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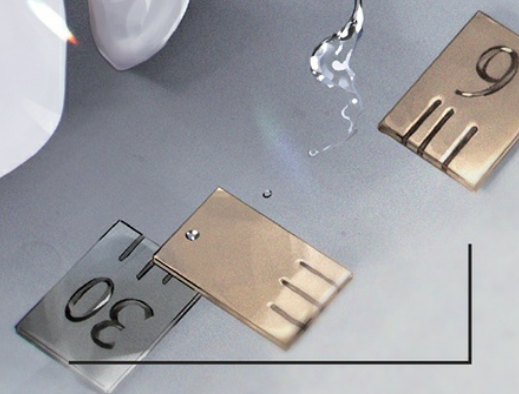
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Yushi Ukai

Illustration by |  
Nekometaru

PLAYING  
DEATH GAMES  
TO PUT  
FOOD ON THE TABLE

20:24:10:15





# PLAYING DEATH GAMES TO PUT FOOD ON THE TABLE

2 Yushi Ukai  
Illustration by |  
Nekometaru





## Yuki's Agent

What Yuki knows about the organization behind the games:

NAME

**Unknown**

STRUCTURE

**Unknown**

PARENT ORGANIZATION

**Unknown**

SIZE

**Unknown, but likely quite enormous**

FOUNDING DATE

**Unknown. At least over ten years old, according to my mentor.**

DEGREE OF RECOGNITION

**Zero, outside the shadows of society**

MISSION

**Unknown. However, they appear to receive funding from the audience members.**

TOTAL GAMES HELD

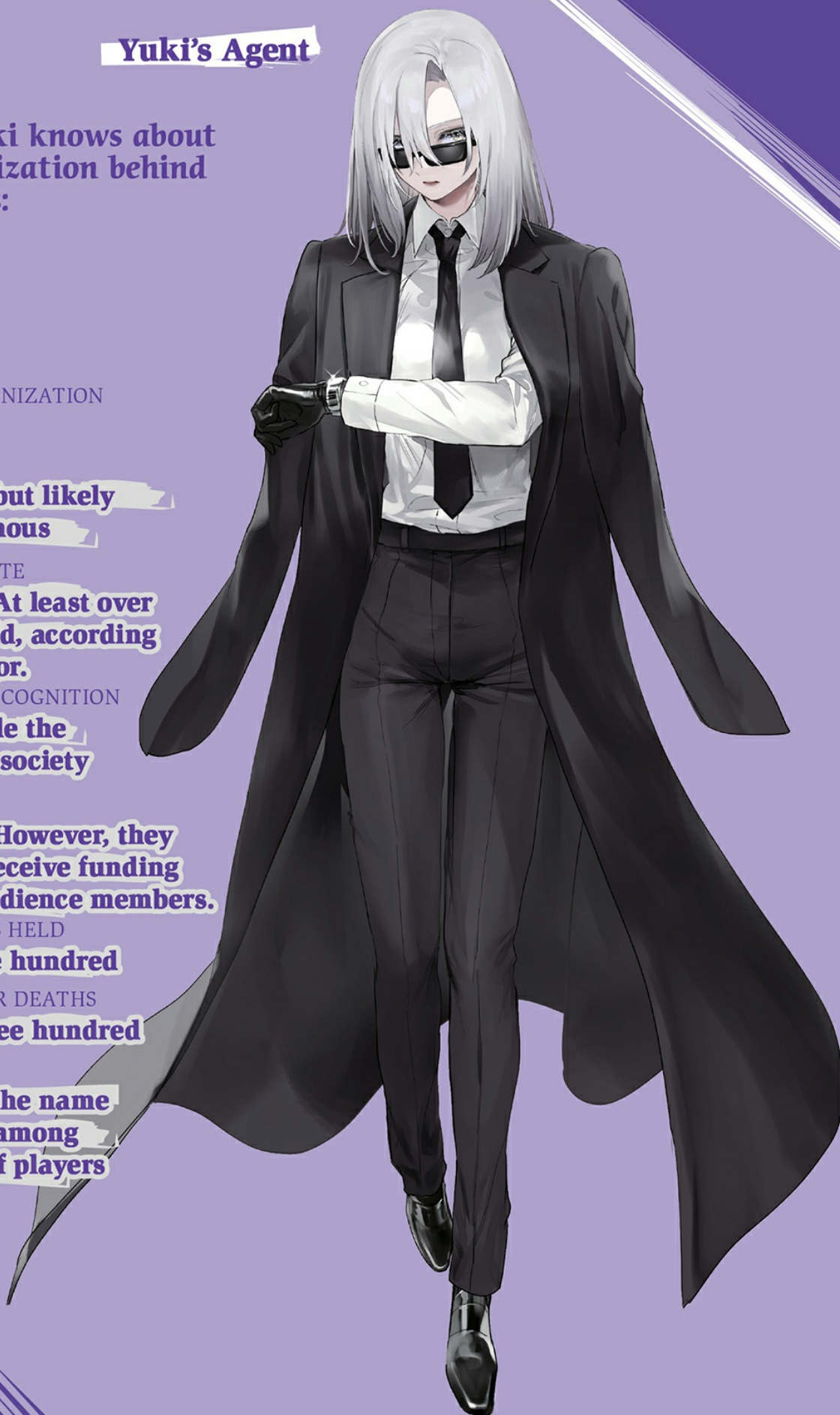
**At least one hundred**

TOTAL PLAYER DEATHS

**At least three hundred**

FOUNDER

**Kowloon—the name whispered among a number of players**



SCRAP BUILDING

"I'm good at quickly figuring out which players are winners. Nice to meet you."



Keito



Chie

"Sure, I think of her as a friend, but it's not like I'd drop everything to go save her."



Kotoha

"...I want to retire early..."



Mishiro

"I have had enough of your poppycock!!"



Yuki

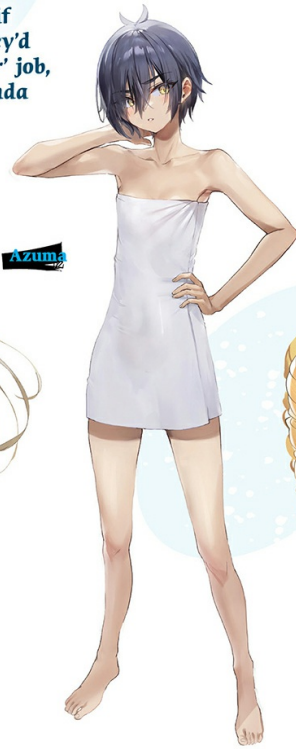
"Likability is an important factor in this game."

"I'd be pissed off if  
someone said they'd  
find me a 'proper' job,  
like I'm some kinda  
charity case."

"We wiped out  
their entire team!"



Riko



Azuma

"Enough toying with me!  
Repent with your life!"



Mishiro



Yuki

"Sorry, but I'm  
a heavy sleeper.  
I'm always late  
to the party."

GOLDEN BATH





# PLAYING DEATH GAMES TO PUT FOOD ON THE TABLE

2

Yushi Ukai

Illustration by | Nekometaru

## Copyright

Playing Death Games to Put Food on the Table, Vol. 2

Yushi Ukai

Translation by Kevin Yuan

Cover art by Nekometaru

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**1. Scrap Building (#10)**

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I don't care when I die, but I refuse to bite the dust while having lost to her.





**(0/30)**

Yuki awoke on top of a cold concrete floor.

**(1/30)**

Yuki realized she was lying atop concrete right after coming to. The mercilessly cold, rough texture that was characteristic of the material made its presence known from beneath her.

She got up off the floor. A white dress adorned her body, the kind that would look stunning under a midsummer sky and that female characters in visual novels would often be wearing. It was her outfit for this game. Although the dress complemented Yuki's ghostly pale complexion, the summer sky, which would otherwise render the scene picturesque, was nowhere to be found.

Her surroundings were dimly lit, almost dark. The lights were off, and no sunshine streamed in through the windows. What kept the room from being completely devoid of light was a monitor displaying a digital number on one of the walls. Its red glow took the form of the digits 05:32:12, and the number ticked smaller and smaller with each passing second. In five and a half hours, the countdown would reach zero. At this stage, however, Yuki had no way to determine whether that would signal the *start* of the game or its *end*.

Still, the room was awfully dim. Relying on the faint light of the monitor, Yuki took a look around. The space was roughly the size of a living room found in an average middle-class home, though notably, the floor was littered with glass shards and wood scraps. It was a room inside an abandoned building—or at least, that was what it seemed like. Perhaps the organizers had repurposed a building that had fallen out of use into the setting of a game.

As she walked around, Yuki hit her foot on something. She looked down to



find a backpack lying on the floor. It was not one of her belongings—rather, it appeared to have been supplied for the game. Yuki unzipped it and found a lavish bounty of provisions inside.

Among the items, the first to catch Yuki's eye were emergency rations wrapped in aluminum foil, which perfectly matched her mental image of emergency rations. She decided to try one of the three individually wrapped portions. It tasted like an energy drink manufacturer's first attempt at making solid food; Yuki quickly concluded that the food in this game fell on the lower end of the quality spectrum.

Next, Yuki's attention gravitated to some first aid supplies. They were all run-of-the-mill items, the kind a hiker, not a combat medic, would carry. Specifically, they consisted of an assortment of household medications and supplies, including bandages, ointment, eye drops, and stomach medicine. Although Yuki had no idea what kind of game awaited her, she figured the supplies would probably—scratch that—*certainly* be of no use.

After rummaging through the backpack in hopes of finding something more useful, she stumbled upon several practical-looking pieces of survival gear. As with the first aid kit, they were ordinary items, such as a sewing kit and a flashlight. Among them, however, were tools that could be used to take another's life, including a knife and a rope.

In addition to those, one final object was inside.

“.....?”

Yuki scrutinized the object carefully, trying to make heads or tails of it.

It was a white sheet of paper, one that had a sturdier and more pleasant texture than ordinary printer paper. Both sides were blank, so its purpose was impossible to identify at a glance. Could it be used in first aid somehow? Did she simply not know what a modern gauze pad looked like?

After folding it, gently tugging at it, and playing around with it for a little while, she reached a tentative conclusion about what the sheet of paper was for. Then she returned all the items she had laid out on the floor into the backpack, which she took with her as she exited the room.

The hallway looked far more dilapidated than the interior of the room where she'd woken. Yuki would have to walk carefully if she wanted to make it out with her legs and dress intact. Although the hallway also lacked any light fixtures, the digital countdown timers attached to various locations on the walls provided some illumination.

Directly adjacent to Yuki's room was a flight of stairs, but she decided to survey the entire floor before checking it out. She opted against using the flashlight that had come with her backpack. Since Yuki was a night owl, the level of darkness in the hallway presented no impediment to her movements whatsoever. Beyond that, she also wanted to conserve her flashlight's battery. With the game taking place in a dark building, sources of light would almost certainly be crucial. While remaining vigilant of her surroundings, Yuki proceeded down the hallway.

She took a lap around the floor. A worn-out floor map that had fallen onto the floor indicated that she was currently on the fifth story. The lack of windows prevented any light from shining in from outside, making it impossible to deduce the time of day. After confirming there were six rooms on this floor, Yuki debated which to investigate first as she began her second lap. Typically, she would have started with the room that had the biggest door, but as the doors on this level were all the same size, she had no choice but to choose one at random.

The room she entered was exactly the same size as the one she had woken up in.

The interior was completely dilapidated, illuminated only by the glow of a digital timer in the wall.

A girl was sound asleep on the stone concrete floor.

"...Oh?"

*That's unusual*, Yuki thought.

She had stumbled upon a sleeping player only a handful of times before. Players received a sleeping pill before each game, and since they were extremely effective on Yuki, she was almost always the last to wake. She had been working on adopting healthier lifestyle habits lately, and her sleep quality

had also improved somewhat, so perhaps those changes had affected how her body responded to the medicine. Those thoughts ran through Yuki's mind as she approached the sleeping girl.

Like Yuki, the girl was wearing a white dress, but since she gave off the impression of a well-to-do young lady, the outfit looked far better on her. Her gorgeous blond hair was coiled into princess curls and seemed more valuable than genuine gold. It wasn't every day you came across a hairstyle like this, so Yuki was overcome with awe. Her mischievous spirit took over, instilling in her an urge to touch the sleeping girl's hair.

Yuki tiptoed up to her, and all of a sudden—

The girl turned over in her sleep.

It happened in the blink of an eye. The girl's momentum caused her hair to fan out, obstructing Yuki's entire field of vision. In an unexpected twist, her wish to touch the girl's princess curls had come to fruition, albeit at the cost of her sight. Before her vision cleared, several cold objects were thrust against her neck.

Yuki immediately recognized them: *fingernails*—long ones, belonging to the girl.

“—Would you care to identify yourself?” the girl asked, blinking her long lashes once. At the same time, the force against Yuki's neck intensified.

Yuki raised her hands, as if staring down the barrel of a gun.

“...My name is Yuki. Nice to meet you.”

**(2/30)**

They moved swiftly after that. The princess-like girl circled around to the other rooms to wake the remaining players, and within five minutes, everyone on the floor had gathered in a single room.

“This was the only room without anyone inside,” said the princess, looking around. “Was it simply left unoccupied to begin with? Or could there be another player lurking somewhere? I suppose we will uncover the truth upon



progressing with the game.”

The princess turned to the players she had gathered. Yuki followed her gaze.

There were five people in the room, including Yuki and the princess. Every player appeared to be an underage girl, and all were clad in white dresses. The choice of a white dress for the game outfit was puzzling. With the stage being an abandoned building, was it meant to bring to mind the image of a phantom? If that were the case, then no player was more suitable for this game than Yuki herself.

“First, shall we follow the accepted protocol and commence with self-introductions?” the princess suggested, staring straight at Yuki. “Although the majority of us are already acquainted.”

“Huh?” Yuki again looked around at the other players. By some odd coincidence, their eyes were all trained on her. “Um... Hang on. Do you all know one another?”

“Indeed. We have collaborated in multiple games in the past. You are the sole stranger in our midst.”

Similarly, Yuki had never met any of the others before. Three months ago, the pool of death-game players had been almost completely decimated in a game called Candle Woods. These girls must have entered the fray since then.

“Guess I’ll go first,” Yuki said. Although she couldn’t quite pinpoint what compelled her to feel introducing herself first was the reasonable conclusion, she continued without a second thought. “My name’s Yuki, and this is my tenth game. It’s been a while since my last one, but my expertise should still come in handy.”

Yuki noticed a scowl formed on the princess’s face the moment after the word *tenth* came out of her mouth. The girl had likely not yet reached that milestone. That was only to be expected, assuming she had debuted as a player after Candle Woods. The other three were probably in the same boat.

“Nice to meet you all.” Yuki concluded her introduction with a nod.

“...Is that everything you have to say?” the princess shot back.

“What more is there to say?”

“You could speak on the skills and abilities you possess, for instance. Unless you share that information as well, it will be impossible to determine the optimal way of handling you.”

Yuki had never been met with such a response before. Introductions at the start of a game typically covered only player names, game count, and whatever a player felt like sharing—at least, based on the tradition Yuki was accustomed to. Considering the length of time she had stepped away from the games, it was possible that quite a few things had changed during her absence.

After some thought, Yuki said, “...Um, since I’m guessing this is an escape game...I’m confident in my ability to detect traps. I’m also pretty decent at close combat. On the flip side, I’m not so good with, you know, games that require intelligence and stuff. I never really went to school.”

Yuki looked straight at the princess. “That enough for you?”

“Yes, very well,” she responded. “That tells me what I need to know.”

Her words stung.

“Allow me to go next,” the princess continued. “You may call me Mishiro. As for my experience, this game is my eighth. I take pride in my superior leadership abilities, so I ordinarily assume the role of organizing and coordinating players.”

Yuki had already presumed as much, but apparently this curly-haired, haughty princess had the highest game count among the others and served as their leader. That explained her antagonistic attitude. Naturally, she wouldn’t take kindly to someone more experienced coming onto the scene.

“Go ahead.” Mishiro gestured to the girl next to her.

“I’m Kotoha,” said the girl in a voice that suggested she rarely spoke. “This is my fifth game. I, um...I think I can support everyone from an intellectual standpoint.”

Yuki got the impression that the girl was the kind of person to serve as a student librarian, from her bookish-sounding name of Kotoha, her self-proclaimed intelligence, and her downcast eyes behind the lenses of her

glasses.

The girl's glasses certainly stood out. Spectacled players in these death games were, as one might expect, extremely rare. That was because the Preservation Treatment players underwent prior to a game corrected visual acuity to a certain degree. Maybe Kotoha had a complicated condition that couldn't be resolved even with the medical technology of the organizers. Or maybe she had a different reason for wearing glasses—they could have been a pair of fakes she wore as a memento of her late grandmother, for instance. Although Yuki felt an intense urge to ask, she was hardly in an appropriate situation to do so.

"It will be quite problematic if you only 'think' so," Mishiro said, her eyes closed. "How many times must I tell you? Do not use expressions that convey a lack of self-confidence. That attitude has no place in a game of life and death."

"Ah. I...I'm sorry." Kotoha bowed.

The exchange was rather uncomfortable to watch, but it painted a clear picture of the pecking order between the two girls.

"That's all," Kotoha said before passing the baton.

"Chie heeere!" said the next girl in a voice so drawn out that Yuki could see the extra vowels linger in the air. "I'm pretty sure this is my fourth game. My usual role is... Well, I'd call myself a jack-of-all-trades, master of none. It's sorta like I can do pretty much anything, but nothing *suuuper* well. Nice to meetcha!"

This girl, who wore her brown hair in a side ponytail, seemed to be a savvy one. In any class of any school, there would always be a student who didn't belong to a specific clique yet could naturally gel with any group—Chie gave off that exact impression. Yuki wondered why someone who was the very picture of a smooth operator was playing in these death games, but again, it didn't feel appropriate to ask.

"You're up!" Chie pointed at the final girl.

"I'm Keito." The girl flashed a suspicious-looking smile. "It's my sixth game. I'm good at quickly figuring out which players are winners. Nice to meet you."

The moment she said the word *winners*, Keito winked in Mishiro's direction.

Keito gave off an overwhelmingly shady aura. She had a tall, thin frame and a smile that hinted she was hiding something. Although she was every inch a girl, for some reason, she had the presence of a wicked man, like a host club worker who would use his silver tongue to weasel money out of naive customers, or a television industry insider who sucked up to celebrities only when they were in their prime.

Yuki figured that Keito was probably a “clingy” player—someone whose playstyle was to find a capable player, butter them up, and ride on their coattails to survival. In this case, Keito’s target was none other than the princess, Mishiro. Yuki knew from experience that clingy players tended to last surprisingly long, but due to their disposition, they never broke into the top echelon of players.

With all five girls having spoken, the self-introductions were over—at least, for those in the room.

“I wonder if there’s a sixth player,” Yuki remarked.

This was the only room on the floor that had been empty, suggesting the possible existence of a sixth player. The venues of games were not always a perfect match for the number of players; in fact, Yuki had been in numerous situations where there had simply been extra rooms prepared. Still, this was a death game, and Yuki couldn’t bring herself to ignore anything that seemed even the slightest bit unusual.

“That’s a pointless topic to pontificate over,” said the blond princess, Mishiro. “As per my earlier statement, the truth will reveal itself as we progress further in the game. Don’t you think we should focus our attention on the matter at hand?”

While Yuki found her reply rather standoffish, she didn’t feel strongly enough to grumble about it. Instead, she indicated her agreement with an “I guess so.”

“Then let us move on. As for how we will proceed...” Mishiro paused to shoot a glance in Yuki’s direction before continuing. “As usual, I will assume the role of leader. Is that agreeable to everyone?”



Keito was the first to nod—how fitting for a clingy player. Shortly afterward, the bookish Kotoha and the sociable Chie bobbed their heads as well.

The only head that remained motionless was that of the sole newcomer to the group, Yuki.

“Very well,” Mishiro said. “As the majority are in agreement, I will again take the—”

“I’m not objecting or anything, but...,” Yuki said, deciding to express what was on her mind. “Can you explain why you should be in charge? I mean, I’m the one with the most game experience here. What makes you think you’d be the best leader?”

“My fit for the role and the trust placed in me,” Mishiro swiftly answered. “Game experience is not a pertinent factor. Leading others requires a different set of skills than those needed to merely survive on your own. Moreover, none of us know anything about you. From a comprehensive standpoint, it would be more reassuring for everyone else to have someone they’re connected to, such as myself, serve as leader. Would you not agree?”

*She has a point there,* Yuki thought, keeping her mouth shut.

“Furthermore, I find you somewhat suspicious.” Mishiro snickered.

The girl had a dazzling smile that would bewitch anyone. If it wasn’t filled with scorn, Yuki might have completely fallen under its spell.

“Based on what I have observed, I cannot possibly imagine that this is your tenth game. Your comportment lacks the slightest sense of refinement. And considering how easily I overpowered you earlier, I find it difficult to believe that you are ‘decent at close combat.’”

“Are you calling me a *liar*?”

“Not at all. Whatever gave you that idea? I simply believe your statements should be more consistent with reality.”

Yuki glanced at the other players. Their gazes implied that Yuki was the one out of line.

In fact, Yuki was ready to admit as much herself. Despite Mishiro’s caustic and

irritating attitude, the girl had a point. It was true that game experience had nothing to do with suitability for leadership. Yuki had never served as a leader, while Mishiro had likely done so several times in the past. There was also no denying that Mishiro had pressed her nails against Yuki's neck. And although Yuki had no awareness of it, her own behavior had probably indeed reeked of being amateurish.

Still, Yuki was not without a defense for herself. She had only just returned from a long hiatus. Ever since the end of Candle Woods, she had been deep cleaning her apartment, improving her lifestyle habits, and completing procedures for enrolling in a high school, all of which had kept her away from her profession. Of course, she had done everything to level up as a player. She had no choice but to acknowledge that she was in poor form at this very moment, but as soon as she found her groove—or if she had still been her pre-Candle Woods self—she wouldn't just accept playing second fiddle to a domineering princess.

