logical result of having quit my part-time job,) my savings dwindled, and as I found myself living out hopeless days, I spent more and more time

mulling over life and death. Through that, I came to hold a number of different convictions. Every human slowly approaches death. The last thing remaining in the hands of someone who has lost all hope is the right to choose how to die. Deciding on how to die is the same as deciding on how to live.

Naturally, those convictions began to appear in my writing. I remember clearly when I first noticed hues of chaos in my submissions. Those hues would grow more profound as time went on, becoming something so strong that not even I could control them, before finally leading me to the genre where they fit most appropriately.

And thus, this work came into being.

Long story short, since I hadn't had many positive results, I became more and more disturbed until I wrote this disturbing story. When this work was recognized for the MF Bunko J Newcomer Award, I commented that I never expected to win an award, and that was the truth. For such a warped story to lead to such an achievement, the world certainly works in mysterious ways.

That being said, I didn't find it to be a completely ridiculous occurrence. I think there are plenty of similar happenings and similar people all over the world.

Now for the acknowledgments.

First, I would like to express my utmost gratitude to my editor, O, and Nekometaru. I confess that Yuki is only the way she is because of their direction. They pulled me by the arms as though I were a captured alien, shaping this story into its current form. Thank you very much.

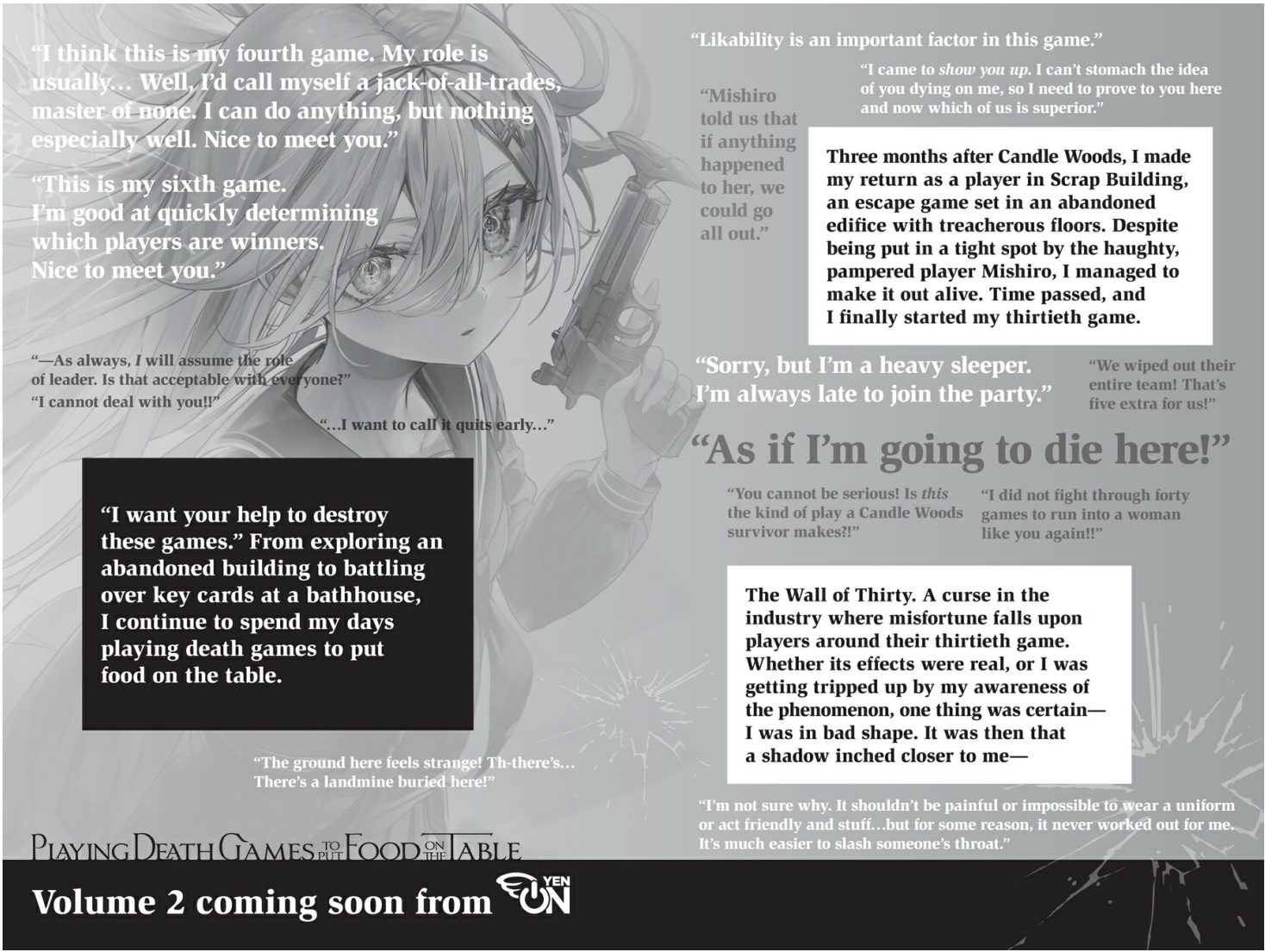
I would also like to thank nigozyu and Takemachi for their commentaries. Because of the nature of this novel, I can imagine how difficult it must have been to write up comments... I offer you my apologies and twice as much gratitude.