However, in death games, one's abilities in the moment were *everything*. It would be utterly pathetic to make excuses right now.

"Fine." Yuki retracted her fangs. "Mishiro, I approve of you as leader."

"Then it is unanimous. Shall we begin the game?" Mishiro turned away from Yuki and looked over at the red number displayed on the wall—05:11:13. "The countdown points to this being an escape game. So let's take the direct approach and head down the stairs."

Escape games were one of the various categories of death games. As the name suggested, the goal was to escape from a certain space. The majority of the time, players would have to push forward while avoiding deadly traps that riddled the venue. Compared to the other categories, escape games were the most common, perhaps due to the relative ease of achieving proper game balance.

Mishiro unzipped the backpack at her feet. It was the same kind as the one supplied to Yuki. After taking out a flashlight, Mishiro flicked it on and off.

"Is there one in your backpacks as well?" she asked.

This time, everyone—Yuki included—nodded.

“In which case, we should use them one at a time. A single flashlight will suffice for illuminating the path before us. As we do not know how long each one will last, it would be prudent to conserve our batteries as we proceed.”

Yuki concurred. If there was a purpose to the darkness, that had to be it. In this game, light—in other words, one’s field of vision—was a resource that had to be strictly managed.

The five players stepped out into the hallway and advanced in single file through the darkness. They had decided via a game of rock-paper-scissors who would take the front with a flashlight in hand, and so the lanky Keito was illuminating the path, with the other four girls following behind her like party members in an RPG.

While attuning their senses to the depths of the darkness, the group headed down the hallway. When they reached the end, they began descending the stairs, but as soon as they neared the landing, Keito abruptly stopped in her tracks.

“...Whoa there,” she remarked.

“What is the matter?” Mishiro asked.

Keito responded by shining the flashlight on the floor, revealing an open hole that was large enough to easily swallow a single person whole.

“Ah... I see.” Mishiro’s tone implied everything had clicked for her. “It appears the floors of this building have collapsed at various points. I suppose that means we must shine the flashlight at the floor or risk falling through.”

“No, that’s not all...”

“?”

Keito directed the beam of light into the hole. The players all peered down.

“Eek...” The reaction came from Chie.

A dead body lay at the bottom.

It lay in a prone position. Although the face wasn't visible, Yuki could tell the body was that of an underage girl, clad in a white dress. The darkness obscured the sense of distance, but the girl had likely fallen one story below, onto the fourth floor. Her neck was bent at an impossible angle from her torso—she was undeniably dead.

The girl's head appeared to have smashed against the floor, as her *insides* were spilling out from the point of impact. However, they were neither the red hue of blood nor the translucent color of cerebral fluids—they were white. Thanks to the Preservation Treatment, the body modification procedure performed on players prior to a game, any internal body tissue exposed to air would puff up and transform into white fluff that resembled the cotton inside a plushie. That was one method used by the organizers to turn death games into a form of show business, ensuring that player fatalities were palatable on the screen. As Yuki had never seen a *genuine* dead body, she had no idea if the treatment achieved its intended effect.

"She must be the sixth player." Mishiro's voice was calm. "She most likely awakened before the rest of us and fell while wandering around carelessly."

The existence of the body explained the mystery of the unoccupied room on the fifth floor. Not only that, it also cleared up something else that had been bugging Yuki—the reason why she'd woken up so early. Yuki's room was situated directly adjacent to the staircase. That meant the noise of the pitiable player crashing onto the fourth floor would have sounded the loudest to her. The realization that she'd slept as deeply as usual this time was a slight disappointment.

"What a foolish girl," Mishiro scoffed. "Sauntering around this collapsing building while paying no attention to the floor, without even thinking to first wake up the other players..."

"You took the words right out of my mouth," Keito added.

"No, um..." It was the bookish girl, Kotoha, who spoke up next.

"What is it, Kotoha?" Mishiro asked.

"Um, *that*..."



“The word ‘that’ by itself does not tell us anything.”

Despite the pressure from Mishiro, Kotoha remained unable to put her thoughts into words. In the end, she pointed to what she was referring to—a flashlight that was lying next to the left hand of the sixth player’s silent corpse. Presumably, it was the one that had been supplied to the girl.

“Ah...” After laying eyes on the flashlight, Yuki understood what Kotoha was getting at. “So this was, um...” She turned to Kotoha, thinking of the right word to use. “This was a *pitfall*.”

Kotoha nodded, indicating that was what she had wanted to say.

The presence of a light source next to the body implied that the sixth player—or rather, the *first* player—had been walking while lighting her path. Yet in spite of that, she had ended up in a hole.

There was only one explanation for this: The hole had opened up the moment the girl stepped over it. In other words, she had plunged into a pitfall.

Clearing this game would not be as simple as proceeding while shining the way forward. Stepping onto a soft patch on the floor would send them crashing headfirst onto the floor below.

This was a *minefield game*.

## (5/30)

The group stepped out onto the fourth floor. There had been no “mines” past the landing of the staircase. None of the players had gotten hurt, but the distance they had walked had chipped away at their nerves, and the time they had spent descending the stairs had eaten away at the flashlight’s batteries.

Typically, staircases connected every floor of a building, but this game was never going to be that forgiving. The stairs came to an end after the group descended a single story, leading to the endless stretch of darkness of the fourth floor. The only light came from the dim glow of digital timers affixed to various spots on the walls. The stairs leading to the third floor were located somewhere on this level, but without any clues as to their whereabouts, the group had no better strategy than to conduct an exhaustive search.

They started by investigating the body they had seen from above. Observing it up close granted them two new pieces of information. The first was that the girl was no longer in this world, beyond a shadow of a doubt. The second and far more vital finding was that the flashlight beside the girl had run out of battery. It must have stayed on even after the girl died.

Although the players failed to acquire any additional batteries, they rifled through the dead participant's backpack for useful items before leaving her corpse behind.

The group turned their efforts to clearing the floor. Faced with the reality that "mines" in the floor would pull them under when stepped on, they slightly altered their formation. Keito remained at the front of the line, while the other four players followed a short distance behind, the same as before. However, they had added a physical connection between them—a rope that had been among their provisions, which now linked together the hands of the four players to Keito's torso.

"I'm not a fan of how we're walking her like a dog..." Yuki commented, looking at Keito out in front.

The purpose of the rope was obvious—to keep Keito from hitting the floor if she stepped on a "mine." Since the rope had to support the full body weight of a person, having Keito hold on to it or wrap it around her arm wouldn't be enough. It needed to be tightly wound around her torso, but as a consequence, it looked like the group was walking a dog or parading around a slave.

"That's the way it has to be. Safety far outweighs appearances," Mishiro said.

Yuki had to admit that Mishiro had a point. Besides, this arrangement was not going to last forever. It would be far too great a burden for the same player to stay at the head of the line for the entirety of the game, so the group planned to reassign the role after every floor. Once they had safely reached the third floor, or if Keito had succumbed to a "mine" like that poor sixth player, the remaining girls would play another game of rock-paper-scissors to determine the next line leader. Yuki wanted to avoid the responsibility if at all possible, but completely dodging it would open a new can of worms. If her prediction about the game was correct, the act of inaction would likely come at a great cost.

“—Wait, Keito,” Yuki called out.

Keito’s back twitched as if an electric current had shocked her through the rope, and she stopped in her tracks.

She turned around. “What is it?”

“It looks a bit dangerous up ahead.” Yuki squinted to get a better view of the path illuminated by Keito’s flashlight. “I think we should take a different route.”

“...Would you care to explain why?” Mishiro asked. Although contempt toward Yuki for speaking out was written all over her face, Mishiro seemed willing to at least entertain her opinion.

“There’s a surveillance camera up ahead in an obvious location.”

Yuki pointed to the ceiling, and the flashlight in Keito’s hands gravitated toward the same direction. The beam of light hit a camera. It had not been masterfully concealed, and it was by no means small—the camera was conspicuous, like one that would be set up for crime deterrence rather than surveillance.

“Whoa, how’d you notice that?” Chie asked.

“My eyes are used to the darkness,” Yuki answered.

“What is the significance of the camera’s mere presence?” Mishiro asked. “There are plenty of them around.”

Although players rarely had the opportunity to think about it, these death games were designed as a form of entertainment. Every move they made was continuously being transmitted to viewers with peculiar tastes through surveillance cameras, which were set up all over game venues, including, of course, in locations that showed a blatant disregard for the law. As such, it wasn’t out of the ordinary for participants to stumble upon cameras.

“The problem is it’s intended to catch our eye,” Yuki responded. “Don’t you think there has to be something here for them to set up a camera that large?”

“Are you suggesting they are deliberately tipping us off to the presence of a trap? Why would they do that?”

“To add to the entertainment value. The same thing happens in hidden

camera shows, where the envelope gets pushed so much that the production threatens to get exposed.”

Did that explanation manage to convince Mishiro? Or had she already made up her mind and was simply egging Yuki on? Or maybe, was she not at all convinced, yet something about the situation had bothered her?

Whatever the reason, Mishiro responded, “Very well. Let’s turn around.”

So their thorough search of the floor reached its first turning point. The group doubled back, headed down the center path of a three-way junction, and continued walking with Keito leading the way.

However, not a minute later—

“Wait,” Yuki called out. “This path also looks suspicious. Let’s turn around.”

“...What is it this time?” Mishiro squinted and looked up at the ceiling. “I see no cameras around. Would you care to explain how you came to that conclusion?”

“...Intuition, I guess. A woman’s intuition,” Yuki responded with a hackneyed phrase.

She was not trying to dodge the question. Rather, she could only describe it as her intuition at work. When she looked at the big picture—the red flags raised by the exceedingly ordinary-looking path, the relaxed atmosphere of the entire area, the relative complacency of the players compared to how they’d been earlier, the progress they had made in the building and the overall game, the ploys of the organizers in past games, and so on—she simply got a bad feeling about the situation. Although she was unable to put it into words, she felt that this area was more suspicious—*far* more suspicious—than the path with the conspicuous camera.

“It’s hard to explain, but I think we better stay away.”

“Yuki.” Mishiro’s gaze was cold. “At this moment in time, I am still prepared to accept you for who you are.”

“What are you talking about?”

“I can sense how you feel, but I implore you to make the courageous decision.



If you do that, the rest of us will meet you halfway.”

“If there’s something you have to say, then cut to the chase.”

“Are you sure? Then I will put it bluntly: Quit being so stubborn.”

The very next moment, the area was consumed by darkness. Keito had turned off her flashlight, perhaps realizing that the exchange would last awhile.

“You have gone too far to back down, yes? After all, you have lied about this being your tenth game. To convince us of your experience, all you needed to do was act like a ten-time player, however minimally. And I have to hand it to you, pretending to detect danger was a crafty little trick. As long as you succeeded in turning us around, your lie would go unnoticed. Nevertheless, this battleground of life and death is no place for your silly games.”

*Quit crafting a narrative in your head*, Yuki thought.

“Quit crafting a narrative,” Yuki said aloud. “You sure have a wild imagination. These games suit you, Mishiro.”

“Keito,” Mishiro said, “pay her no heed. Please continue onward.”

Keito turned the flashlight back on, casting a glow on her worried face. “Are you sure?”

“Yes. You need not lend an ear to anything *she* has to say.”

*Seriously?* Yuki thought. *You won’t even think about turning around? Aren’t you the one being stubborn here by telling her to ignore me and keep going?*

Yuki glanced at the other players—Chie, Kotoha, and Keito—in succession. Chie looked away awkwardly. Kotoha appeared to be deep in thought and was too preoccupied to notice. Keito’s eyes darted back and forth between Mishiro and Yuki before she made up her mind.

“I’m going ahead,” she said.

Her pace seemed awfully slow to Yuki. She took one step forward. Followed by a second. Even after the third, the fourth, and so on, the ground showed no signs of collapsing.

“.....”

Relief washed over Yuki.

“Yuki.” Mishiro’s gaze appeared as cold as ever, but her eyes also showed a hint of pity. “Anytime is fine. Should you choose to apologize, I am willing to forgive and forget.”

Yuki felt a sensation like blood pooling inside her heart. “I’ll think about it,” she replied.

## **(6/30)**

Yuki did have a defense for herself. She had only said the path was “suspicious”; she didn’t remember saying it was guaranteed to collapse. As to the probability of whether the floor would give way, there was obviously a greater chance it wouldn’t. The gamble was one that didn’t favor Yuki to begin with. If the probability of the path containing a “mine” was 5 percent, or even a mere 1 percent, that was more than enough risk to justify turning around. Just because it turned out there were no traps did not mean Yuki had spouted lies. That was the logical argument.

However, the situation had its own circumstances. Explaining her thinking would almost certainly not help her case. The path had not collapsed. Yuki had made an incorrect prediction. That was the long and short of it. There was no use wasting her breath on a third-rate player like the phony princess. Still, Yuki had no choice but to acknowledge Mishiro’s charisma—or at least, her ability to turn any tide in her favor. Yuki was at a disadvantage. Keeping her mouth shut and putting up with whatever came her way was the best course of action.

The group did not run into any “mines” as they successfully cleared the fourth floor without incident. After locating the staircase, they descended to the third floor. As before, the stairs continued for only one floor, and what awaited the players at the bottom was the same darkness they had encountered on the story above.

Another fateful game of rock-paper-scissors determined that the spectacled Kotoha would lead the way. Kotoha stood at the head of the line with the safety rope tied around her body, and the group began exploring in very much the same manner as they had on the fourth floor.

Shortly afterward, the flashlight in Kotoha's hands ran out of power.

That made their *second* dead flashlight. Keito had led the group from the fifth floor through the entire fourth floor, and her flashlight had died midway through. She'd then borrowed Kotoha's flashlight, so by the time they reached the third floor, it was already on the verge of dying.

In other words, it had taken two flashlights' worth of battery life for them to explore the fourth floor. Three floors stood between them and the presumed exit, but since they had only three working flashlights left, their supply of light would be depleted long before they could escape the building if they continued at their current rate.

Faced with the reality of the situation, Mishiro—the group's self-proclaimed leader—had only this to say: "From this point forward, let us proceed with more haste."

"Hey, this really isn't good," Yuki protested.

Her words fell on deaf ears.

"Rushing won't help us make it in time. Besides, this game was designed for us to run out of batteries."

Yuki continued, but no one—not Mishiro, Chie, Keito, or Kotoha—gave her the time of day. She felt as if she really had become a phantom.

"We started with five flashlights for five floors. The fourth floor cost us nearly two whole batteries, so if we keep going at this pace, we'll run out of light halfway through the second floor. That leaves us with one and a half floors in the dark. It's reckless to try to cover that amount of distance by speeding up."

Yuki had been trying to explain her view of the game since they'd reached the third floor, from around the time Kotoha's flashlight died. However, it was too late to convince the others of her abilities. Yuki was fully aware that none of them would put stock in what she said, but their survival hung in the balance. If they kept going like they had been, Yuki's life would be in danger.

"We're going to have to put up with the darkness at some point in this game. On either the fourth, third, second, or first floor, we'll have to move forward without using batteries. Which means...you know. It's reasonable to think that

the lower we go, the more dangerous the traps. That's what makes it advantageous to endure the darkness as early as possible—that's what makes this game entertaining."

The logic of her words was becoming somewhat jumbled, but Yuki persisted regardless. She noticed herself growing impatient.

"It's not too late. The organizers probably expected us to make this realization on the fourth floor and then to brave the darkness on the third floor. That has to be the expected solution to the game. That's why the traps on this level shouldn't be one hundred percent lethal. It'll be too late if we wait until the second story, since the traps there might kill us if we make one wrong move. We'll be completely helpless in the face of death. That has to be the bad ending the organizers are anticipating. Don't you get it? Right now, we're marching straight toward certain doom."

Personally, Yuki thought she was doing a good job explaining. Her reasoning was flawless. She even thought she had managed to lay everything out in an easy-to-understand way. But despite her best efforts, none of the other players would lend her an ear.

Yuki began to wonder where things had gone wrong. Sure, considering how she'd acted until this point, she hadn't exactly done anything to earn the others' trust, but even so, shouldn't they be swayed by sound logic? Why didn't the other players understand something so obvious? Yuki had no idea. Although she was proud of herself for starting back at school recently and gradually picking up life skills here and there, that didn't change the fact that human psychology remained an enigma to her.

As Yuki felt herself getting worked up, the procession of players came to an abrupt halt. That was because the line leader, Kotoha, had stopped in her tracks.

".....? What's the matter, Kotoha?" Mishiro asked.

Kotoha was frozen mid-step, with her legs wide apart. Her posture made it seem as if she had been forced to stop at an awkward moment in a game of red light, green light, or like she were a windup robot whose spring had returned to resting position.

Maintaining her pose, Kotoha turned her head back to the others. “Um... There’s...”

“What is it? Enough dragging your feet. You’re wasting the battery.”

Upon being badgered by Mishiro, Kotoha turned off her flashlight and continued to speak.

“Th-there’s a mine,” she said in the darkness. “There’s a mine here.”

“Do you mean to say there’s a pitfall ahead? How can you tell?”

“No... That’s not it!” Kotoha raised her voice in an uncharacteristic yell. “The floor here feels strange! Th-there’s... There’s an *actual land mine* buried here!”

## (7/30)

It was a common scene in movies: A group of people traverses a jungle when one of them suddenly notices a strange sensation beneath their feet. They look down to see that they have stepped on a terrifying metal disc—a land mine. The group is then forced to temporarily suspend their trek and find a nearby rock or other object to use as a weight to appease the deadly explosive.

Every time Yuki saw such a scene, the same questions popped into her head: Why weren’t land mines designed to explode the moment they were stepped on? Why did they function like clicking a mouse, in that they would detonate only upon the moment of release? Yuki didn’t have an in-depth understanding of explosives, but she figured such items didn’t exist in real life. It was the same concept as the deliberate anachronism of using thoroughbred horses in period dramas—they were simply a dramatic license to add to the excitement.

But now Yuki and the others were face-to-face with that very product of fiction.

“Um, um, um, um, so...,” Kotoha stammered like a broken record.

“Calm down,” Mishiro said. “Maintain your current position and do not move a muscle.”

“Okay...,” Kotoha said weepily. Anyone would sound the same after stepping on a land mine.

Sensing an opportunity, Yuki nudged Mishiro's shoulder. Mishiro shifted her gaze to Yuki, seemingly unable to ignore the sensation of physical touch.

Yuki looked back with a smug grin.

"...Hmph." Mishiro scoffed before turning away.

Of course, the only information they had gained was that the traps on the third floor were deadlier than the ones on the fourth. There was nothing indicating anything about needing to conserve their batteries or about whether even deadlier traps awaited them on the second level. Still, Mishiro had been forced to acknowledge that even a sliver of Yuki's prediction had come true. That was what her scoff implied.

"For now...I suppose we have no choice but to imitate what they do in the movies." Mishiro took off her backpack and flipped it upside down, sending its contents spilling to the floor.

"What are you doing?" Yuki asked.

"Is it not obvious? I'm going to fill the backpack with debris so it can be used as a weight. Otherwise, it would lack sufficient mass."

*Oh, so your brain is functioning,* Yuki thought. If Mishiro hadn't drawn the appropriate conclusion, Yuki would have humbly pointed it out to her. Perhaps Mishiro didn't deserve the label of a third-rate player—she was at least second-rate. Yuki wasn't opposed to admitting that much.

With the venue being an abandoned building, so much scrap was scattered across the floor that it was difficult to walk around without getting injured. Consequently, finding objects to fill the backpack presented no challenge whatsoever.

"Here you are." Mishiro handed the backpack to Kotoha. "Even if the land mine detonates, I do not believe your life will be in any danger, unless you are extremely unlucky with the blast. Nevertheless...be careful."

"...I understand."

The other players distanced themselves from the land mine—and Kotoha. They hid around the corner to ensure they wouldn't get caught in a blast. It was



just a precaution; after all, the group predicted that the land mine would not be too powerful, and they didn't want to imagine the possibility of Kotoha failing. Although it was indeed a heartless action, they couldn't have done anything even if they stayed at Kotoha's side, and they wanted to convey to her not to take things the wrong way.

"Go ahead." Mishiro signaled.

The group waited with bated breath. Yuki counted the seconds inside her head.

Ten seconds passed.

Twenty seconds passed.

Thirty seconds passed, but still nothing happened.

"...I—I did it..."

At last, an extremely feeble voice echoed through the darkness, prompting the others to breathe a collective sigh of relief.

"That takes care of that...", Mishiro said. "Good work, Kotoha. We should avoid this path to be safe, so come this way."

"R-right," Kotoha replied in a loud voice. She hurried back with frenzied footsteps that betrayed the depths of her fear.

But another noise was mixed in with the sound of her footsteps—that of something being dragged.

Yuki immediately identified the source of the noise.

"Wait, Kotoha! Be careful not to get the rope caught—"

*—so walk slowly.*

Yuki was unable to complete her sentence before a deep, heavy thump rang out; it sounded like the lid of hell's cauldron opening up.

She felt the blood instantaneously drain from her body.

"Th-that fool!" Mishiro yelled. But before she could shout another insult—

The noise was unmistakably a *boom*.

It was a middling sound of an explosion, one that did not exceed or fall under expectations. Pieces of scrap that were warmed and carried away by the blast flew toward the end of the hallway, as if competing in a race. The pieces bounced off the walls and landed close to where Yuki and the others were, forcing them to curl up in order to protect themselves. But that was the extent of the danger. None of the four had sustained any wounds of significance. Their preemptive evacuation had paid off.

As for the remaining girl, however...

“Kotoha!”

Yuki was not the only one to cry out the name. Although the exact timing varied, all four of them had shouted it. They headed down the hallway, which reeked of gunpowder. With all the smoke and dust in the air, a flashlight would not aid their cause, so the group could figure out what had happened only by groping around.

First, they realized that the path came to an abrupt end—the blast from the land mine had made it collapse completely. Although the hallway was quite wide, a fault had formed, spanning the entire width of the path from the left edge all the way to the right. The same amount of flooring had likely collapsed along the direction of the hallway as well, which meant jumping across to the other side would be an impossible feat.

Additionally, Kotoha was nowhere to be found on their side of the hallway. There were no signs of her body, nor of *anything that resembled her body parts*. Even if she had been blown to bits, scraps of her flesh would be scattered around, but from the complete lack of any remains, the players concluded that Kotoha had been flung to the other side.

Furthermore, the group located the culprit that had caused Kotoha’s misfortune—the rope that had been wrapped around her torso to prevent her from falling.

Yuki picked it up. Naturally, a portion of it had burned off. She regretted not having pointed that out earlier. She should have realized the dangers of the rope getting caught around an object that they needed to stay in place. The act

of working in the dark had brought about this calamity. None of the players—not Yuki and likely not even Kotoha herself—had remembered the rope had been tied around the girl’s body.

The *thump* Yuki had heard probably came from the backpack falling over. She didn’t know exactly how the rope had caused the backpack to fall, but there were two obvious facts. First, the hallway was filled with pieces of scrap, any of which could have hooked on to the rope. And second, it was impossible to predict how much force the rope could generate on the backpack while it was tied to a girl who was frantically rushing away.

Shortly after the smoke cleared, Yuki shined her flashlight on the other side of the hallway.

Lying there was Kotoha. Or at least, *her body*.

“—...”

Someone audibly gulped.

In contrast, Yuki let out a sigh of relief; most of Kotoha’s body was intact. Both of the girl’s legs had been blown clean off, and blood that had transformed into white fluff was littered all over. She was lying face down and appeared to be unconscious, but based on the scene, Yuki determined that the girl had not lost her life.

It was exactly as Yuki had predicted—the traps on the third floor were not 100 percent lethal.

“Kotoha! Can you hear me?” Mishiro shouted.

Kotoha did not respond, nor did she show any signs of movement. The explosion had evidently knocked her out.

“...There’s no hope for her.” The princess sighed. “Yuki, please turn off your flashlight. I feel sorry to see her illuminated in such a state.”

“Huh...?” Yuki was perplexed. She turned off her flashlight to conserve its battery, but she couldn’t let Mishiro’s statement slide. “You’re going to abandon her? You can’t be serious.”

“I am not abandoning anyone. Does that *corpse* look alive to you?”

“She’s definitely alive. With the Preservation Treatment, that kind of injury means nothing.”

All death-game players, without exception, underwent a body modification procedure called the Preservation Treatment prior to participating in a game. The procedure stripped players of their body odor, prevented them from dying of blood loss even if they were dismembered, and kept their bodies from rotting even when exposed to the elements. The primary purpose of the Preservation Treatment was to make players’ deaths more palatable for the audience to watch, but at the same time, it also increased the durability of the players’ bodies. The *mere* impairment of losing both legs, while certainly an injury, would not be anything fatal. In fact, Yuki had lost all four of her limbs in a past game, but she’d still been able to jump and leap around.

Yuki continued, “If she fractured her neck or hit her head, it would be a different story, but her injuries don’t appear life-threatening at all.”

“I am not referring to Kotoha being biologically alive,” Mishiro responded. “I mean to say that she has died *as a player*.”

“What?”

“She has lost both her legs, yes? How could she possibly return to the game in her condition? Are you going to carry her like a backpack? And even in the event she survives the game, do you truly believe her injuries can be healed?”

While death games placed little value on life, surprisingly enough, their participants received considerable protection outside the actual games. Once a game concluded, players could receive free medical support from the organizers, and thanks to the Preservation Treatment, the kinds of injuries that could be treated far exceeded the limits of normal medicine. Severed arms or legs could be reattached as easily as one would stitch a plushie back together. However, even with the medical capabilities of the organizers, it was impossible to fully restore a player whose body had been blown to bits in an explosion.

“Her chances of making a return as a player are nonexistent,” Mishiro asserted.

“Sure, that may be true, but—”

“Besides, attempting to rescue her will come at a price. It would require us to use precious battery life to locate a route to the other side of the hallway. And that would mean having to risk stepping on land mines that we would have otherwise avoided. Do you see enough value in her to outweigh those costs?”

“—So you’re saying it’s not cost-effective to save her, is that right?”

“If I were to not mince words, then yes, I suppose.”

Yuki turned to the other two players—Chie and Keito.

“...Well, I don’t think we have much of a choice here,” Chie said. “We’re only teamed up to help one another survive. Sure, I think of her as a friend, but it’s not like I’d drop everything to go save her. Besides, isn’t this Kotoha’s fault for being a klutz? I don’t think karma will come for us if we look the other way.”

“Ditto,” Keito added. “Worst-case scenario, we waste too much battery and end up shooting ourselves in the feet. Yuki, weren’t you the one who said we should conserve our light?”

Yuki narrowed her eyes.

She didn’t think of the others as being coldhearted.

Oneself over others. Self-interest over altruism. At the end of the day, that was the common attitude in these games. Kotoha’s current status also presented a problem. There was no guarantee she was alive, and even if she was, she would be unable to walk on her own, which meant someone would have to carry her on their back. It was wishful thinking to expect to survive while carrying literal “baggage.” Considering the circumstances, the other girls were being realistic.

Still, Yuki was disappointed in them.

“In that case, I’ll go it alone,” Yuki said. “I’m free to do what I want, aren’t I?”

“No, you are not,” Mishiro snapped. “Yuki, I believe you approved of me as our leader. I cannot accept you running off to make a grandstand play. However, if you insist on going...” Mishiro stuck out her right hand. “I must have you relinquish your flashlight to us.”

Yuki looked down at the item in her hand.

A flashlight. It was their lifeline in this game, the primary reason they were sticking together. Yuki had only used it to illuminate Kotoha for several dozen seconds just now, which meant its battery was close to full. However—

“Fine.” Yuki flung the object at Mishiro. “Happy now?”

Mishiro’s eyes widened in surprise after Yuki’s irrational decision. She quickly regained her composure and briefly turned on the flashlight to confirm the batteries were still inside.

“...Very well,” Mishiro said. “You disappoint me. And to think I was about to reassess your value as a player.”

“Right back at you,” Yuki said while walking away. “None of you get what this game’s about.”

## **(9/30)**

After separating from Mishiro’s posse, Yuki proceeded through the darkness. While she felt confident in her ability to detect traps, the lack of light undoubtedly complicated things. On her way to Kotoha, Yuki activated two different traps. One was the same kind of land mine Kotoha had detonated, which Yuki circumvented by using a perfectly sized piece of debris as a weight. The second was a bomb connected to a trip wire that was sticking out aboveground. Since it was designed to not immediately explode, Yuki dove into a nearby room and took shelter from the blast.

It took little time for her to locate Kotoha, since she didn’t maintain the snail’s pace Mishiro’s group had adopted. One of the few benefits of acting as a lone wolf was the freedom to walk faster than the rest of the pack.

Yuki ran up to Kotoha. The girl was still lying on her stomach, and her legs were still missing. It was possible that Kotoha’s legs could have simply been torn off rather than blown to pieces, so Yuki looked around for them, but to no avail. The only thing she found was white fluff. Unfortunately, the likelihood that Kotoha’s legs could be restored to normal was virtually nonexistent.

Yuki picked up the flashlight Kotoha had been holding and flicked on the switch. Right after she confirmed there weren’t any issues with the light, Yuki



spotted the girl's glasses nearby on the floor. Cracked lenses and slightly bent frames aside, they were in miraculous condition for having gotten caught in an explosion. And thank goodness for that—for players with glasses, losing their specs was far deadlier than losing limbs. Yuki flipped Kotoha onto her back to put them on the girl's face.

Kotoha opened her eyes. "Ah... Yuki."

Although her words were slurred, she was conscious and even capable of speech.

"Do you know where we are?" Yuki asked.

"In an abandoned building for a game..."

"And your name?"

"Shiori Kotonno..."

"Your player name, please."

"...Kotoha."

"Do you remember how you ended up like this?"

"I stepped on a land mine...and the rope got caught..."

Everything seemed fine—discounting her two missing legs, of course. At the very least, her life and brain seemed to be fully intact.

Yuki looked away from Kotoha and turned her attention to the knapsack hanging from the girl's back. Like Kotoha's body, it had retained most of its original form, but its contents had lavishly spilled out of a newly formed, large and unrepairable hole. Understanding that the backpack would have to be left behind, Yuki began fishing through its contents.

"Why did you come for me...?" Kotoha asked as Yuki continued rummaging.

"To score brownie points," Yuki replied while transferring objects from Kotoha's backpack into her own.

Right after the word *points* came out of her mouth, Yuki presented the object in her hands to Kotoha—the mysterious piece of white paper.

"Likability is an important factor in this game," Yuki said.

*"...So...that's what it's for..."* Kotoha muttered.

Yuki was not surprised by Kotoha's reaction. After all, she was a bookish girl who seemed to have been blessed with a good education. It appeared she understood what this game was really all about.

Yuki shifted her backpack to her chest and lifted Kotoha onto her back.

"You're pretty light, Kotoha," Yuki commented. "How much do you weigh?"

"Last time I weighed myself, I was just under one hundred pounds..."

"Then I guess you're at around sixty-five now." Yuki chuckled.

"...I can't laugh at that." Kotoha hugged her arms tightly around Yuki's chest.

## **(10/30)**

Yuki continued heading through the darkness. She heard no footsteps aside from her own. Perhaps Mishiro's posse was already on the second floor. Yuki searched for a corridor with traces of people having passed through and followed the route she suspected Mishiro's group had taken.

Upon turning a corner, Yuki shined her flashlight down the hallway for a split second to confirm the absence of traps. Relying on the image burned into her retinas, she moved forward while deftly evading piles of rubble.

"...You're amazing, Yuki," Kotoha said.

"Huh?"

"Is it really possible to determine if a path is safe at a glance...?"

Since reuniting with Kotoha, Yuki had repeated the same series of actions over and over. Instead of leaving the flashlight on, she would light up paths for only a brief moment to make sure the coast was clear. That was her strategy for conserving battery life.

"Yeah, I guess so," Yuki answered. "Detecting traps is mostly instinct. A glance is more than enough. Though keeping the flashlight on would definitely leave much less room for error."

There was also the fact that they were following in the footsteps of Mishiro's

group. It would be safe to assume that a path someone had walked down once before would contain no traps.

“So this really is your tenth game, then, Yuki,” Kotoha said.

“You didn’t believe me.”

“I’m sorry. Honest...”

“...Well, it’s been a while since my last game, so I can understand why it sounded like a lie.”

Yuki balled her hand into a fist before opening it again. Although her instincts were gradually returning, she couldn’t yet tell whether she had fully regained her form.

“Why go back to being a player?” Kotoha asked.

“Well, it’s not like I intended to retire or anything. I just had something of an awakening in my last game, so I was working on improving my lifestyle and whatnot. That’s what kept me away.”

“When...was your last game?”

Despite her introverted appearance, Kotoha was being awfully assertive with the questions. Perhaps she had an insatiable curiosity, being a booklover and all.

“Around three months ago, I think...”

“Oh... So you were a player from before Candle Woods.”

The comment took Yuki aback. “You know about Candle Woods?”

“My agent told me about it and how it wiped out the pool of players... They wanted to restore the playerbase as soon as possible, which is why I was scouted.”

As Yuki had surmised, Kotoha had debuted as a player after Candle Woods.

“Is that true for Mishiro, Chie, and Keito, too?” Yuki asked.

“Yes. We became acquainted during a game not too long ago. There were around thirty players, all of us in our first game... That was when we grouped up.”

To the best of Yuki's knowledge, new players often started out in games with other rookies, rather than being put alone with a pack of veterans. That was a mechanism to maintain proper game balance, to make up for the immense gap in ability between beginners and experienced participants. It appeared the players recruited after Candle Woods had gotten the opportunity to meet one another—that explained why the others were used to working in a group.

Yuki focused her attention on the path ahead of her. The darkness of the third floor stretched on. She figured it was her turn to ask some questions.

"So you said this was your fifth game?" Yuki asked.

"Yes."

"Why's an earnest-looking girl like you playing in these games? Are you in debt or something?"

The most obvious benefit for death-game players was the prize money. Although the exact amount varied by individual, players stood to win a few million yen for each game. That was a substantial amount, considering it necessitated at most a few days of work, with no requirements for certifications, experience, or nationality. However, Yuki knew full well that the financial aspect was not the only thing players sought from these games.

"...Um..." Kotoha seemed hesitant to reply.

"You don't have to say if you don't want to."

"Oh, no... It's fine..." Kotoha took a deep breath, as if steeling herself. "...I want to retire early..."

"....."

...*That's practical of you*, Yuki thought. She shrugged, even with Kotoha on her back.

"I want to be a recluse," Kotoha continued. "I mean, don't you think people in society are all crazy nowadays? Cynicism, Machiavellianism, the just-world hypothesis... It's like mass hysteria is taking over. I don't want to live around those kinds of people. That's why my goal is to save up as much as I can as quickly as possible, run away to a country with a low cost of living, and lead a

quiet life in seclusion.”

Yuki wondered about Kotoha’s body, which had been reduced to half its original form. “Will the prize money from this game be enough?”

“I think I’ll either have to live frugally or come up with another idea...”

Yuki wasn’t sure if it was appropriate to force a smile, so instead she responded with a vague “Ahhh...”

“How about your reason for playing, Yuki?” Kotoha asked. “If you don’t want to answer...I don’t mind.”

“I’m aiming to set a new record in these games,” Yuki replied. “Ninety-nine consecutive victories. That’s my goal.”

“Ninety-nine...? Not a hundred?”

“Apparently, the current record is ninety-eight, so I’m starting with ninety-nine. Sure, a hundred sounds much nicer, but you know, I’m putting my life on the line. Haven’t decided if I’ll go the extra mile.”

“...That’s an amazing goal. Will you receive anything for a new record?”

“Nope, nothing. Just bragging rights, I guess. Maybe they’ll give me a trophy or something, but who knows. And I’m not even sure the current record is ninety-eight. Out of the players I’ve met personally, the highest streak was ninety-five.”

Kotoha fell silent. Yuki could sense the girl’s bewilderment. The question on Kotoha’s mind was obvious—

*—What’s so fun about these games to make you want to set a record in them?*

Yuki didn’t have a concrete answer. She lacked the linguistic capabilities to explain what Candle Woods had changed in her.

“Well, you know...” After struggling to string together her thoughts, Yuki finally decided on her reply. “I just wanted a goal. Didn’t matter what.”

“Right...” Kotoha’s reaction was tepid.

The corners of Yuki’s lips curved upward into a smile. *So this was how my*

*mentor felt*, she mused.

As the two of them continued making small talk, Yuki eventually spotted the staircase leading to the second floor. Yuki lit up the flight of stairs to the landing for a split second before beginning her descent. After rotating herself a full 180 degrees on the landing, she illuminated the remaining stairs.

“Huh...?” Kotoha remarked.

“What the heck?” followed Yuki.

The rest of the stairs were missing.

## **(11/30)**

It wasn't that the stairs had ended—they were *missing*. The latter half of the stairs leading from the third to the second floor, beyond the landing, had completely vanished. The distance to the floor below was considerable, far enough for one to feel reluctant about jumping down.

“...What the heck?” Yuki repeated while looking down. “Was this...a pitfall? Of abnormal proportions.”

“Maybe this is meant to be a one-way set of stairs,” Kotoha suggested. “Could it be signaling to us that we won't be able to come back up after setting foot on the second floor?”

“I have a bad feeling about this...” Yuki once again shined the flashlight and estimated the distance to the floor. “There's no way forward but down. Things might get a bit shaky, so hold on tight.”

“Okay.”

Yuki stepped forward. Rather than tumble down onto the second floor, she used one hand to grab the edge of the landing, thereby decreasing the amount of potential energy equivalent to her height. After her body became completely still, she let go and fell through the air. She landed on the floor, masterfully maneuvering her knees to dissipate the force of the impact across her body. Kotoha absorbed some of it as well.

Yuki looked around. Just like the previous floors, the second level was



completely enveloped in darkness. This was where Mishiro and company would have run out of batteries if they had been constantly using their flashlights. Yuki believed the traps on this floor were capable of inflicting lethal harm. With that on her mind, even a ten-time player like Yuki couldn't help but feel nervous.

Still, all she had to do was continue on as before: illuminate the path ahead for an instant to make sure the coast was clear. So Yuki and Kotoha began their quest to clear the second floor.

"I don't hear any footsteps," Yuki said while walking. "Besides mine, of course. Hate to use such a cliché phrase, but it really is eerily quiet."

"It's also strange that we haven't seen any signs of light," Kotoha added. "With how dark it is, we should be able to figure out where the others are if they're using a flashlight. But since there's been nothing so far..."

"That means they've either made it to the first floor or gotten stranded after running out of batteries."

"Um... Yuki? If the latter happens to be true..."

"Yeah?"

"What will you do if we find the staircase before reuniting with the others?"

"Head down." Yuki's answer was instantaneous. "It's not like we have any way of knowing if they *are* stranded. I definitely wouldn't go searching for them if there's any chance they'd already reached the first floor."

"And what if we reach the exit without running into them?"

"...Good question. Well, there's no telling *what things will be like* by the exit... I haven't thought that far."

"I see..." After that brief reaction, Kotoha fell silent.

Did she want Yuki to save the others if at all possible? That was certainly a praiseworthy attitude, especially in light of the fact they had left Kotoha for dead without a second thought.

"Well, if I'm able to save them, I will," Yuki said to put the girl's mind at ease.

"Yes... Of course," Kotoha replied.

Yuki couldn't tell from her response whether Kotoha felt reassured.

They turned a corner, and Yuki lit up the path. After confirming the coast was clear, she continued onward.

*Weird that we haven't run into any traps*, she thought.

Every path they had chosen had been safe. The nervousness she had felt upon reaching the second floor seemed to have been misguided. Was it mere coincidence that they had reached a safe area? Had Yuki been wrong about the second level being dangerous? Or had her ability to detect danger started to malfunction? Just as she was beginning to redirect her attention from her surroundings to the thoughts flying through her head—

—a chill ran down her spine.

Yuki froze for a second.

## **(12/30)**

An instant later, Yuki resumed walking. Only a split second had passed. To a passerby—disregarding the darkness of the hallway—it would seem as if she had simply been walking normally. Even Kotoha likely did not notice anything out of the ordinary as she clung to Yuki. However, Yuki was aware that her feet had paused for a fleeting moment.

*Something* had caused her to stop—an overwhelming sense of malice had struck her from behind like a bolt of lightning.

Yuki pulled forward on the two arms around her chest to lift Kotoha higher onto her back, high enough for their cheeks to touch. To use a technical term, the scene would be referred to as a “Luminous” cheek rub.

In as low a voice as possible, Yuki whispered to Kotoha, “There’s *someone behind us*.”

“Huh...?”

Yuki pulled once more on the arms of the confused girl. This time, it was a signal to be quiet. Her message must have gotten across, as Kotoha shut her mouth. She also didn't do anything stupid, like turning around to look behind

her.

“I can’t really describe it, but there’s *bloodlust* in the air. Someone’s locked on to us.” Yuki maintained her normal pace as she talked.

“Bloodlust...? Is that really a thing?”

“Dunno, but I felt what I felt. Interpret it as ‘signs of life’ if you want.”

Despite her words, Yuki knew that she hadn’t merely sensed signs of life. It could only be described as unadulterated *bloodlust*. And it wasn’t just hanging in the air; it was paired with a palpable desire to claim someone’s life. Although Yuki could detect the presence of traps at a single glance, comparatively, she had little confidence in her ability to sense signs of life—and by extension, bloodlust. Did that mean the malice in the air was so strong that even someone like her could notice it? Or had Yuki unlocked a new ability after confronting a woman who could be described as bloodlust incarnate three months prior?

“I don’t hear any footsteps...,” Kotoha said.

“Whoever it is, they’re probably staying far enough away to not be heard. I’m pretty sure we won’t see anyone if I turn around and shine the flashlight straight ahead.”

“Who could it be?”

“That’s the question. Are any of the other girls good at sneaking up on people?”

“No... I don’t think so.”

“That rules them out.”

Yuki next thought of the sixth player. The girl had supposedly died before any of them had woken up, but maybe she was still alive. However, the group had confirmed her death, and even if she was still roaming around, there was no way she could have gotten this far without a flashlight. The existence of a seventh or eighth player was also unlikely, given the number of rooms on the fifth floor and the short battery life of the flashlights.

Only one possibility remained.

“This has to be the lethal trap lurking on the second floor,” Yuki said.

“...So you’re saying...it’s a living thing?”

There were countless horror stories that featured supernatural monsters no human could possibly stand a chance against, creatures that guaranteed the death of anyone unfortunate enough to encounter them. It wasn’t at all unusual for those tropes to appear in death games, but this was the first time Yuki had come across a monster in her ten games.

Now she finally understood why the stairs were missing. It was not to create a pitfall or to signal a one-way path—it was to create a *cage* to prevent whatever roamed this floor from ascending to the levels above.

“Wh-what do we do?” Kotoha asked. “If we’re being targeted...”

“Calm down. For starters...it’s keeping its distance, so we’re safe for the time being. I bet it’s waiting for an opportunity to strike.”

Yuki began racking her brain. Whatever it was, it had to have some degree of intelligence to tail them. Because its bloodlust had traveled through the air, it was obviously seeking to kill, but for some reason, it had determined the time wasn’t right to do so. But then what exactly was it waiting for? Was it holding out until Yuki exhausted herself from walking? Was it waiting for them to reach a debris-choked corridor that would hinder a possible escape? Or did the second floor have other traps in addition to this “living thing,” and it was waiting for them to take damage from running into one?

Or perhaps...

“Let’s get a good look at it,” Yuki suggested.

Kotoha offered no reply. Yuki unilaterally interpreted her silence as reluctant approval and moved to action.

What she needed was a single long corridor, one that was longer than the distance *it* had opened up between them. Each time Yuki reached an intersection, she shined her flashlight on every path in search of a hallway that fit the bill. It was a waste of batteries, but her curiosity and need to identify the entity following them won out. After locating a suitable hallway, Yuki nonchalantly proceeded down it. As soon as she reached the very end, she spun around with such agility that Kotoha could very well have fallen off her back.