My thanks also go out to the MF Bunko J editorial department and the judges of the Newcomer Award. You all are why I'm able to write these words right now. Thank you very much. To the proofreaders, designers, printing company employees, bookstore staff, and again, every single one of my readers... My appreciation extends to as far as it can reach. If it is not too much to ask, I

would appreciate it if you would accept my gratitude.

...By the way, maybe you have heard about it already, but this series has an official X account. There is a QR code printed nearby, so I would appreciate it if you could follow the account. I am certain good things will happen if you do.

Well, then... If fate will have it, I hope to see you back for the second volume of *Playing Death Games to Put Food on the Table*.



“I think this is my fourth game. My role is usually... Well, I'd call myself a jack-of-all-trades, master of none. I can do anything, but nothing especially well. Nice to meet you.”

“This is my sixth game. I'm good at quickly determining which players are winners. Nice to meet you.”

“—As always, I will assume the role of leader. Is that acceptable with everyone?”
“I cannot deal with you!!”

“...I want to call it quits early...”

“I want your help to destroy these games.” From exploring an abandoned building to battling over key cards at a bathhouse, I continue to spend my days playing death games to put food on the table.

“The ground here feels strange! Th-theres's... There's a landmine buried here!”

“Likability is an important factor in this game.”

“Mishiro told us that if anything happened to her, we could go all out.”

“I came to *show you up*. I can't stomach the idea of you dying on me, so I need to prove to you here and now which of us is superior.”

Three months after Candle Woods, I made my return as a player in Scrap Building, an escape game set in an abandoned edifice with treacherous floors. Despite being put in a tight spot by the haughty, pampered player Mishiro, I managed to make it out alive. Time passed, and I finally started my thirtieth game.

“Sorry, but I'm a heavy sleeper. I'm always late to join the party.”

“We wiped out their entire team! That's five extra for us!”

“As if I'm going to die here!”

“You cannot be serious! Is *this* the kind of play a Candle Woods survivor makes?!”

“I did not fight through forty games to run into a woman like you again!!”

The Wall of Thirty. A curse in the industry where misfortune falls upon players around their thirtieth game. Whether its effects were real, or I was getting tripped up by my awareness of the phenomenon, one thing was certain—I was in bad shape. It was then that a shadow inched closer to me—

“I'm not sure why. It shouldn't be painful or impossible to wear a uniform or act friendly and stuff...but for some reason, it never worked out for me. It's much easier to slash someone's throat.”

PLAYING DEATH GAMES TO PUT FOOD ON THE TABLE

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