The next moment, she pointed her flashlight at their pursuer.

The beam shined on a *beast*.

## (13/30)

It was a four-legged canine of some sort. Its full body resembled a wolf more than a dog. Yet it was far larger than the species of wolf Yuki was familiar with, and it was not roaming around in a pack. It had a coat of black fur, as if it had absorbed the color of a dark, moonless night. Since its entire body was a single color, down to its pitch-black pupils, the creature gave off the impression of being a shadow. The only spots not colored black were the tiny white parts of its eyes visible around its pupils, the small sections at the tips of its paws, and the exposed teeth beneath its snout.

Its teeth were clamped down on a piece of prey that was damaged from repeated gnawing. Because the surface of the object was covered with white fluff, neither Yuki nor Kotoha had trouble identifying it.

It was a *human arm*.

Just as they began wondering whom the arm belonged to, the creature stirred.

Yuki took a step back as the beast inched forward. Despite having been spotted and losing the opportunity for a sneak attack, it had not lost its will to fight. Slowly but surely, one step at a time, it drew closer to the girls to intimidate them.

Cautiously retreating backward, Yuki asked, “What the heck is that?”

“...It appears to be a beast,” Kotoha replied.

Yuki had thought the same. At the very least, it did not appear at all human, nor did it seem as if Mishiro, Chie, or Keito had mutated into a monster.

Yuki glanced down at her arms and Kotoha’s arms, just to make sure that the limb in the beast’s mouth did not belong to either of them. After confirming that all four of their collective arms were properly attached, Yuki focused on the white fluff.

“Any idea whose arm that is?” she asked.

“No... It’s too mutilated to tell.”

“That’s not a *snack* it was given before the game, right? Which means...it got someone.”

“I sure hope it only chewed off an arm...”

The wolf prowled forward. Yuki took another step back.

“Do man-eating wolves really exist...?” Yuki asked. “...I guess they have to, since there’s one right in front of us...”

“I think it must have been specially tamed by the organizers. It brings to mind the Beast of Gévaudan.”

“The heck is that?”

“A legendary man-eating wolf. It was large and had a coat of black fur, and it allegedly devoured more than a hundred people. I imagine the organizers trained a normal wolf to mirror the legend.”

“You’re kidding...”

Continuing to retreat backward, Yuki reached the end of the corridor. Although she could turn the corner, she would need to point the light away from the beast for an instant to make sure the path was safe. And in this situation, every second was worth its weight in gold.

As a result, Yuki froze in place.

“Was there only one Beast of Gévaudan?” she asked.

“According to many of the reports. But it might be too risky to jump to that conclusion...”

“Does it happen to be weak to light?”

“No, I haven’t heard of anything like that... But taking the nature of this game into account, it’s possible...”

As soon as those words came out of Kotoha’s mouth, the beast ceased its advance and began pacing left and right, as if it had run up against an invisible wall.



*Bingo*, Yuki thought. The beast was *weak to light*. That should have been obvious, in light of the nature of the game. Players could advance through each floor while wielding their flashlights to stave off any attacks. However, if players had wasted their batteries without thinking of the consequences—as Mishiro’s group had done—this beast would hunt them down. The trap was designed with that in mind.

Yuki’s efforts had paid off, as they still had a functioning flashlight. However...

“...This isn’t good. It’s almost out.”

Yuki looked down at her flashlight. The intensity of its glow had diminished significantly since she’d first turned it on. Retracting her hand, she could clearly see the bulb that served as the source of the light. The battery was on its last legs. Yuki had taken the flashlight from Kotoha midway through the third floor, at which point the battery had already been mostly used up. Still, she would be barking up the wrong tree to curse the flashlight at this critical juncture. The tool had done a commendable job holding out for so long.

Nevertheless, all things finite eventually came to an end.

The beast likely understood that as well. That was why it hadn’t fled. And it was abundantly clear what the creature would do the moment the flashlight died.

Yuki took out a knife from the backpack on her chest. It was a rugged survival knife. She deftly removed its cover with one hand and flaunted the blade at the beast—and Kotoha.

“Are you going to fight?” Kotoha asked.

“There’s no other choice.”

“In these circumstances?”

To summarize Yuki’s circumstances, she had a backpack on her chest and Kotoha on her back.

“Want me to put you down?” Yuki twisted her lips in a smirk.

“Please don’t...”

Kotoha hugged Yuki even tighter, much to Yuki’s satisfaction.

Yuki figured it would be better to keep the backpack on, as it would function as a breastplate. In order to demonstrate that she was no sheep for slaughter, she stepped forward. That caused the beam of light to shift forward as well, forcing the beast to take one step back. Yuki advanced a second step, then a third, returning to the spot she had previously occupied.

The very next moment, the flashlight went totally dead, plunging the area into darkness.

But Yuki had already seared the image of the corridor, down to every last stain on the floor, into her mind. Being deprived of sight put her at no disadvantage; in fact, it sharpened her other senses. Not only could she hear her own heartbeat, but she could also feel Kotoha's pulse and breathing, along with the sweat dotting the girl's soft, fair skin.

Yet Yuki's net of heightened perception contained no signs of the beast.

## **(14/30)**

Its presence had faded. The bloodlust in the air had vanished.

Still, Yuki was not so foolish as to conclude the beast had departed. However, her body reflected her inner thoughts—her grip around the knife loosened, the low posture she had adopted reverted to normal, and a sigh of relief escaped her lips. It appeared Kotoha noticed those reactions as well, as she relaxed her arms around Yuki's chest.

"Is it gone?" Yuki asked in a way as if wishing that hope into reality. "It's gone."

"Is it really?" Kotoha asked.

"Well, after seeing me take an attacking stance with a weapon right up in its face, it probably didn't like its chances."

Yuki strained her ears for the sound of footsteps. They were astonishingly quiet, given the distance between them and the beast, but footsteps were indeed retreating farther and farther away. Although Yuki felt no inclination to let go of her knife, for the time being it was safe to assume the danger had vanished.

“We should get going, too.”

Yuki flicked the flashlight switch off and on again. The light did not turn on. She tossed the now-useless item onto the floor and started walking.

“Is it really okay to go ahead in the dark?” Kotoha asked.

“Not really, but it’s not like we have a choice.”

That the beast was the trap on the second floor suggested that there weren’t any immobile traps, like pitfalls or land mines. In that sense, the lack of light would not affect their safety. But avoiding traps was not the only reason Yuki had continued to light up the hallways—she had also done so to avoid cutting her legs on the debris littering the floor, which included objects sharp enough to function as weapons. Whether it was in a death game or reality, light was an indispensable resource for exploring abandoned ruins.

It was no use crying for the moon, so Yuki resigned herself to paying close attention to where she was stepping.

“I wonder if the others are alive,” she said.

“I sure hope they are...”

Yuki thought back to the arm in the beast’s mouth. She had seen only a single limb, but was that really the extent of the damage?

“Against a wolf, whispering like this is probably enough to give away our location,” Yuki said. “Or even just making audible footsteps... Wait, scratch that. I bet it can track us down off scent alone.”

“It seems like it won’t attack anyone with a light, but it’s pitch-black...”

With how dark the floor was, Yuki and Kotoha should have been able to perceive any other sources of illumination. Since they’d noticed nothing of the sort, that suggested the others had run out of light. With that in mind, the likelihood of them being alive was—

“Well, let’s not jump to conclusions,” Yuki said, feigning ignorance. “The depressing talk can wait until we see some actual *proof*. No harm in staying optimistic for now.”

“Yes... You’re right.”

Those soothing words were meant to reassure Kotoha, but they also reflected Yuki's genuine beliefs. Although negative thinking was the key to surviving death games, that did not equate to adopting a pessimistic attitude. Someone's arm had been ripped off. Wolves had a keen sense of hearing and smell. Those were the facts of the matter. Yuki believed there was a difference between a realistic attitude and a pessimistic attitude. Being realistic simply meant acknowledging the facts; it did not imply acting positively or negatively. That was her take.

And in reality, the pessimistic outlook proved to be false.

Shortly after they resumed their progress, *something* touched Yuki's leg just as she passed by a pile of debris.

".....!!"

Yuki swung her leg to the side, kicking away the mountain of rubble, which collapsed with a loud crash. Although the darkness prevented her from seeing what had happened, she felt a sensation suggesting she sent whoever had touched her leg flying.

"Wh-what is it?" Kotoha asked.

"Something's there," Yuki replied. "Something *alive*."

Whatever it was had touched her knee. Yuki had felt the texture of skin and the warmth of a body, meaning someone had concealed themselves inside the debris. The space was too small for the Beast of Gévaudan—could it have been a child? Or was there a second beast roaming the floor?

Yuki inched forward toward the being she had kicked away.

"Wait, wait! Yuki!"

The next moment, Yuki felt another touch on her leg. Since she had heard a voice this time, she kept her leg still. She looked down at her feet to see—

"...Keito?"

It was Keito, the girl with a lanky build.

Yuki looked forward, realizing that earlier she had kicked away—

“...Rude much, Yuki?” Chie crawled out of a pile of rubble.

These two members of Mishiro’s posse had survived.

## **(15/30)**

Yuki didn’t stop walking. There was no telling when the Beast of Gévaudan would strike again. She wanted to locate the stairs to the first floor as soon as possible. Chie and Keito tagged along behind her.

“Glad to see you safe and sound,” Keito said.

“Same,” Yuki responded. “Neither of you seem hurt.”

Yuki turned to examine the two of them. Although they were covered in scratches, probably from hiding among the debris, the two girls could be described as uninjured. They both had all their limbs attached.

Which meant that the arm inside the beast’s mouth belonged to—

“Where did Mishiro go?” Yuki asked the burning question on her mind.

Chie and Keito exchanged awkward glances.

“We lost sight of her while running in the dark...,” Keito answered. “No idea where she is.”

According to Keito, after separating from Kotoha and Yuki on the third floor, the remaining players had continued the game with Mishiro taking the lead. Apparently, they’d encountered the Beast of Gévaudan as soon as they reached the second floor. It had shown up out of nowhere immediately after their last flashlight died. Realizing they had no chance of besting it in a fight, the three fled in different directions. Chie and Keito had managed to reunite afterward, but they had no clue as to Mishiro’s whereabouts.

“So was that Mishiro’s arm...?” Yuki asked a leading question.

“I think so,” Keito answered.

From Keito’s reaction, Yuki was convinced that the girl’s story had holes. She had not asked, “*What do you mean, ‘arm’?*” or “*Was there an arm somewhere?*”—she had responded, “I think so.” That implied she knew Mishiro

had been in a situation where her arm could be chomped off. In which case, Keito and Chie had seen the beast biting at Mishiro's arm. Only *after* that did they realize they had no chance of winning in a fight, and they'd run off in different directions.

They had abandoned Mishiro.

The very girl who had decided to abandon Kotoha had now been left to fend for herself. What an ironic turn of events.

"So you were hunkered down in the rubble to, what, hide from that beast?" Yuki asked.

"Yeah. There's no way we'd stand a chance against a monster like that."

"And hiding...turned out all right?" Yuki asked. "It didn't track down your scent?"

"We thought that might happen, but things were A-OK," Chie replied. "We did get the Preservation Treatment, y'know. We don't have a scent."

"Right..."

Yuki remembered the Preservation Treatment was a thing. One of its effects was neutralizing body odor. It would keep players from smelling sweaty even if they ran around a tropical jungle for an entire week. Apparently, this was effective enough to confound the sharp olfactory senses of a wolf.

"Still, it would've found us if we made any noise," Keito said. "We had no idea where we were, since we ran off in random directions, so we were pretty much trapped. We would've been goners if you hadn't passed by, Yuki." The girl stared at Yuki with a pair of glistening eyes. "If it's no trouble, I would love to keep accompanying you. Would that be all right?"

"I don't think that'll stop the beast from attacking."

"You chased it away, right? It won't attack you again. That canine definitely understands which one of you is the alpha."

Yuki didn't believe that to be the case. The beast must have been specially trained to kill players. While it would probably prioritize going after easier targets, in the end it wouldn't hesitate to attack Yuki.

She also thought Keito didn't truly believe what she was saying. Her words were tools to coax Yuki into letting them stick together. Keito wanted someone who would fight for her when the beast came knocking. She was a clingy player who buttered up strong people to survive. With Mishiro out of the picture, she had now set her sights on Yuki.

"Well, I don't mind...", Yuki said. "We're almost there anyway."

"Huh?"

Chie, Keito, and even Kotoha shared the same surprised reaction.

*Figures they haven't noticed*, Yuki thought. She decided to lay it out clearly. "The staircase is nearby. We'll get there after rounding another corner or two."

"...How can you tell?"

"The flow of air is different here. I'm assuming the first floor has windows. Some of the outside air is reaching where we are."

"Do you sense anything...?" Chie asked Keito.

"Nope... Not at all," Keito replied.

Yuki continued walking without another word. The other two girls also fell silent. They turned one corner, then a second...

And in the end, unlike the last time she'd made a prediction, Yuki avoided embarrassing herself. On the right side of the corridor that they had just entered was a magnificent staircase.

"...Wow," Chie remarked.

"Didn't doubt you for a second," Keito said.

"Look... This is really the kind of thing you should notice," Yuki replied.

Even if the others had been terrified by the beast, Yuki thought they were being way too inattentive. Although her remark was patronizing, she couldn't refrain from voicing it out loud.

As they approached the staircase, Yuki noticed a faint glow coming from below. Either the first floor had working lights, or sunlight was streaming in through windows. Regardless, the sight energized Chie and Keito, who excitedly



rushed down the stairs like elementary school students being dismissed for the day.

However, Yuki stayed frozen at the top of the staircase.

After realizing that only two sets of footsteps echoed in the air, Keito turned around.

“...What’s wrong?” she asked with a puzzled look on her face. “Don’t tell me—is there a trap on the stairs?”

“Huh? Oh, no, nothing like that.”

Yuki glanced at Keito, then Chie nearby. Adding in Kotoha, that made four of them. Based on that combination of players, she deduced that *the one who would die at the end* would likely be—

Yuki felt something tighten around her chest—Kotoha’s arms.

“Are you going back?” Kotoha asked, seemingly understanding the reason Yuki had frozen.

“...Yeah. I think I should,” Yuki replied. She couldn’t lose sight of what was most important here.

“Wait, *no way*... You aren’t thinking of going to save Mishiro, are you?” Chie asked.

Yuki smiled at how callously she’d spat “no way.”

Mishiro—she was a spoiled, domineering princess and a leader who had been coordinating rookie players post-Candle Woods. This was her eighth game, and she had frequently butted heads with Yuki, who posed a threat to her standing.

“That’s exactly what I’m thinking,” Yuki replied. “She might still be alive.”

Both Chie and Keito stared back in disbelief.

Going to save a single player who had been left behind—that was basically the same thing she’d done with Kotoha, but there was one crucial difference. While Kotoha had merely been physically separated from the group, in Mishiro’s case there was the imminent threat of the Beast of Gévaudan to worry about.

However, Yuki felt no hesitation. She took Kotoha off her back and held the girl out toward Chie.

“Mind carrying her? Obviously, it’s not a good idea to bring her with me.”

“Sure...” Chie grabbed hold of Kotoha and lifted the girl onto her back. “But... why are you doing this? I...I don’t see why you would want to save Mishiro...”

Yet another callous remark. Yuki forced a smile before answering.

“To score brownie points.”

## **(16/30)**

How had things turned out this way?

That was the sole question on Mishiro’s mind.

## **(17/30)**

Everything was dark.

Mishiro was inside a small room.

She had taken shelter in a makeshift hideout. While its exterior took the form of a pile of wood scraps, inside was a hollow space large enough for a person to sit while hugging their knees. It had been a rush construction job, but she was proud of the result. In fact, the beast had approached the room twice and passed right by it on both occasions. Mishiro had, for the time being, ensured her safety.

But she couldn’t stay there forever. With every second that ticked away, she inched ever closer to her doom.

“...Curses,” Mishiro muttered under her breath to avoid the beast’s detection. The only vibrations generated by that expression of exasperation occurred within her skull.

This game had a time limit. Once the countdowns visible all over the building reached zero, it would be game over. Perhaps an oversize bomb on the first floor would blow the building to smithereens, or a lethal device attached to

Mishiro's heart would activate. Although she didn't know how it would happen, her execution would be a foregone conclusion. In all likelihood, she would not survive long enough to see the countdown hit zero. The beast wasn't brainless, so it would eventually discover Mishiro's hideout and trample over her teenage body.

Mishiro desperately wanted to leave the room as soon as possible, but she saw no prospect of survival. Before taking cover, she had run around in a frenzy, leaving her with no sense of the floor's layout. She had no memory of the direction from which she had come, nor any inkling of the direction in which the downward staircase could be. It would be foolish to think she could stumble upon the staircase simply by taking off in a random direction. But her situation would not improve if she continued to hide, and it would be prudent to take the opportunity to escape before her reserves of stamina and willpower ran dry. Alas, Mishiro lacked the courage to do so. All she could do was sit there, hugging her knees, alone.

And to be perfectly precise, she could not even manage to do that to her satisfaction.

That was because she had only one arm to hug herself with. Her right arm, beyond her elbow, was covered with white fluff. By now, the part of her limb that had originally been attached there was likely settling in the beast's stomach. Just as how Kotoha's legs could not be restored, Mishiro's right arm would likely never be the same again.

"Curses," Mishiro muttered again.

She had become a mere shadow of her usual graceful self. That Mishiro had been blown away immediately upon reaching the second floor. Once the group had depleted their batteries, the beast appeared and clamped down on her right arm at lightning speed, and it was lights-out for her. There was nothing elegant about the scream she'd let out. It was no surprise that Chie and Keito had abandoned her and run for their lives.

The silver lining was that her forearm had *come off* rather easily. That meant two things: One, Mishiro reflexively uttered a remarkably pathetic shriek, and two, the beast temporarily ceased its chase. As the beast gnawed on her arm,

Mishiro managed to scamper away like a cartoon character. She ran without even thinking about the possibility of other traps, knocking against debris that scratched her body and transformed her dress into a piece of tattered cloth, clumsily tripping on and slamming against the concrete floor and walls to the point where it became difficult for her to even breathe, before finally...

She took shelter in darkness.

All that Mishiro had left was her small hideout.

“...Curses,” she muttered a third time.

She had no clue how much time had passed since then. Perhaps at most ten or twenty minutes had ticked away in reality—not a significant amount of time by any means—but to Mishiro, it had felt like an eternity. That was plenty of time to ponder—ponder about pointless matters.

*Why? How did this happen? Where did I go wrong?*

The first thing to pop into her head was the face of that wretch—Yuki. The girl with the countenance of a phantom, who claimed to be a ten-time player.

*This is all her fault, Mishiro thought. If she hadn't kept running her mouth, my fate would have been different. "We should conserve our batteries"? Of course I knew that! Wasn't I the first to propose using one flashlight at a time? I was fully aware of our situation. If Yuki had kept her mouth shut, I would have thought to instruct Kotoha not to use her flashlight on the third floor. But because she just had to go and speak out, I was forced to ignore her. Exactly. If only she hadn't disrupted my rhythm.*

*If only she hadn't said this was her tenth game.*

Next, Mishiro imagined the face of the person who had dragged her into this world—her agent. Mishiro could recite every word of the invitation offered to her.

*"Here, there will be no one to stand above you. We will offer you the status you desire."*

That was a given. Since not many people would leap at the chance to play death games, one could easily become a top player after five or ten games. It

was comparable to setting a Guinness World Record for spitting watermelon seeds. Upon further reflection, Mishiro realized the social status offered by the games was nothing amazing, but at the time, the invitation had sounded incredibly alluring. Easily becoming a top player in an industry that catered to a clientele of high-society elites? Not too shabby.

But her agent hadn't said a word about wretches like *Yuki*.

*This was a scam, Mishiro thought. I shouldn't have fallen for those empty promises.*

She thought back to the night she'd destroyed every inch of her room. She had gone on a rampage because she felt she had come up against a wall in life. Since she couldn't tear down that wall, she settled for destroying her room instead. Mishiro believed her greatest misfortune in life was being born in the current era. No matter what she did, there would always be someone who would rise above her. There were so few peaks in this world, and far too many people trying to reach them.

*What is someone like me to do in this day and age?* Mishiro wondered. *Would it be better to die? I beat my little sister with my beloved racket until she had to be rushed to the hospital in an ambulance. If only I hadn't been born with this disposition.*

Finally, her mind drifted to the image of her mother. She looked up at the woman who was more than twice her height and asked, *"Hey, why does my name, Kazumi, mean 'most beautiful'?"*

The woman answered, *"I named you with hopes that you would be the best at something, no matter how small."*

*Shut up, woman. Die. How dare you curse me... Die!*

*You're the one who's going to die,* said the cold part of Mishiro's heart to herself.

*"....."*

Mishiro buried her face in her knees.

She let her consciousness gradually melt away. She didn't care if she fell

asleep. She was tired. Nothing mattered anymore. Upon losing her right arm, her dignity and her will to survive through thick and thin had evaporated. She had no need for something that had shattered. The second she closed her eyes, a mighty wave of exhaustion washed over her. She was more fatigued than she had thought. As she surrendered herself to the feeling, Mishiro—

—heard footsteps.

It was no hallucination. The echo of footsteps reached her ears. They were getting closer.

Mishiro removed her left hand from her knees and grabbed the knife on the floor. It was the only thing she'd taken with her after emptying her backpack on the third floor. However, what would that accomplish? Did she think she could hold her own against the beast with that pathetic blade? No. The knife was not so much a weapon to her but a *charm*. She couldn't stomach the feeling of being empty-handed.

And so Mishiro remained motionless as the source of the footsteps entered the room.

Although her superb hideout had twice saved her from being attacked by the beast, it had a flaw—it lacked a peephole. She had no way of confirming the identity of the intruder, nor if they had seen through her hiding spot. Mishiro hit her chest with her handless arm, directing herself to stay calm, but in blatant mockery of her command, her heart only beat faster.

When her hideout was kicked away, Mishiro thought her heart was going to stop.

No—it *did* stop for a split second. She felt a rip in the fabric of time. When she came to her senses, she found herself staring at a single girl who was returning to a normal posture after delivering a high kick.

It was the phantom girl, Yuki.

**(18/30)**

Sure enough, Yuki found Mishiro hiding in a spot where rubble had been disturbed.

“Hey,” Yuki called out. “Seems like you’re okay.”

Mishiro was wearing a dumbfounded expression.

Despite the thick shadows of the room, the exhaustion on the girl’s face was obvious. And it was little wonder she was fatigued—she’d been curled up in such a cramped space for quite a while. Yuki thought about giving her a wake-up slap, but before she could lift her hand—

“How?” Mishiro asked. “How did you know I was here?”

“A woman’s intuition,” Yuki answered, repeating the same phrase she had used some time ago. “Doesn’t matter how long I’ve been away from these games—I’m not going to lose to a stupid mutt.”

“What do you want with me?”

“Aren’t you the one who wants something from me?”

Mishiro fell silent.

“That was quite the loud noise just now.” Yuki nudged a piece of scrap with her foot. “Chances are, that beast is sprinting here as we speak. And this time, it won’t just settle for an arm—it’ll devour your whole body.”

“...That should apply to you as well, no?”

“Nope. I’ve got a safety net. I’ve found the stairs, so I can run away anytime I want.”

Mishiro’s expression changed.

Yuki continued, “Of course, I didn’t forget how to get there. The other three have already gone down to the first floor. It’s just you and me left.”

“...Even after locating the staircase, you decided to come back?”

“That’s how it is.”

“Do you mean to say you came looking for me...in order to rescue me?”

Yuki snickered. “No way. 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.”

“Huh...?”

“You’ve had too much fun treating me as a punching bag, Mishiro. Can’t remember how many times it was...so let’s just bundle it all into one. If you apologize, I’ll forgive and forget.”

Yuki stretched out her arms as if to indicate her generosity.

“If you say sorry for acting all cocky, I’ll show you to the staircase.”

## **(19/30)**

Mishiro was speechless.

“Huh? What’s wrong? It’s just admitting the obvious. From where we stand, it’s plain as day which of us is more capable. And you clearly slung mud at me for no reason. I know your heart is filled with guilt, so all you have to do is voice your feelings.”

Mishiro’s hand trembled around the handle of the knife. But her trembling led to nothing further.

“Or what, do you really not see that I’m on a different level from you? Give me a break. It sure is easy to be smug when you’re incompetent. And because you don’t realize how powerless you are, you’ll repeat the same failures over and over until you die. It’s funny to watch from a distance, but I sure don’t want to stand close enough to breathe the same air as you.”

Mishiro was at a loss for words. However, the same phrase repeated itself over and over inside her mind.

*You wretch, you wretch, you wretch, you wretch—you wretch!*

“Cat got your tongue? Don’t tell me you’re trying to buy time for the beast to show up. That won’t do. You get ten seconds. I’d hate to do it, but if I don’t hear an apology in that time, I’ll have to give up on you, princess.”

Yuki held her palms out in front of Mishiro. She held up the same number of fingers as the number of seconds she had designated—ten.

Yuki folded down her right thumb.



Yuki folded down her right index finger.

From seven to six to five, the number of her outstretched fingers continued to decrease. Mishiro stared on, as if being hypnotized by a coin on a string.

*Say it*, came a voice in her head.

Right—she had no choice but to admit it. Objectively speaking, Yuki was the superior player. She was probably telling the truth about being a ten-time player, too. Mishiro had to own up to the fact that she'd acted superior toward a more experienced player. No—she didn't even need to do that. All she needed to do was apologize. An empty apology was all the situation demanded. There was little doubt Yuki would guide Mishiro to the staircase, as it was hard to imagine she would come back just to put Mishiro down. Yuki was a seasoned player in her tenth game, and she must have wanted to rescue Mishiro.

An apology would save Mishiro's life.

However, her mouth remained rigid and refused to budge.

*Why do you hesitate?* she thought. *What are you thinking? This is no argument between elementary school students. What will being stubborn accomplish at a time like this? —Stubborn? No. That's not what I feel at all. So what is it? After going through all this hell, what is this feeling burning inside of me?*

*Frustration.*

The moment she found the word, Mishiro's eyes opened wide. The gears in her body began to turn, restoring her normal functions.

*That's it. I'm frustrated. I'm too frustrated to admit defeat. So frustrated I refuse to surrender to her in hopes of extending my life.*

"Shut up," Mishiro said after the number of Yuki's outstretched fingers fell to one.

"Huh? What?"

"I've had enough of your poppycock!!"

Yuki was stunned. Surviving Candle Woods had meant nothing in this situation.

The next thing Yuki knew, she was falling backward onto her bottom. Unable to piece together anything to say to her assailant, she could only watch blankly as Mishiro dashed out of the room.

“.....?”

Yuki held her hand against her chest. Her heart was racing, as was her mind.

Still, she tried to piece together the situation with her barely functioning brain. What had just happened? Yuki had located Mishiro. She could have rescued the princess immediately but instead decided to use the opportunity to tease her a little. There was nothing to lose, and even if Mishiro refused to apologize, Yuki was still going to save her. Instead, Mishiro had flown into a rage. Yuki had failed to respond to the unexpected development in time and remained bewildered as the girl pushed her back and raced out of the room. And now...

And now, for some reason, Yuki's heart was racing.

She could hear the sound of heavy footsteps from afar.

“...Right, I have to get out of here.”

Yuki got up off the floor. The footsteps belonged to the Beast of Gévaudan, who would reach this room shortly. Recognizing that time was of the essence, she swiftly left the room while attempting to detect Mishiro's location.

As she sprinted, she touched her chest again. Her heart was still racing.

But her heart rate wasn't elevated because she was running. Nor was it because she felt irritated at the unexpected turn of events. In fact, Yuki came to understand that it meant the opposite. She was *curious* about Mishiro. She had *warmed up* to her.

“*Poppycok,*” *huh?* she thought. Yuki was impressed with Mishiro's defiance. It felt as if Yuki had struck and been repelled by the softest part of Mishiro's heart.

Yuki found her endearing.

She also didn't want Mishiro to die.

Yuki's heightened perception simultaneously picked up the presence of two beings. The first was the Beast of Gévaudan. The second was Mishiro. The girl was presumably running aimlessly through the hallways, but evidently, the gods of survival had not forsaken her, as she happened to be making a beeline toward the staircase. However, the fangs of the beast were inching ever closer to her. At this rate, she wouldn't make it to the stairs in time.

After turning a corner, Yuki spotted Mishiro's silhouette. Mishiro was about to run straight through a three-way junction.

Meanwhile, a shadowy figure was barreling down the side path.

Yuki bolted forward at full speed and leaped at Mishiro's back—

**(21/30)**

“...Gah?!”

Mishiro felt something hit her from behind. Her posture crumpled, and the inertia from the force caused her to roll onto the floor. Discovering just how disorienting it was to fall over in the dark, she managed to stop herself from tumbling, and she got back up. A stinging pain shot through the cuts that had formed all over her body.

“I've taken a shine to you!” The voice belonged to Yuki. “As a special treat, I'll save you this time! Turn left at the next corner and then take the third right! Hurry while I distract the—”

The girl's words cut off abruptly. Mishiro heard something topple over, followed by sounds of a struggle. Was Yuki flailing around all alone? No, that was impossible. Among the cacophony of noise was snorting that sounded far too intense to come from human lungs.

It was the trap of the second floor—the man-eating beast. Yuki had become its next victim.

Until a few seconds prior, Mishiro had been where Yuki was. If Yuki hadn't kicked her away, Mishiro would have fallen into the clutches of the beast

instead. Yuki had *protected* her. Not only that, she had also disclosed the location of the staircase—and to Mishiro no less, someone whom she should have deeply resented. Despite the fact that Mishiro had repeatedly lashed out at her and had refused to apologize.

The question going through Mishiro's mind: Why?

Was it a trap? Was Yuki still out to get her?

That was certainly a plausible explanation. Still, Mishiro ran as Yuki had instructed. She turned left at the next corner. Then she took the third right. There was no reason for her to trust Yuki, but trust her she did. Because when Yuki shouted the directions to the stairs, her voice had sounded far brighter and cheerier than any Mishiro had ever heard before.

## (22/30)

Yuki heard footsteps heading farther away. *Guess Mishiro's gone*, she thought, feeling the beast's breath on her skin as it pinned her to the floor.

The Beast of Gévaudan had claimed Yuki with its fangs, chomping down on her stomach from the side. However, Yuki remained unfazed. Although she felt pain, she did not associate it with the feeling of suffering. In fact, it only served to calm her down. That was proof of two things: that she was on the brink of grave danger and that she was back in practice as a player. Relief flooded over her—the game *had been far too lenient*, rendering her uncertain as to whether her instincts had returned. But this moment communicated to her that she was back in business.

Yuki was very much in peak condition as, despite the dark, she deftly maneuvered her knife from behind her back to slice the eyeball of the beast, attempting to force it to retreat. She even had the mental leeway to consider the audience; executing the beast in an excessively brutal fashion would earn her their disapproval. Some people rejoiced at the deaths of humans yet took great exception to the abuse of animals, and many such people were among the members of the audience. As far as Yuki was concerned, it was outrageous to demonstrate an unwavering devotion to animal welfare while watching a death game, of all things, but there was no denying reality. If she fell out of favor with

the members of the audience—the games’ patrons—there could very well be an adverse impact on the prize money she received for surviving. She had to act like the ideal player and set aside her personal beliefs. In this world, what mattered was whether you could act according to others’ desires.

*Actors sure have it rough*, Yuki thought.

With her free hand, she pulled out a second knife, which she had secretly swiped from Mishiro. It was time to show off her dual-wielding skills.

## **(23/30)**

Kotoha’s group reached the first floor.

There were no traps. But there was ample light.

## **(24/30)**

Just as Yuki had predicted, the first floor had windows, which were fitted with iron bars. Although they were too narrow for anyone to squeeze through, they did allow light to stream in from outside. It was the early morning, and the sky was still ultramarine, but there was plenty of light. Kotoha, Chie, and Keito did not need to watch their footing as they progressed through the first floor.

“Y’know, it really feels like we’ve reached the end,” Chie said, gazing at the sky through the iron bars. “Sure, we shouldn’t let our guard down, but we’re definitely past the worst of it.”

“Yeah...,” Kotoha replied from Chie’s back.

Kotoha twisted around. Keito was straggling far behind them. Although the first floor appeared completely safe, it could very well be an illusion to hide the existence of traps, so Chie was walking out in front. Keito had taken the lead on the fifth and fourth floors, Kotoha on the third, and Mishiro on the second, so now it was Chie’s turn. Besides Yuki, they’d all had at least one opportunity to be line leader.

There were no signs of Mishiro or Yuki coming up from behind. Had the two girls simply not caught up yet, or had they run into trouble? Kotoha wondered

what would happen if her group reached the exit without them. The most likely scenario would be—

“I gotta admit, I’m surprised,” Chie said. “That Yuki is a real nice gal. Not only did she go save you, she also went back for Mishiro, even though they kept butting heads... You’re lucky to be alive, Kotoha.”

*Yuki.* A player in her tenth game who looked like a phantom. A player from before Candle Woods. She had constantly been working to save others throughout this game. However—

“That’s not it,” Kotoha said. “She’s frightening, far more than she looks.”

“Huh? What makes you think that?”

“Do you want to know?”

“You betcha!”

Kotoha twisted around again. After making sure that Keito was walking far enough behind, Kotoha brought her voice to a whisper.

“If I tell you, will you promise me one thing?”

“Huh?” As if sensing something foreboding in those words, Chie lowered her voice to match Kotoha’s. “What do you mean by that?”

“Just promise me you’ll do what I ask. I only need your word.”

“...Well, okay, I guess.”

“Do you still have that paper?”

Even without a view of Chie’s face, Kotoha could tell she was surprised.

“Paper?” Chie asked.

“The sturdy white sheet about the size of a handkerchief. It was inside our backpacks.”

Chie fished around inside her backpack, which she had strapped to her chest just as Yuki had done.

“Oh, here it is.” She pulled out a white piece of paper.

“It’s synthetic paper made by YUPO.”

“...What’s that again? I know I’ve heard the name somewhere...”

“It’s the material used for ballots in government elections. After it’s folded, it’ll open back up by itself inside the ballot box, so it’s convenient to use.”

“Huh... Really? I’ve never voted or anything, so I didn’t notice. So?”

“Well, there’s one other thing I found curious... The outfit for this game.”

Kotoha looked down at Chie. She had on a white dress that would look dazzling beneath a summer sky. But it had accumulated many tears in her walk through the scrap-strewn building, becoming something that would be embarrassing to wear in public.

“Have you given any thought as to why it’s a white dress?” Kotoha asked. “It completely clashes with the venue of the game.”

“I did wonder about that...but is it really anything strange? It’s not like I can think of an outfit that would match the vibes of an abandoned building. Did you figure something out?”

“Yep. I’m pretty sure these dresses are modeled after chitons.”

“...Okay, now that’s definitely not a word I’ve heard before...”

“A chiton is a form of clothing that was common in ancient Greece. It’s made by folding a large sheet of linen fabric twice, without making any cuts. It was the predecessor to the tunic, so its shape is close to that of a dress.”

“Huh. But what does that have to do with anything?”

“Does anything come to mind when you hear the words ‘ancient Greece’ and ‘vote’?”

“Not really, no.”

“.....”

Kotoha fell silent. *Good grief*, she thought. *Kids these days have no appreciation for education. The internet doesn’t always cut it.*

She decided to change her approach. “Then let me ask you this. Why do you think this level doesn’t have any traps?”

“Huh? Well...”

“Don’t you think that suggests there’s an unavoidable trap by the exit? Don’t you think there could be something waiting for us at the very end that will serve as the culmination of this game?”

“...I mean...”

“Think back to everything we’ve been through. All the traps set in this building can be avoided by making someone else take the lead. Not just the pitfalls and land mines; that goes for the beast, too. A creature of that size should be *completely full* after eating a single person. The game was balanced so that you could breeze through it just by having someone else walk out in front. Why do you think that is?”

“.....” Chie grew pale.

“Sorry. I figured it out at the very beginning,” Kotoha said. “I kept quiet, knowing something like this would be waiting for us at the finish line. I mean, if it turned out to be true, there would be no avoiding it... Truth be told, I was ecstatic to lose at rock-paper-scissors and to take the lead on the third floor. Because braving danger head-on would most likely save me from being chosen at the end... And since you’ve been carrying me, Chie, I won’t vote for you. So I’d like you to not vote for me, either.”

The next moment, Kotoha heard two voices from behind. One was Keito’s, while the other belonged to someone else she knew. As the two sets of footsteps got closer, Kotoha turned around and called out the girl’s name.

“—Mishiro! You’re okay!”

“...Yes. For the most part.” Mishiro looked down at her *missing* right arm. That was not her only injury, either; she was covered in cuts and scrapes, and her dress was in tatters. She looked less like a girl on a summer’s day and more like a young slave.

“Um... Where’s Yuki? Wasn’t she with you?”

“...She...jumped in to protect me.” Mishiro’s tone suggested a reluctance to admit it. “She became the beast’s victim in my stead. I believe she is no longer with us...”

Kotoha doubted those words. *Is that really true?* She couldn’t possibly



imagine Yuki dying after seeing her demonstrate such magnificent skill. Yet Mishiro didn't appear to be lying.

"Anyway, I'm glad to see you're all right," Keito butted in. "What a relief. Goes to show that you're our one and only leader."

Kotoha thought Keito was acting awfully chummy despite having abandoned Mishiro when fleeing from the beast.

However, Mishiro showed no anger. Instead, with a dour look on her face, she simply replied, "...I suppose so."

As if in consequence of the tremendous melancholy behind those words, the group simply marched ahead silently for a while.

It was only when they reached the iron door resembling an exit that their silence was broken.

Chie was the one to speak. "What on earth...?"

## **(25/30)**

The exit stood before their eyes. It was an iron door, likely made of the same material used for bank vaults. Above it was a monitor with a blank display. The door had no knob or handle, and it would not budge even with the entire group pushing against it. It was impossible to open through sheer strength alone.

On either side of the door were three small rooms, each around the size of a shower stall, for a total of six. These rooms were unlocked, and inside each was a single desk and chair, as well as the same kind of monitor as the one above the door. They also contained a digital timer like the ones the players had repeatedly seen throughout the building, and on the outer wall was a single rectangular gap.

As if waiting for Kotoha and the others to look around, the monitor emitted a conspicuous static noise.

"—Welcome, players. Congratulations on clearing the game."

An inoffensive-looking mascot appeared on the screen.

Kotoha had imagined something like this would happen. In these games, the presence of a monitor implied the appearance of an explainer. In situations where it would be otherwise difficult to explain the rules, or in games with many first-time players, explainers would show up to guide players in the right direction.

For this game, the explainer was a mascot character that resembled a wolf. Its design was neither ferocious nor adorable; it was very neutral and inoffensive. It evoked a sense of pity, as though it had been created during the mascot fad a decade ago but was discarded for lacking any sense of uniqueness. Kotoha speculated that the character hadn't been specially created for this game but rather been reused from somewhere else by the organizers.

The wolf mascot continued, "While that is what I would like to say, the game has yet to conclude. It is now time for you to undertake the Final Trial. I trust you see the rooms on either side of the door, yes?"

That was very much a rhetorical question, as the mascot had almost certainly been watching when the group was examining the rooms.

"Each of you will step inside a room," the mascot went on, without waiting for an answer. "However, it appears not all of you are here. As such, there will be some waiting involved."

"—Not all of us are here?" Kotoha parroted back. "Does that mean Yuki's alive?"

"This goes without saying, but each room can only accommodate a single player," the mascot continued, ignoring Kotoha. "When someone enters, the door to the room will lock automatically. The lock cannot be disengaged from inside, so take this time to conduct any unfinished business you may have outside."

Mishiro narrowed her eyes in reaction to the part about the lock. Whatever happened in those rooms, it required that they be locked in.

Although some parts of the explanation didn't sit right with them, the group followed the wolf mascot's instructions and entered the rooms. Without her legs, Kotoha was unable to sit down on a chair by herself, so Chie assisted her. The moment Chie left the room, the door closed on its own, and a clunk

echoed, signaling the door had been locked. Kotoha had been isolated from the outside world.

She waited patiently as the seconds ticked away.

She glanced at the timer on the wall. 01:32:45. All the digits between zero and five were present exactly once. When Kotoha had woken up, there had been five and a half hours remaining on the countdown, which meant it had taken the group approximately four hours to reach the exit. *Was that all it took?* Kotoha thought. She was so exhausted that she would have believed they'd been wandering the building for four whole days. If this was how she felt despite having been carried for the entire second half of the game, she couldn't begin to imagine how tired the others were feeling.

They still had an hour and a half left, but there was no need to wait for the rest of the time to elapse, as a few minutes later, Kotoha heard footsteps beyond the door. As soon as she did, delight came over her. It had to be Yuki. After the moment of joy passed, Kotoha's nerves showed on her face. *Is Yuki really all right? It sounds like she's doing well enough to be walking on both legs...*

Before Kotoha could get lost in her thoughts, she heard the outside monitor turn on again. The wolf mascot repeated the same explanation it had given the players a few minutes earlier. Kotoha heard the sound of a door opening and closing, and she even made out the clunk of the lock.

The monitor in Kotoha's room flicked on.

"Now, let's begin," said the wolf mascot.

**(26/30)**

Mishiro focused her mind, hanging on to the explainer's every word.

"Players, open your backpacks and look inside the inner right pocket. There, you should find a white piece of paper. Have you located it?" The wolf mascot held up a piece of paper.

However, Mishiro was unable to do as the explainer asked. This was no surprise, as her backpack had been incinerated when the land mine exploded

on the third floor.

“Oh? It appears a number of you have misplaced it... In that case, I ask anyone without a backpack to open the drawer of your desk. You will find the same sheet of paper inside.”

Mishiro did as instructed and grabbed the piece of white paper. She recalled finding something similar inside her backpack at the start of the game, though she hadn't given it any thought at the time. She had merely assumed it was some kind of double-sided tape.

“This is YUPO paper,” the wolf mascot explained. “It is resistant to water and difficult to rip apart, and it will open on its own when folded. It's used for ballots in our country's elections. Did any of you make that connection?”

The wolf mascot paused as if to gauge the players' reactions.

“...I see. It appears a number of you did. Then you should already understand what this paper will be used for. In just a moment, you will be casting a vote. You will write the name of the player you believe to have *contributed the least* in terms of clearing this game. The player who receives the most votes...”

The wolf mascot paused once more—this time for emphasis.

“...will die.”

The explainer continued, “There is a gap in the wall to your right, which serves as both the slot of the ballot box and a vent. A chemical gas we have painstakingly created will flow into the room of the player who receives the most votes. For the sake of your mental well-being, I shall abstain from explaining the specific effects, but know that the lethality rate is virtually one hundred percent, with death occurring within five minutes of administration.”

“.....”

*I see... So that explains it,* Mishiro thought.

*This* was the reason Yuki had saved both Mishiro and Kotoha. Yuki had understood what the paper represented and had anticipated a trial like this awaited them at the very end. Of the five players, she was the only outsider, so she must have thought she would receive the most votes if they got through

the game normally. That was why she'd risked being devoured by the beast to save Mishiro.

"You will have fifteen minutes to vote from the moment I announce the start of the voting period. Be aware that any player who fails to cast their ballot in that time will be treated as having voted for herself. This concludes the explanation. I will answer any questions you may have at this time."

The wolf mascot fell silent.

Mishiro stayed quiet as well. Although she had questions she wanted to ask, she decided to first see how the other players would react. Before long...

"One player has posed a question," the wolf mascot said. "'What will happen if two players tie for the most votes?' An astute query. If that occurs, the votes will be weighed differently; players who voted with the ballot found inside their backpack—in other words, players who did not misplace their original ballot—will have greater voting power. Should the tie still persist, then there will be a tiebreak vote between the two top vote-getters. As there is an odd number of players, that vote will assuredly be decisive."

That rule penalized Mishiro, who had lost her ballot, although she thought it was better than having no voting power at all.

"...There has been another question. 'What if a player casts a blank ballot or writes something besides another player's name?' In that case, it will be treated the same as not casting a ballot—the vote will count toward the player herself. The same rule will apply for an illegible ballot or other relevant cases, so I advise that you cast your ballot carefully."

That meant there was no way to avoid the trial. Mishiro wasn't surprised. The organizers would never give the players an out after putting them through so much trouble.

"I would like to ask a question," Mishiro said. "Let us assume a player received or stole a ballot from another player during the course of the game, or chooses to use the paper inside their desk in addition to their original ballot. What will happen if that *one player casts multiple ballots*?"

"...There has been another question," the wolf mascot said, following a brief

pause. After repeating the content of Mishiro's question, the wolf mascot answered, "In that case, only the first ballot cast will be considered valid. If it is impossible to determine which ballot was cast first—for instance, if two ballots are tied together—then only the first ballot we count will be considered valid. Regardless, a single player cannot cast more than one vote."

The answer came as a great relief to Mishiro.

Harvesting ballots would not grant a player an advantage. If, at the start of the game, Yuki had predicted what would happen, she would have had the opportunity to obtain at least two additional ballots—one from looting the corpse of the sixth player and another from saving Kotoha after she had been blown away by the land mine. Combining those with her original ballot and the paper in her desk would have given Yuki at least four ballots. If players could cast as many votes as they had ballots, Mishiro and the others would have no way of contesting Yuki's voting power.

"...As it appears there are no additional questions, I will take my leave. You have fifteen minutes—until the countdown timer reaches one hour and five minutes—to cast your votes. Players, I wish you the best of luck."

The screen fell dark with a zap.

Mishiro glanced at the timer. It read 01:20:03.

**(27/30)**

On the table sat a cylindrical pencil case and two pencils. After inspecting the pencils, Mishiro concluded nothing was out of the ordinary about them. She scoured the room but failed to find anything like a golden ballot with the weight of two votes, or an opening that would allow her to see whom another player was voting for. Resigning herself to the lack of any secret loopholes, Mishiro returned to the desk.

Mishiro was right-handed, and the beast had devoured her right arm. She had only ever written with her left hand a handful of times in elementary school for fun. To ensure her handwriting would be legible, Mishiro held her pencil as close to the tip as possible.

Then she began to think—whose name should she write?

First, she imagined the face of that wretched girl, Yuki, the player with whom she had frequently butted heads throughout the game. With her out of the picture, Mishiro would return to *the top of the heap*. But she couldn't write Yuki's name in good faith. Thanks to what had transpired earlier, Mishiro's stance toward Yuki had changed. Even though the girl was a regular player in these amoral games, she had a personal code of honor. Would Mishiro be able to live with herself for writing Yuki's name?

The next name to come to mind was Kotoha's. Among the players, she had been most severely injured, which would likely prevent her from ever joining another game. Assuming they would not run into one another in a future game, there would be no issue even if the girl formed a grudge against Mishiro. However, Mishiro again found it difficult to move her pencil. She herself had sustained a permanent injury in this game, so sympathy for Kotoha lingered somewhere inside her heart.

"...I suppose I should adhere to the instructions," Mishiro muttered before writing down a fateful name.

Since the beast had eaten her dominant arm, it took a bit of effort, but she managed to submit her ballot. Mishiro sank into her chair and waited for the time to pass.

The timer in the room ticked down to 01:05:00. Mishiro assumed the wolf mascot would make another appearance to reveal the votes, but that did not come to pass. The screen remained completely blank.

"...Huh?"

A voice from a different room revealed to Mishiro the results of the vote.

"Wha—? Me? It's me? Why?"

Being in a separate room, Mishiro had no idea how the girl had discovered she'd received the most votes. Perhaps only the monitor in her room had turned on, or the chemical gas had begun streaming through the vent. In any case, the outcome was clear. Mishiro breathed a sigh of relief knowing she had not received the most votes.

“Who was it? Who voted for me? Kotoha? Didn’t you promise not to vote for me? You didn’t, right? I voted for Keito, y’know! So why? Did I do something wrong?”

*It’s because you did nothing*, Mishiro thought.

Keito had faced the danger of pitfalls by walking out in front on the fifth and fourth floors. Kotoha had taken the lead on the third floor and lost her legs to a land mine. Mishiro had led from the third floor to the second, and the beast had eaten her arm. Yuki had rescued Kotoha and Mishiro. Each and every one of them could be said to have contributed to clearing the game. Only one player was different—Chie, who’d done nothing of importance aside from carrying Kotoha.

“This isn’t right. It’s not my fault! We randomly decided who would walk out in front with rock-paper-scissors! I don’t deserve any blame! Why did everyone listen to the explainer? You should’ve voted for who you wanted to kill! No... Don’t push the blame on me for this stupid reason!”

The first time Mishiro had felt *that feeling* was when her little sister was born. Anytime something happened between them, Mishiro always bore the full brunt of the blame. She had found it odd how her mother wouldn’t treat them equally. But the time she definitively felt *that feeling* was when a fatal incident occurred at her high school. A student who had been treated as a lapdog had apparently *taken matters into their own hands*, but for some reason, hardly anyone showed any sympathy for them. That was when it finally clicked for Mishiro. *Nobody has any sense of humanity*. She wondered if what she had just done was no different—making a problem go away by pinning the blame on a convenient scapegoat. But this time felt more wicked than usual, since they could justify their target based on her lack of contribution to clearing the game.

“Why?! Why me and not Keito? What does that kiss-ass have that I don’t? Mishiro, didn’t you see? She ran away before me! And she was laughing, too! She was relieved to not be attacked before she even thought about showing any concern for you, y’know! You should’ve killed her instead of me! Right?... Say something!! I’ve only got five minutes left!!”

Mishiro said nothing. She quietly closed her eyes.



“You’ll pay for this. I’ll curse you. I’ll curse you. I’ll curse you. I’ll curse you. I’ll curse you! I’ll curse you! I’ll curse you!! I’ll curse you!! I’ll curse you!! I’ll curse you!! I’ll curse you!! I’ll curse you!! I’ll curse you!! I’ll curse you!! —...”

Chie banged on the door, repeating the same words over and over. The volume and tone of her voice remained constant, and the banging continued without end. There were no signs of the door opening.

Before long, the voice abruptly stopped like a speaker that had been turned off. It was replaced with the faint sound of sobbing. Yet that lasted for just a brief moment. Soon afterward, the girl fell silent, leaving Mishiro with only the sound of ringing in her ears.

The digital timer in the room read 01:00:02.

**(28/30)**

The door opened.

Yuki stepped out of the room. She was the first to exit. A somewhat wobbly Mishiro appeared soon afterward, followed by Keito. After recalling that Kotoha was unable to leave her room on her own, Yuki went to get her. She hoisted Kotoha onto her back, just as she had done on the third and second floors. That made four of them.

There was no fifth player to join them.

The door to Chie’s room stayed locked and wouldn’t budge, even when they pushed or pulled it. There weren’t any gaps above or below the door, so the group was unable to peek inside. However, the fate of the occupant was obvious to all who had heard her screams.

Of the four remaining players, Mishiro was the first to speak.

“Yuki,” she said. “You managed to survive... That is a great relief.”

“Yep. All thanks to you.” Yuki took out a bloody knife from her backpack. It had belonged to Mishiro previously. “I went and used this for myself. The rest came easy.”

“...My knife... You got it back?”

“I didn’t want it to go to waste.”

Mishiro’s eyes settled on Yuki’s body. Although there was white fluff coming out of her stomach, she was otherwise uninjured. In the end, the Beast of Gévaudan hadn’t been able to land another attack on her. Things had been different when Yuki was carrying Kotoha, so with nothing to hold her back, overcoming an obstacle like that was child’s play.

Mishiro grabbed own right shoulder. Yuki didn’t have to ask to know what was on the girl’s mind.

“Um...” The voice came from behind Yuki—from Kotoha. “It’s probably not right to ask...but who did you all vote for?”

The players froze and exchanged glances for a short while.

“...I voted for Keito.” Kotoha was the first to break the silence. “I was indebted to Chie for carrying me here...”

“...My vote was for Chie.” It was Mishiro who spoke up next. “I followed the instructions of the explainer and selected her.”

“I voted Chie, too. Same reason as Mishiro,” Keito said.

Nobody spoke of what Chie had yelled in her dying moments, as if they had all silently agreed not to bring it up.

“How about you, Yuki...?” Kotoha asked.

“Who knows?” she replied. “I guess it must’ve been Chie. She probably voted for Keito, so they’d otherwise be tied at two votes apiece.”

“You ‘guess’? What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Well, you know. There was that rule about how only the first ballot would be valid when submitting multiple, right? I didn’t care who I voted for, so *I wrote everyone’s names on different ballots and stuck all four into the slot*. That’s why I don’t even know where my vote ended up.”

The other players were speechless.

“...You had...four ballots?” Keito asked, breaking the profound silence.

“Yep. My original ballot, the one from the sixth player, Kotoha’s, and the one

inside the desk. That makes four.”

“Does that mean you realized they were ballots from the very beginning?” Mishiro asked.

“More or less. You all seemed pretty chummy with one another, so I figured I’d be exiled at the end. That’s why I went to save Kotoha and Mishiro. To gain brownie points.”

*Still...* “*For this stupid reason,*” huh? Chie’s words echoed in Yuki’s mind. It turned out that Yuki’s ballot had ended up influencing the results. Since it didn’t matter to her whom she voted for, she’d figured it would be fairest to vote at random, but now she was having second thoughts. That may have been irresponsible of her. It would probably be best to devise a different rule for deciding who to kill off, for any similar situations in the future.

Like with the doors to the individual voting rooms, the exit door swung open on its own. Yuki and the others left the building and found several cars parked outside. Each girl’s agent came out to greet them.

They had cleared the game. Once again, Yuki had survived to see another day.

“Yuki,” Mishiro called out when it was time to part ways.

“What?” Yuki asked.

“Earlier...you mentioned taking a liking to me.”

“Oh yeah. I guess I did.”

“Was that merely a lie to convince me to not vote for you?”

“Huh? No, I wasn’t thinking that deeply. Nobody’s ever said anything so strongly to my face before, so you sparked my curiosity. That’s all there is to it.”

Mishiro stared intently into Yuki’s eyes, as if trying to glean her true thoughts. As Yuki had no guilty conscience, she stared straight back.

Before long, a sour expression formed on Mishiro’s face. She paused for one or two seconds more, probably to steel her heart, before addressing Yuki in a reflective tone.

“Yuki, *I sincerely apologize for acting so full of myself.*”

Yuki was taken aback.

The princess continued, “You have made me fully aware of which one of us is superior... Now, if you will excuse me.”

As Yuki stood there frozen, unable to react, Mishiro climbed into a car.

“Um...Yuki? I want to get into my car, too, so I’d appreciate it if you could let me down...”

When Kotoha tapped her on the shoulder, the spell was broken. Yuki grew completely dumbfounded.

## **(29/30)**

Regular players like Mishiro each had an exclusive agent. Before being assigned someone to manage them, new players had to clear their first game, which many were unable to accomplish, and clear a second game to demonstrate that they were not one-and-done players. Agents all fit a specific mold—they wore sunglasses and black suits and drove black cars, like a group that existed only in urban legend. However, individual agents came in all shapes and sizes. Some did only the bare minimum, silently sending off and greeting players, while others cheerfully conversed with their players, got involved in their private lives, and provided extra support to push them to even greater heights.

Mishiro’s agent belonged to the latter group.

“That was unlike you, milady,” her agent said, turning the steering wheel.

Mishiro’s agent directed those words to the back seat, where Mishiro’s head was drooping listlessly.

“Could that have been the first apology of your life? What a sight to behold. I only wish I’d been recording it. If I—”

“Would it be all right if I vented a little?” Mishiro interrupted.

“...In here? Honestly, I would prefer if you didn’t...”

“Supporting the mental well-being of players is part and parcel of an agent’s

duty.”

After giving that self-serving remark, Mishiro raised her right leg and kicked her agent’s seat with all her strength.

“Damn her!!” she screamed. “Damn her!! Damn her!! Damn her!! That wretch!! —\*\*\*\*!!”

She continued to kick with all her might, shouting everything and anything that came into her mind. The seat pushed against her leg with every kick, causing the cuts on her back to sting in pain, but she paid that no mind. Her priority was to get out everything weighing on her heart.

Mishiro continued until her stamina ran out. Then she lay down across the back seat, panting.

“Good thing I wasn’t recording that, milady,” her agent said cheerfully. “Your reputation would go down the drain if anyone other than me heard those filthy words.”

“Silence...” Despite her exhaustion, Mishiro did not weaken her tone.

“If you’re so frustrated, then wouldn’t it have been better not to apologize to her?”

“I offered an apology because I felt it necessary. If I do not acknowledge reality, I will be unable to face it head-on. That would make it impossible for me to defeat her.”

“...Oh? Does that mean you’re going to continue as a player, milady?”

Mishiro looked at her right arm. Everything beyond the elbow was gone, and it couldn’t even bear the weight of anything heavier than a pair of chopsticks. She would have no chance of surviving her next game in her current condition.

“I must start over from scratch,” Mishiro said. “Regarding the suggestion you made to me some time ago... I will go along with it.”

“Which one? Attaching a drill to your right hand?”

“I would gladly accept the operation if I could still participate like that, but it would be a violation of the rules, yes?”

“Well, you can’t bring in any weapons.”

“Then I will request an ordinary prosthetic arm.”

“You say ‘ordinary,’ but even with *their* skill, it’ll be impossible to perfectly restore your arm, you know. It won’t exactly be starting over from scratch.”

“I’ll have to make up for it by leveling up. Regardless, with my current abilities, I hardly stand a chance against that wretch. I require a significant boost, enough to completely negate the disadvantages of a prosthetic arm.”

“Well, sounds like you need a hand. In two senses of the phrase.”

“.....”

“Get it? A physical hand and a helping hand...”

“Keep your eyes on the road while driving.”

“As you wish.”

**(30/30)**

# Whisperings Among Urban Explorers

When exploring derelict structures, the number one thing to watch out for isn't getting caught in a building collapse.

Nor is it being followed home by a phantom.  
Nor is it running afoul of the law.

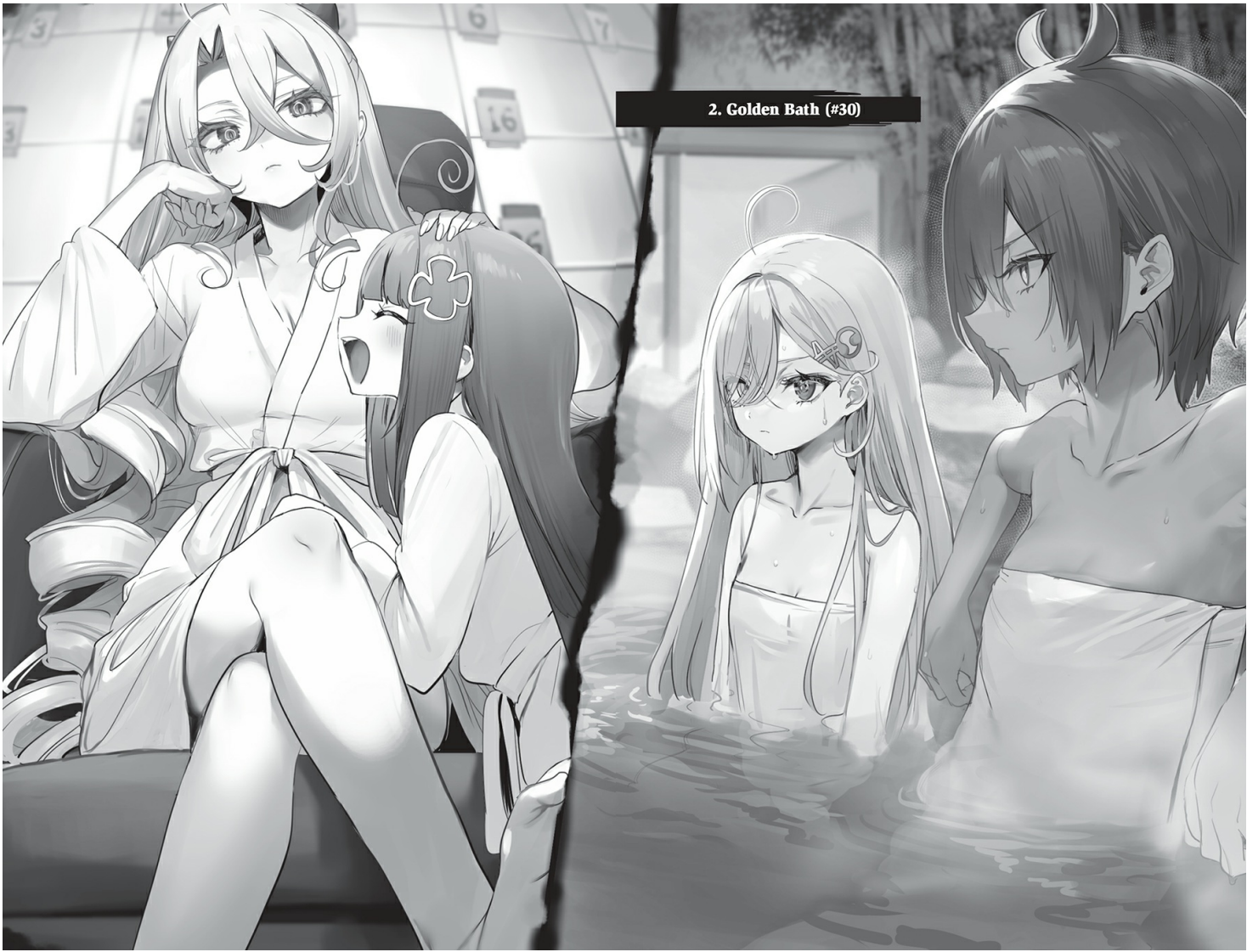
It is discovering signs of recent life in buildings that should have been abandoned.

It is noticing that ruins left untouched for years are strangely neat and tidy.

The biggest red flag is finding something that resembles white cotton.

If you stumble upon that, you must leave the building at once and wipe everything from your memory.

For it is irrefutable proof a *game* has taken place there.





**(0/41)**

Like with any other field, senior-junior relationships existed in the death-game industry, as did mentor-protégée relationships. Finding a mentor early on represented the most important factor in a player's long-term survival. Learning through repeated trial and error was infeasible, as a single misstep in a game could lead to death, and the internet offered no tips and tricks for survival due to the underground nature of the industry, which was limited to the shadow of society. Therefore, the only avenue of "study" was to rely on the oldest method of education—finding a mentor and learning by word of mouth.

Yuki had once had a mentor of her own by the name of Hakushi, who'd cleared an earth-shattering ninety-five games—the highest amount of any player Yuki knew. There was a time when Yuki had learned the ropes of death games from her accomplished mentor.

"Beware your thirtieth game."

That was one of the lessons Yuki had received.

"There's something known as the Wall of Thirty. Around their thirtieth game, perfectly capable, experienced players who had been clearing games without any issue suddenly drop dead. The 'wall' refers to that dip in the odds of survival. That's why there are so few players like me who have crossed thirty."

"...Is that because the organizers raise the difficulty level on purpose?" Yuki asked. The organization running the games would certainly have methods of encumbering certain players.

"Nope," Hakushi replied. "The difficulty remains the same. There's nothing suggesting the organizers intervene during games, either. In fact, they loathe the idea of tipping the scales to manipulate the outcome."

"Then is it carelessness? Like maybe the thirtieth game is right around the

time players have enough experience to get overconfident...”

“That could be part of it. Some players may also be overly conscious of the Wall of Thirty and psych themselves out because of it. But speaking from experience, I don’t believe the phenomenon is anything that nebulous. Everything begins to work against you, and it feels like the whole world is out to get you. It can only be described as a *curse*. When it happened to me, it was the first and last time I’d ever been put through such a game. It certainly isn’t something I want to go through twice.”

“...How can a player get over that wall?” Yuki asked.

“Wouldn’t we all like to know?” Hakushi replied.

**(1/41)**

Yuki awoke inside her tiny studio apartment.

**(2/41)**

Her head still felt a little woozy, and her body lethargic. Those were lingering side effects from the sleeping pills that were handed to her at the start and end of every game. Realizing that a game had just concluded, Yuki let out a groan to express her displeasure before getting off her mattress.

A white lab coat was folded up next to her pillow. It had been the outfit of her twenty-ninth game, but Yuki knew it was not the one she had worn herself. Her own costume had disintegrated when some chemicals splashed onto it during the course of the game. Though many of Yuki’s past game outfits had gotten damaged or ripped, she’d never had one completely dissolve on her. This was also the first time the organizers had given her a brand-new outfit as a memento of the game.

Yuki took the lab coat into her hands.

The next moment, she slammed it onto the floor with an audible *bam*.

“Dammit,” she muttered.

**(3/41)**

After completing her usual post-game rituals—storing the outfit in her closet, offering a prayer to the departed players, and reflecting on the game itself—Yuki left her apartment.

She was going on a walk. At some point, she had turned that into her hobby. The Yuki of the past had thought walking around without a specific goal in mind was a waste of time, something only for old people who were bored out of their skulls, but her stance on this had changed. Apparently, setting aside the time to do nothing was a plain old human need. When something unpleasant happened, or when she was feeling down for making a stupid mistake, an extended walk would heal her spirit before she knew it.

This time, however, the walk failed to improve her mood.

In her twenty-ninth game, Yuki had yet again made a fool of herself. Her lab coat hadn't been the only thing to disintegrate; the chemicals that had doused her from overhead had burned off the skin all over her body and, according to her agent, had even melted off half her skull. The hair currently on her head wasn't the real thing. A woman's hair was her life—this was certainly not a belief Yuki held, but she couldn't help feeling shocked by the reality of having sustained a head injury that had stripped her of her hair.

Her missteps hadn't been limited to her most recent game. In the game before that, and the one before that as well, Yuki had not been in her usual form. While the outcome of her twenty-eighth game, Ghost House, would likely not have differed had she been in peak condition, she was still conscious of her embarrassing showing.

*It's not looking good, she thought. Even though the next game is finally my thirtieth.*

*Or maybe...because the next game is my thirtieth?*

**(4/41)**

After another two weeks wearing down the heels of her loafers, Yuki once

again took to the asphalt on a nighttime walk. This had become part of her daily routine lately. She was attending a night school, and rather than make a beeline home after class, she'd been choosing to wander around the vicinity.

Initially, Yuki would first stop by her apartment to change into a tracksuit before going out again, but after getting tired of doing that, she now took walks in her sailor-style uniform. Loitering around late at night in a getup like that was socially undesirable behavior, especially for a minor like her, but for some reason, nobody had ever scolded her. Maybe she had simply been fortunate enough to avoid running into police officers, or the game organizers had been working their magic in her favor—or perhaps other people thought her to be a real phantom and concealed themselves in the shadows, reciting incantations in hopes of pacifying her spirit.

Two weeks had passed since her previous game, and Yuki had yet to get back into form. She had tried every trick in the book—eating nutritional foods, avoiding naps, adding these walks to her routine—but to no avail. She was fully aware that part of the problem was that she couldn't tell what was working. It felt as if the gears of her body were failing to mesh in harmony, as if something in her core had been severely rattled.

To Yuki, a period of two weeks represented a cycle, for it was the typical duration of her break between games. A week was not enough time to recover her stamina, while an entire monthlong hiatus would dull her senses. Thus, she thought it best to operate on an interval of one game every two weeks, which meant participating in two or three every month. Her agent was well aware of that fact and would soon—perhaps as soon as this very night—approach Yuki with an invitation to another game.

However, the crucial detail was that Yuki was in no condition to accept such an invitation.

One particular option nagged at her mind—delaying her return to the games. Obviously, that was a course of action available to her. Although the organizers had zero concern for human rights, they were *egregiously* kind toward players outside the games. Players reserved the right to accept or decline any game invitation. Turning down one invitation would not make their future games any more difficult, nor would it cause them to receive threats along the lines of,

*“What an adorable little sister you have; it’d be a shame if something happened to her.”* It was perfectly acceptable for a player to say no if they so wished.

But as far as Yuki was concerned, that would amount to kicking the can down the road. She couldn’t imagine her condition improving over time—in fact, it would likely only worsen. The longer she stayed away from the games, the duller her instincts would become.

An unpleasant vision of the future entered Yuki’s mind: After declining the invitation, she would fail to get back into practice and end up turning down the next invitation as well, and the next and the next, repeating the same decision over and over. Eventually, her instincts would completely rust, her self-confidence would fade away, and in the end—

—she would never participate in another game for as long as she lived.

“That’s the one thing I want to avoid...,” Yuki muttered. She had no intention of helplessly watching as her goal of clearing ninety-nine games slowly slipped away.

But what, then, was she to do? Agree to participate in spite of her current form? Was it not the mark of an amateur to accept a challenge all willy-nilly because things would otherwise continue to worsen? Yuki didn’t just want to win; she wanted to win as a *seasoned professional*. To Yuki, putting on a reckless performance was as shameful as giving up halfway.

She had spent the past two weeks mulling over everything. And yet she had reached no conclusion. She stood at an impasse.

On this day, Yuki had again failed to stumble upon a solution. After completing her usual walking course, she would typically buy some ice cream at the convenience store before heading home. Today, however, she deviated from that habit, as she thought it undesirable to cool her body down too much. Breathing through her mouth to stave off her craving for food, Yuki set a course for home.

And for an instant, she stopped in her tracks.

After that second elapsed, she continued walking. She had paused for only the briefest of moments. There was virtually nothing irregular about her movements. Had there been a hundred people watching her from nearby, ninety-nine of them would not have noticed anything strange.

Her action would have escaped the notice of a layman, but against a professional, it would likely have amounted to a mistake.

Yuki had felt someone staring at her from behind. She had cultivated this sixth sense of hers by teetering on the brink of life and death over the course of twenty-nine games. It allowed her to perceive any threat to her life. While that obviously included sensing hostility, she could also detect, with rather high precision, the presence and stares of other people. She'd also trained herself to avoid alerting people to the fact that she'd sensed them.

That was what she had hoped to do in this situation as well.

It was only for a mere moment, but Yuki had reacted to the person's gaze. A professional with keen observational skills, like a police detective or a private eye, could very well have noticed Yuki's unnatural movement. She had been too careless. Even though she was outside a game, she had demonstrated an excessive lack of attention. Her condition was clearly abnormal—

Yuki cut short her train of thought.

None of that was important. Right now, her priority was the gaze.

How long had it been on her? In all likelihood, it had only just landed on her, but since Yuki was off her game, she couldn't say that with certainty. It was possible someone had been watching her since the beginning of her walk or even since she was in class.

Whom did the stare belong to? A classmate from her night school? A police officer seeking to scold a minor for walking around late at night? Her agent, who had finally come to invite Yuki to her thirtieth game? Or perhaps a player with a grudge who had discovered where Yuki lived and was waiting for the perfect moment to carry out an assassination?

Regardless, Yuki had to uncover the identity of her pursuer.

She strayed from her usual route home and headed to a nearby park. She

didn't have a particular reason for deciding on the park. She did think she could minimize damage there if she was forced *to cause a commotion*, but she also had a gut feeling, bordering on conviction, that a park was the perfect setting for a midnight rendezvous.

In any event, she ended up in a park. It was a rather bare-bones affair, with swings, a slide, rideable animals with springs jutting out of their abdomens, and a single bench. It seemed like management hadn't been by to spruce things up in ages, as the equipment had rusted and weeds were running rampant. Since it was the middle of the night, no one was around.

Yuki stopped in the center of the park and turned around with the agility of a phantom. While heading to the park, she had pinpointed the direction the gaze had come from. Directly in her line of sight was a tree, large enough for a single person to hide behind.

"Come out," Yuki said. "What are you sneaking around for?"

There was no response. Yuki grew annoyed. After losing her patience, she approached the tree, figuring there would be no issue if she took matters into her own hands. On the way to the park, she had also narrowed down the identity of her pursuer. They were no professional. Either one of her classmates or a random creep must have spotted her.

*Why the heck does this have to happen now, of all times?* she thought. *This is supposed to be an important milestone for me. I'm nearing my thirtieth game, for crying out loud—*

*Wait—is this because my thirtieth game is around the corner?*

When Yuki was halfway to the tree, her pursuer stepped out from the shadows.

It was a middle-aged man.

Yuki had never seen him before. Since she made a living in an industry that exclusively employed women, she had an exceedingly short list of male acquaintances, limited only to her father, her classmates, and her teachers. This middle-aged man was nowhere on it.

But for some reason, he seemed familiar. It wasn't that he *looked* familiar—

Yuki had never before seen his well-worn checkered suit or his toned body, which suggested a regular habit of exercise, nor had she seen the sullen look on his face, which brought to mind a man battered by the rocky waves of society for decades. But the man's *aura*—the quality of his that suggested he could very well die from pushing himself too hard—*seemed* familiar to Yuki.

"Please excuse me." The man took off his hat and gave a low bow. "I was planning to speak with you once your errands had finished. I sincerely apologize for the trouble."

"...Who are you?" Yuki asked.

"My name is Tsutomu Kaneko. I believe you became acquainted with my daughter the other day."

Yuki's eyes widened in disbelief after she heard the man's name. Her mind overlaid the image of a certain girl onto the man's face. Player name—Kinko. A girl whose name shared the same written characters as the man's surname. A girl who had lost her life in Yuki's twenty-eighth game, Ghost House. A girl whose death was something in which Yuki bore great responsibility.

This man was—

"—Her father?!"

## **(6/41)**

Yuki had met the girl two games ago, during Ghost House. Her player name was Kinko. She was a small girl with blond pigtails and a delicate frame that seemed like it would fall apart with the wrong touch, as well as an overly serious personality that suggested she had missed out on much of life. She was an upstanding player—quite a rarity in death games—which made her all the more memorable to Yuki.

And following the events of this night, Kinko had evolved into a player whom Yuki would likely never forget for the rest of her life.

Although Yuki had previously met fellow players outside of the games, this was her first time encountering a player's parent or other relative.



Rather than continue the conversation standing up, Yuki and Mr. Kaneko sat on the bench. It was in shabby condition, fitting for seating in a rundown park. Being the rogue that she was, Yuki took no issue with that, but she was reluctant to make this gentleman sit on such a seat. In fact, she even suggested that they head to a different location.

“No, this is fine,” Mr. Kaneko replied. “This is not a conversation that will be appropriate elsewhere.”

The two of them were sitting side by side.

“...Where should I begin...?” the man muttered, stroking his beard.

“Um, Mr. Kaneko?” Yuki jumped in before the man could continue.

“Yes?”

“First, I just want to ask, how on earth did you find out about me?”

Right now, that was the question at the top of Yuki’s mind. The organizers heavily safeguarded players’ personal information. Even if Mr. Kaneko had been a member of the audience during Ghost House, he would have no way of knowing Yuki’s address. Plus, it wasn’t as if Yuki had been going around gloating about being a regular death-game player, and besides attending night classes, she had virtually no social footprint. And yet somehow the man had managed to track her down.

“All I can say...is that I tapped into my network.” Mr. Kaneko struggled to come up with an answer. “I apologize. I am not entirely sure of the specifics myself.”

“...Right.” Sensing that the man had special circumstances, Yuki figured it best to not dive too deep with her questioning. “How much do you know about me?”

“I know that you are a regular player and that you recently participated in the same game as my daughter.”

“I assume you are referring to Kinko.”

“Was that the name she went by?”

“Huh?...Well, yeah. Players generally use aliases to hide their identity. We call those ‘player names.’”

“I see...”

It seemed the man was not so familiar with the specifics of the games. As such, he was probably unaware of who had killed his daughter.

“She was a small girl with blond pigtails,” Yuki said, “and the same strong sense of responsibility as her father.”

“As me...? I’m not sure I would give myself that much credit...but there’s no doubt. That’s my daughter.”

The man’s expression was melancholic; unsurprising, considering he had lost his daughter. Nothing was more tragic than losing one’s child. Yuki felt the normal human response of sympathy, in addition to guilt at having been involved in Kinko’s death.

But at the same time, something wasn’t quite adding up. What was it, exactly, that was bugging her? She thought back to everything Kinko had said over the course of the game. Right—the reason she had joined was...

“By the way, sir,” Yuki said, “there’s one thing I’m curious about.”

“...What is it?”

“Kinko mentioned she had joined the game to *pay off her father’s debts*. Do you have anything to say about that?”

At the time, Yuki had thought Kinko was raised in a toxic family environment with a scumbag of a mother and a sleazebag of a father, who’d forced Kinko to bear the burden of everything. But the man sitting next to Yuki was far removed from the man she’d imagined—and in fact, he seemed far more down to earth than she could ever hope to be.

It wouldn’t bother Yuki if the man turned out to be the kind of person to sell his daughter to death games, but she had still felt compelled to ask.

“I have no excuse,” Mr. Kaneko replied. “It is true that I had liabilities. My business fell on hard times, and, well...”

“So you made your daughter join a death game?”

“Absolutely not! I most certainly...did no such thing...but that may have been the end result. Back then, I was too preoccupied with myself...”

“...Right.”

Yuki determined that the man was probably not to blame. It was certainly in line with Kinko’s personality to research the games and join without anyone asking. Perhaps the organizers had scouted her, but either way, Kinko had almost assuredly become a player of her own volition.

“I take it you know what happened to your daughter in the game?”

“...Only the fact that she did not make it out alive.”

“Does that have to do with why you came looking for me?”

“Of course.” Mr. Kaneko balled his hands into fists atop his knees. “I wish to avenge my daughter. I will not stop until the organization behind the games is destroyed. And I would like to request your assistance in this, Miss Yuki.”

**(8/41)**

Mr. Kaneko reached into the inner pocket of his suit jacket. Yuki expected the man to pull out his business card, but since they had already concluded their introductions, what appeared in his hands instead was a small plastic bag, similar to the kind used to store evidence for a murder investigation. It contained a capsule pill, one large enough to be difficult to swallow.

“What’s that?” Yuki asked.

“A transmitter. It will continuously relay the location information of whoever ingests it from anywhere in the world.”

The man offered the object to Yuki, who accepted it and examined it carefully. Since the capsule was opaque, she couldn’t see the transmitter inside, no matter how much she strained her eyes.

After sensing Mr. Kaneko’s gaze on her, Yuki lifted her head.

“I would like for you to swallow that before participating in your next game.”

“...So that’s your plan.”

Yuki had no trouble putting two and two together. Bringing a transmitter into a death game, which operated in the shadows of society, could serve only one purpose—

“The most confounding aspect of the games is their secrecy,” the man explained. “While that certainly applies to the games themselves, it also goes for the organization behind them, along with the audience. Everything occurs outside the public eye. On the other hand, should their operation be exposed to the world, dismantling them will be no difficult task.”

A logical conclusion. In twenty-first-century Japan—at the very least, in the Japan of *today*—such deadly games had no place in society. If their existence was brought to light, both the games and the organization behind them would swiftly be dismantled.

“Of course, no harm will come to you from swallowing the transmitter, and it will naturally pass through your body after several days. There’s nothing else to do on your end. All I ask of you is to ingest the capsule. Once the location of the game is revealed, we’ll handle the rest.”

“‘We’?”

A horrified expression appeared on the man’s face, implying he had said too much.

“Are you not working alone, Mr. Kaneko?”

“...No. To tell you the truth...that capsule was created by my associates.”

The evasive answer clued Yuki in to the man’s circumstances. “And you can’t tell me anything more about those ‘associates’?”

“I cannot... Apologies.”

Yuki imagined that Mr. Kaneko belonged to a so-called society of victims. Since many had fallen prey to the games besides Kinko, accordingly there would be several times as many family members of victims. It was easy to imagine those people coming together. That would also be consistent with the man’s mention of having located Yuki through his “network.”

The man must have been instructed to keep the existence of the society a secret, hence his evasive answers. That was likely to hedge their risk—without knowing whether Yuki could be trusted, they couldn't rule out the possibility of her leaking information about the society. Lurking in the shadows to ensure safety was not only a tactic used by the game organizers.

Yuki toyed around with the capsule inside the bag. “You *do* realize you're asking this of a player, right?”

“Yes. Will you assist me?”

“I'm a player—that means I approve of the games. Do you really think I'll help you?”

“Of course, I did consider that. When the games are successfully dismantled, I'll offer you my assistance to ensure you will never have any struggles in life. With my personal connections, I can refer you to *a new place of employment.*”

Yuki thought the man's answer was way off base. Even without any support, she could live off her total winnings for quite some time. Being referred to a new place of employment would mean nothing; her incompatibility with the normal waking world was one reason why she had turned to death games in the first place. Besides, Yuki had not become a player in pursuit of fortune or a stable career.

“I'm pretty sure you have the wrong idea,” Yuki said. “Mr. Kaneko, do you think I'm playing these games reluctantly?”

“...Is that not the case?”

Yuki's heart panged. “Not at all,” she replied. “Sure, there are players like Kinko who feel compelled to participate, but they generally quit after five or six games. Those of us with a higher game count are in it because we want to be. We're the ones with warped views of life and death. We have something we can't accept that overshadows the thought of losing our lives. That's why we continue to play.”

“Something you can't accept...?”

“For me—”

*—it's an idle life of nothing*, Yuki was going to say.

*That's why I'm aiming to clear ninety-nine games*, she was going to say.

However, no words came out of her mouth.

"Miss Yuki?"

"...Well, there's a bunch of things. A whole bunch," Yuki said, playing it off.

Mr. Kaneko didn't pursue it any further, probably recognizing that it was a delicate subject.

"I am fully aware of how rude this will sound," the man said, "but I believe that you, Miss Yuki...or rather, *all players* should value yourselves more highly."

Yuki felt something stir inside her heart. She had most felt this sensation during her verbal altercation with the psychopath from some time ago. Prior to that, she had felt it as a child when being scolded by her teachers and mother. It felt as if her legs were about to give way, as if something had grazed her heart.

It was the sensation of someone encroaching on somewhere she didn't want them.

The feeling of someone rejecting the root of her very being.

The man continued, "Our modern era embraces a diversity of lifestyles, though reasonable bounds still exist. Death games should only be enjoyed through manga or film. Their existence in real life—and I say this with full conviction—is clearly abnormal."

*Shut up*, Yuki thought. *Of course the games are abnormal. We play in them knowing that. Unfortunately, we players are just as abnormal. So save your breath and don't tell me what I already know. Just leave me be.*

"These games have no place in twenty-first-century Japan. Miss Yuki, I beg of you. You have played in numerous games... Someone like you surely has other paths available, with or without them. Please lend us your aid."

*Shut up. Don't you say "played in numerous games" so casually. My achievements are mine and mine alone. How dare you tell me I have other paths available; how dare you talk like you know me?*

Yuki gripped the capsule tightly. She thought about shoving it back at the man.

She had plenty of words to say to him. *I have pride in being a player. I chose this path of my own volition. I'm going to clear ninety-nine games. So take this away and get out of my sight.*

She was going to say that.

“—...”

However, no words came out of her mouth.

Instead, an unintended smile formed on her face.

*This is a hopeless case,* she thought.

## **(9/41)**

After parting ways with Mr. Kaneko, Yuki set a course for her apartment. She thought it would be rather amusing if a second stalker turned up, but alas, her walk home was a peaceful one, granting her ample freedom to contemplate the problem in the palm of her hand—the capsule-shaped transmitter.

“...Japanese people really can't say no, huh?”

Yuki had not agreed to Mr. Kaneko's request, but she hadn't been able to turn him down, either. The man said she could throw the transmitter away, but urged her to at least consider the offer before her next game. So Yuki had accepted the capsule. Although she hadn't said yes, she couldn't say no, either. That was her current predicament.

She stroked the plastic bag with her fingers. Why had she accepted the capsule? There was no way she could swallow it. While she felt genuine sympathy for Mr. Kaneko over the loss of his daughter, that was completely irrelevant. If the plan became exposed, Yuki would certainly not be spared her life, and if the games were dismantled, that would be problematic in its own right—her vow to clear ninety-nine games would crumble away.

However, she had found herself unable to voice this out loud, for her mind had begun to waver. Her extended slump had chipped away at her confidence

and her pride of living as a player. She had been too embarrassed to admit that she couldn't accept the man's request because it would interfere with her goal of clearing ninety-nine games.

Yuki opened the plastic bag and took out the capsule, which was as thick as her pinkie finger. The idea of swallowing it here and now crossed her mind. That would solve two problems at once. For one, she would be compelled to sit out any games while the transmitter was inside her, which would result in her declining the next invitation. And two, it would offer her a polite excuse for getting rid of the capsule, as it would be flushed down the toilet in a matter of days. There would be no downsides.

Despite the logic of this scenario, she opted against the idea because she wasn't a fan of pills. The thought of the capsule getting stuck in her throat made her uneasy, so she wouldn't be able to swallow it without water. The sleeping pill she was given before every game gave her similar issues; she always had to close her eyes and swallow it in the same manner as a picky child would eat their carrots. She had to prepare herself, and so, capsule in hand, she returned to her decrepit apartment.

A car was parked in front of her building.

“—Good evening.”

The window of the driver's seat rolled down to reveal the face of Yuki's agent.

Yuki instinctively hid her left hand—the one with the capsule in it—behind her back. Since it was in her fist, it should have been out of sight, but Yuki still felt anxious. If it were discovered, she would be in hot water before the game even began.

Seemingly oblivious to Yuki's panic, her agent spoke in her usual tone of voice. “You have been invited to a game. Are you ready?”

“Oh yes.”

The second after Yuki blurted out those words, she realized what she had just done. *What are you saying? Don't get caught up in the moment.*

Her agent opened the rear car door. “Here you are.”



Yuki opened her mouth to try to amend her previous statement. “No, um—”

“Is something the matter?”

“...No. It’s nothing,” Yuki said, not out of instinct, but rather of her own volition.

*I guess this is fine*, she thought. Since she was stuck between a rock and a hard place, going with the flow seemed like a perfectly valid option. It was her style to not turn down anything that came her way and to answer the call to action on the spot. All she needed to do was see things through. She could get rid of the transmitter by tossing it out the window when her agent wasn’t looking.

Yuki entered the car while clad in her sailor-style uniform.

“This is for you.” Her agent handed her an object—a normal-size capsule.

Of course, it was no transmitter—it was a sleeping pill. This was one way the organizers kept the locations of games hidden. Players would immediately nod off upon ingesting the medicine, and when next they woke, the game would begin.

“Here you go.” Yuki’s agent offered her a paper cup. Since she had been working with Yuki for over a year, she knew full well that Yuki couldn’t swallow pills without water.

Yuki reached for the cup with her left hand but stopped short. She couldn’t grab anything with the transmitter still in her hand. Instead, she first placed the capsule in her mouth before accepting the cup with her newly emptied hand.

Then she gulped down all the water at once, sending the capsule down her throat. For some reason, this felt more unnatural than usual.

Not a moment later, Yuki realized she had just made a grave mistake.

“.....?!”

She opened her right hand. In it sat a normal-size capsule—the sleeping pill.

So then what had Yuki just swallowed?

*This is bad*, she thought. *I can’t join the game like this.*

Yuki clutched her stomach. Unfortunately, she lacked the skill to regurgitate on command. Although she could induce vomiting by sticking her hand down her throat, causing such a dramatic scene would draw the suspicion of her agent.

Yuki looked ahead. The car was already in motion. She quickly glanced at her agent through the rearview mirror. She had to do something—it would be strange for her to stay awake after having swallowed the pill. If her agent began to suspect that Yuki had swallowed something else, it would take little time for the truth to come to light.

*My hands are tied*, she thought. While pretending to rub her eyes, she swallowed the sleeping pill in her right hand.

Moments later, she realized her second mistake. *What the heck am I doing? Just because we're moving doesn't mean we can't turn around. I should've turned down the invitation...*

But it was too late. The drug activated immediately, and a wave of drowsiness assaulted Yuki. She tried to resist it, but not once in her previous twenty-nine times had she been able to escape the pull of slumber. So for the thirtieth time in a row, Yuki quickly fell asleep.

Would she get the chance to experience this a thirty-first time?

**(10/41)**

Game start.

Mikan awoke to a shaking sensation.

**(11/41)**

Pain ran through her entire body, forcing her eyes open. Mikan looked around groggily, turning her head left and right.

She was in a cramped room.

The room was so small that she couldn't even lie down across the floor. With her back resting against the wall and her legs folded underneath her, Mikan had

only barely managed to fit inside the space. She was in such an awkward position; it must have been a cramp that jolted her awake. As that thought ran through her head, she stood up.

Mikan immediately identified the room as a shower stall, for she bumped her head on a magnificent showerhead moments after getting to her feet. Clutching her head, Mikan looked up at the showerhead before scanning the other items in the room—a shower hose, a faucet, a mirror, a small caddy with various toiletries, a towel hanger that held a thin towel, and a round light fixture protruding out from close to the ceiling. The more she saw, the less it seemed the place could be anything *but* a shower stall.

While many compartments of this kind featured glass panels, the walls around Mikan were completely white and opaque. She turned the lock connected to the door handle, pushed the door ajar slightly, and peeked outside.

As she looked through the gap in the door, the only thing she could see was white—white *steam*, to be exact. The fact she had woken up inside a shower stall convinced Mikan that it was steam rather than fog. Beyond the steam, she could make out a tile floor and walls, along with several baths filled with hot water. The venue for this game was a large bathhouse.

Considering the immense amount of steam lingering in the air, Mikan certainly sensed the ill will of the organizers. She speculated that the game would require her to pay close attention to where she was walking, so she carefully exited the shower stall—

—only to then realize she was *completely nude*.

“.....?!”

Mikan scurried back inside and shut the door, ensuring that no one would see her body.

She hugged her shoulders. She was naked. Completely naked. The same way she’d come into this world, without a single fiber of cloth around her body.

*Why am I naked?* she asked herself.

*Because this is a bathhouse,* she answered.

*That's not it*, she shot back.

Mikan darted her eyes around like a country bumpkin visiting the big city for the first time. Were there cameras in this room, too? Was she being *watched* from somewhere?

Death games were forms of entertainment, and players were constantly being monitored by members of an audience. This was Mikan's fifth game, and in one of her previous games, she had been forced to wear a risqué outfit. Back then, she had gone along with it for the sake of money. However, being nude was a completely different story.

Mikan looked around restlessly, not for cameras, but for an *outfit*. Each game featured some kind of outfit, ranging from a proper costume at best to something bordering on exhibitionism at worst. Was there none for this game? Since the venue was a bathhouse, would the players have to go without one? Just as Mikan was about to fall into the depths of despair at the thought of having to proceed in the nude, she spotted a towel on the wall. *So they want us to cover up with this, huh?* After wrapping the towel around herself, Mikan looked at her reflection in the mirror. Upon noticing that her appearance looked several stages closer to that of a civilized person, she unbecomingly wondered if Adam and Eve must have felt the same way.

As she prepared to exit the shower stall a second time, Mikan made another discovery. Out of the corner of her eye, she spotted something glimmering from inside the caddy.

".....?"

She squinted to get a better look. Whatever it was had a golden sheen. She would likely have paid it no mind had it been silver, but the color gold never failed to bewitch the hearts of those accustomed to living in a capitalist society. Mikan brushed aside the toiletries with her hand.

Inside the caddy was a small, rectangular golden block—a key for a shoe locker.

Instead of using normal keys, shoe lockers at traditional bathhouses used wooden blocks that had slits on the bottom edge. The custom had developed centuries ago, when guests of theaters and other establishments would deposit their shoes upon entry and receive a block in return as a sort of claim check. Mikan couldn't remember when she had picked up that factoid.

In front of her was a golden shoe-locker key with a large number 17 etched into it. Mikan grabbed hold of it and found that it was heavier than expected—around two pounds, or probably even more. Regardless, it was too heavy to be an ordinary wooden block painted over with gold leaf. Although she couldn't deduce whether it was genuine gold, it undoubtedly contained metal.

Mikan took the golden block with her as she exited the shower stall.

She carefully walked through the steam-filled bathhouse, paying enough attention to avoid slipping. Mikan was certain the block was a key item for the game. Its golden hue and hefty weight hinted that it was valuable. Not only that, it wasn't a regular gold bar; it took the form of a shoe-locker key. Any experienced player could imagine the implications—

—Carrying the block to the exit was the condition for clearing the game.

That would make this a special kind of escape game. Simply exiting the bathhouse would not be enough. Players would need to search the venue for a shoe-locker key—the majority of which were presumably well hidden—and use it to retrieve footwear from a shoe locker before escaping. The heavy steam and any traps lurking within the bathhouse would stand in their way.

As Mikan walked ahead carefully, staying on the lookout for traps, her lips twisted into a grin. Fortune had smiled upon her: A key had been hidden inside her shower stall, and she had managed to locate it. She also thought it lucky that this game—which was likely going to be her last—was an escape game. Compared to competitions, escape games typically had higher survival rates.

Mikan's lucky streak continued as she spotted the exit straight away. Its location was immediately obvious, even within the heavy steam—or rather, *because* of the heavy steam. The steam in this section of the room appeared far heavier than in other areas. This meant the temperature was low enough for water vapor to condense into droplets, suggesting the existence of an open

door.

Mikan charged into the dense steam, and her vision was quickly impeded. She raised her guard, slowly but firmly stepping across the tile floor.

To speak only of the positive outcome: She no longer needed to show any caution.

The texture of tiles underfoot had vanished. Mikan floated in the air before falling backward and slamming against the floor. Belatedly, she realized that she had been tripped. The countless pitter-patters of bare feet surrounding her echoed through the air.

A great number of arms—likely equivalent in number to the sets of footsteps she had heard—reached through the steam and held down her body. A heavy tug on her trademark orange hair pulled back her scalp. Her extremely sensitive neck felt no tickling sensation as hands clamped down on her windpipe. The hands on her shoulders felt like they were clutching her bones instead of her flesh, and the weight of several people pressed down against her torso. Her already-limited field of vision was obstructed by a towel, and within three seconds of flailing her legs in a desperate attempt to avoid capture, Mikan lost the freedom to open and close her mouth, and her screams of protest were silenced.

Naturally, her hands, clutching the shoe-locker key, were not spared, either.

Mikan heard one person's footsteps and realized they had taken away her key. But at this point, Mikan could not care less about the item. Fear dominated her mind. She felt many people around her. She was being restrained by a large group of girls. She grew dizzy at the feeling of their thin fingers digging into her flesh, their hair brushing annoyingly against her skin, the weight of their bodies keeping her on the floor, their moist skin, their body temperatures, their breaths, and even their abject bloodthirst. *What's going to happen to me?* she wondered. *They stole my key, but what do they plan on doing with me now that I'm useless to them?*

Mikan would come to learn the answer momentarily. After the weight pressing against her body disappeared, she was dragged across the tile floor. The thought that they were guiding her to the exit did not once cross her mind.

The moment her head and shoulders were plunged into a bath, Mikan figured out the fate that awaited her. She inhaled at the moment of impact, unfortunately allowing water to enter her lungs. She had already mentally surrendered, but her instincts kept screaming at her to resist. However, those instincts were far inferior to the combined intelligence of the dozen or so girls holding her down. As a pain like nothing she had ever felt before assailed the inside of her nose, a single image entered her mind.

It was the face of her younger brother, who lay on a hospital bed—the boy whom Mikan would have been able to save had she returned from this game alive.

She had made her last stand. Mikan went limp, and her mind faded to nothingness.

**(13/41)**

Game start.

Yuki awoke to a shaking sensation.

**(14/41)**

Pain ran through her entire body, forcing her eyes open.

“Ouch...,” Yuki groaned as she sat up.

She was inside a cramped room.

The room was so small that Yuki was unable to lie flat across the floor. Her body only fit because it had been curled up, her feet against the wall. She must have been like that for a while, as the cracking sound of bones throughout her body told Yuki she had slept in an awkward position.

The game had begun. Yuki placed a hand to her head. Her memories from before she’d fallen asleep were somewhat jumbled. It occurred to her that this was an important milestone: her thirtieth game. She’d been out of shape lately and wavering on whether to join the game, but in the end, she was swept along and agreed to participate. And then her agent had passed her the sleeping pill—

“—Right.”

Yuki looked down at her stomach. She was wearing no clothes, and her stomach was completely bare. She couldn't find any signs of her stomach *having been opened*. Had her agent not noticed anything? Was the transmitter she had unintentionally ingested still inside her at this very moment?

Was her location being transmitted from her stomach to somewhere outside the venue?

*I messed up big-time*, Yuki thought. Perhaps it was fortunate she hadn't said that out loud. She had joined a game after swallowing the transmitter, thereby going along with Mr. Kaneko's request and unwittingly aiding the plot to destroy the death games. *What the heck am I doing? What kind of moron swallows the wrong pill?* The shame she felt over what happened far outweighed the embarrassment of her naked body being exposed to the audience.

Yuki turned to the white walls surrounding her. *What's it like outside? Did the game already end? Or is it still going on? Forget that; how are Mr. Kaneko and the other victims going to move ahead with their plan? What are they going to do after learning the game's location? He told me he'd "take care of the rest," but does that mean he's going to make this the final game? Or will he and his associates simply use this chance to observe and lay the groundwork for something in the future? I wasn't going to accept his deal, so I didn't ask about any of that. How the heck should I—?*

Yuki slapped herself hard on the cheek. The pain settled her restless spirit back into her body.

*Calm down*, she told herself. *Don't worry about the transmitter. Didn't Mr. Kaneko say you only had to swallow the capsule? Ingesting it doesn't change what you have to do. Live. Survive. Even if this game is your last, even if you lose your goal of clearing ninety-nine games, you can't die here. Don't let your will to survive fade away.*

Yuki slapped herself once more on the cheek to refresh her mindset. The truth was, it didn't work in the slightest, but at the very least, she was able to demonstrate her intention to focus on the game.



She thought on her current situation. She had been placed in a space resembling a shower stall. Upon opening the door and peeking outside, she saw a large bathhouse that was filled with far more steam than any bath she had seen in her lifetime. The heavy steam was mostly likely an intentional design choice to limit players' range of vision.

Next, Yuki looked down at her body. She'd been stripped of her clothing and left completely nude. Perhaps this game lacked an outfit, as the venue was a bathhouse. Yuki found that to be an odd choice. She took the towel hanging on the wall and wrapped it around herself, barely managing to conceal the parts of her body she needed to conceal.

Just as she was about to exit the shower stall, she noticed something glimmer out of the corner of her eye.

Lying inside the hair filter in the drain was a golden shoe-locker key.

A large number 9 was etched into it.

**(15/41)**

After exiting the shower stall, Yuki turned around and examined the exterior of the room where she had woken up. The shower stall was of a bare minimum size and seemed more like a telephone booth or a portable toilet. Perhaps the term *shower cubicle* was more appropriate. Upon closer examination, she spotted scuff marks on the wall, and upon even closer examination, she noticed scrapes on the section of floor directly beneath those marks, suggesting that the shower stalls had risen up from beneath the floor. The shaking sensation that had roused Yuki was no hallucination—she had been jostled awake by the force of the shower stall coming out of the ground.

With both hands, Yuki clutched the golden block she had found in her stall. She believed it to be a key item. Would she need to open a shoe locker and retrieve the footwear inside in order to escape? Did that make this an escape game? She lacked sufficient evidence to paint a full picture.

Yuki remained cautious as she walked. The shower stall opened onto an area replete with baths. To list the things that were visible: First of all, there was

heavy steam akin to that of London, the city of fog. The steam dampened Yuki's skin as she moved ahead, and it severely limited how much she was able to see.

The floor was completely tiled. Due to the aforementioned steam, it was plenty wet; anyone walking without sufficient care would likely trip and fall. Perhaps the floor would be better described as a *path*, as it was extremely narrow in width due to the individual baths lining either side. Yuki tried scooping the contents of one bath, only to discover that it was normal hot water. There was a medicinal bath, a Jacuzzi, and even something described as an electric bath here. Thinking back to how her bones had cracked when she'd woken up, Yuki contemplated taking a dip while she was still uninjured but ultimately passed on the idea.

Here and there, Yuki also spotted multiple shower stalls like the one in which she had woken up. The door of every last stall was open, indicating that Yuki had come out of the starting gate later than the other players.

A short while later, Yuki stumbled upon those "other players." She heard the sounds of people in a bath in front of her.

Yuki squinted to get a clearer look. The distance made it difficult to tell, but there seemed to be three human figures in a bath farther down the path. The sounds suggested they were not pouring water on themselves, but rather moving around inside the bath.

Yuki approached, and as soon as she got close enough to identify human silhouettes, the noises ceased, suggesting that the other players had noticed her. She continued forward, when all of a sudden—

"Who are you?" A voice shot through the steam. It was a low voice tinged with caution. Even though it was rather quiet, Yuki had no problem hearing it, perhaps because the sound waves were being amplified by all the water.

"Oh, um, I just—"

Yuki was going to say she had just woken up, but she found herself unable to finish her sentence.

The moment after she opened her mouth, one of the silhouettes made a motion, resulting in the sound of something cutting through the air.

Yuki instantly ducked. A gust of air passed over her head.

Moments later, she heard the clanging of an object bouncing on the tile floor. Yuki turned in the direction of the sound, but the thick steam prevented her from identifying the projectile. She could have walked over to it but decided instead to focus her attention on where it had originated from.

Yuki turned back around. The three silhouettes splashed out of the bath. While paying careful attention to her footing, Yuki chased after them.

Since she was keeping her eyes on the floor, she spotted *a fourth player* crouching next to the edge of the bath.

The fourth player swung at Yuki's legs. Even through the steam, Yuki could tell that they were holding on to something, so she reflexively removed her legs from the floor—by diving forward. While in the air, she threw her shoe-locker key into a bath so it wouldn't weigh her down in a fight. The same moment the block hit the water with a splash, Yuki landed on her hands; she turned around while sliding across the tile floor.

The fourth player was already inches away.

Yuki grabbed her by the wrist, which was moving toward Yuki's face. Although she had successfully stopped the oncoming attack, because she hadn't adopted a proper defensive posture, the force caused her to collapse backward. The player grabbed Yuki's shoulder and rested her knees on Yuki's stomach.

Their faces were in close proximity, close enough that they could see each other through the steam.

Yuki's eyes widened in shock—was this player *a boy*?

But then she immediately walked back that thought. Although the player had a boyish face, Yuki didn't need to rip off the towel wrapped around her opponent to tell that her body was clearly a woman's. Although the player looked exceedingly boyish, she was a girl. Yuki breathed a sigh of relief. The organizers hadn't altered the rules of the games to allow prepubescent boys to participate.

Still grasping her attacker's right wrist, Yuki cast her gaze at the girl's hand. It was wrapped around a weapon—a mirror shard. Just then, Yuki remembered that her shower stall had been equipped with a mirror. Her opponent had broken one and was using a shard from it as a knife. Yuki also noticed some kind of fabric between the shard and the girl's hand—it was a scrap of a towel wrapped around the blade to form a makeshift grip. As Yuki telepathically sent the girl praise for her resourcefulness, the very next moment—

The girl loosened her grip on the mirror shard, and as a natural result, gravity took hold, sending the knife plunging downward.

Dodging it was no issue. Although the girl was on top of her, Yuki had the freedom to move her head. But the problem was that Yuki inadvertently closed her eyes at the sight of the object falling toward her. When someone in close proximity was trying to harm you, wincing was far more disgraceful than getting stabbed in the face.

A stinging pain ran from Yuki's right cheek into her cheekbone. She had taken a punch.

Right after Yuki opened her eyes, the second punch landed. Her vision shook. As soon as the shaking stopped, she saw the girl raise her left hand—a sign that she was going to throw a punch from her left.

Yuki attempted to stick out her right hand to guard against the attack, but her position underneath the girl presented an issue; on its way up, her arm got caught on the edge of the bath. Since her right shoulder was pressed against the bath, her arm's range of motion was constrained. Her immediate priority was to put some distance between herself and her opponent. Even as she took a fourth and a fifth punch, Yuki put all her strength into moving her legs, managing to shift herself a few inches to the left along with her attacker.

Then Yuki threw a right counterpunch at the girl's face.

The girl was focused solely on attacking and hadn't noticed Yuki getting in position to counterattack, so the punch caught her unawares. Seizing the opening, Yuki pulled down the girl by the shoulders, lifting her upper body with her back muscles to land a headbutt. The girl reacted as any living being would—she bent over and recoiled, thereby shifting her center of gravity backward.

The next moment, Yuki thrust her hands at the girl's chest and successfully got the girl off her. Now it was Yuki's turn to get on top of her opponent, whose back had hit the tile floor. As she did so, she shrewdly grabbed the mirror knife the girl had dropped and brought it against the girl's neck, pushing it forward to the point that the tiniest amount of extra force would cut into flesh.

The girl stopped resisting. She hadn't breathed her last—she was admitting defeat.

"Who are you?" Yuki asked, repeating the same words she had been asked earlier. "Why did the other three run away? Why did you stay behind?"

The boyish girl offered no answer.

"Answer me," Yuki prodded. "As I was trying to say earlier, I just woke up. I have no clue what this game is about, so I'd appreciate you telling me everything you know."

"...Huh?" The girl showed a confused reaction. "You ain't with the entryway crew?"

"Entryway?"

"A new player...? At this point in the game?" The girl seemed taken aback.

"Sorry, but I'm a heavy sleeper. I'm always late to the party."

"....." Following a prolonged silence, the girl replied, "My bad."

**(17/41)**

After seeing the will to fight leave the girl's face, Yuki lowered her blade. She picked up the shoe-locker key she had thrown into the bath and followed the girl, who had beckoned her to come with.

The boyish girl introduced herself as Azuma.

"This here's my seventh game. Nice to meetcha."

In these games, it was a fairly common occurrence for players to exchange pleasantries with someone they had tried to kill just moments prior. Finding nothing unusual with it, Yuki responded with a "nice to meet you" of her own.

Then she attempted to introduce herself. “I’m—”

“Yuki, yeah?”

“Huh? Have we met before?”

“Nah, first time. But I’ve heard talk of a veteran player who’s got the look of a phantom. The stories are right—you’re pretty damn strong.”

Azuma touched her neck. She had gotten cut during their earlier grappling match.

Yuki had never before encountered a stranger who knew her name. Now that she’d reached her thirtieth game, perhaps she was gradually entering the ranks of the heavyweight players.

“Glad you ain’t an enemy,” Azuma said.

“As you suspected, I’m Yuki. This game is my thirtieth. It’s an important occasion, so I need to be giving it my all.”

“Your thirtieth, huh? That’s a milestone.” The girl seemed to be aware of the Wall of Thirty.

“By the way, where are we going?” Yuki asked Azuma, who was walking a few paces ahead. “Somewhere to use *this*?” Yuki held out her shoe-locker key.

“Nope. We’re headin’ in the opposite direction.”

“.....?”

“We’re here.”

The two girls reached a section of the bathhouse where the steam appeared far denser than elsewhere. Yuki charged through, following after Azuma. Although no more than a yard separated them, Yuki’s vision was so constrained that she would probably lose sight of Azuma if she looked away for even a second.

“Who goes there?” asked someone through the steam.

“Not a suspicious soul,” Azuma replied.

After that, Azuma and the mysterious voice had a back-and-forth conversation. Yuki realized Azuma had used a code phrase earlier—if someone

failed to give the correct response, they would be branded an enemy.

“You may pass,” said the voice.

Azuma and Yuki continued walking. Soon the steam thinned, the air cooled, and a soft light filled the area. And before Yuki’s eyes appeared...

“...An open-air bath?”

“Welcome to our base.”

The area consisted of a single large bath that was surrounded by rocks. The water reached slightly above Yuki’s knees. Around the bath was a grove of trees, and beyond that, Yuki could see a wall made of tall stalks of bamboo. That probably indicated the boundary of the game venue.

Azuma and Yuki proceeded deeper into the base. After sloshing through the water for quite some time, they reached the innermost section of the base, where Azuma’s teammates had gathered. Upon noticing Azuma, the other players welcomed her back. Some of them turned to look at Yuki, so Yuki returned their stares with a nod and a “hello.”

As the girls offered nods in response, Yuki sized them up. There were nine of them, which meant the three people from earlier had not been the entire rest of the team. Factoring in the lookout waiting inside the steam and other players who had possibly gone out to the indoor bath area, Yuki estimated the team consisted of fifteen players. Like her, the majority of them were unclothed and wearing only a towel for defense, but among them were—

“Huh?” Yuki reacted. “Hey, Azuma...”

“Yeah?”

“Some of the girls here are wearing bathrobes—where did those come from?”

“Ah... We stole ’em off enemy players. Seems like a few were in the changing room.”

“There’s a changing room?”

“Yep. Haven’t seen it ourselves, though.”

Azuma lowered herself into the water until her shoulders were submerged.

“Take a dip,” she suggested.

Yuki did as instructed.

“I know I’m repeatin’ myself, but... My bad,” Azuma said, lowering her head. “Didn’t occur to me there’d still be someone who’d just woken up. But now that I think about it, there’s no way the enemy would act solo. Sorry for gettin’ carried away and treatin’ you like an enemy.”

“Don’t apologize.” Yuki motioned with her hands to show she had no hard feelings. “Nobody got hurt, so don’t let it get to you.”

Azuma nodded.

“By the way, how long has it been since the game started?”

“Can’t say for sure without any clocks around, but no less than a few hours. You’re probably the last to wake up.”

Yuki was astonished at her tardiness. Although she was no stranger to being late for the start of a game, she had never overslept by several hours. It was no surprise there had been a misunderstanding.

Why had she woken up so late this time? Was it really just coincidence that she had fallen into a deeper sleep than usual? Or was it deliberate intervention at the hands of the organizers? She rubbed her stomach.

“I’ll give you a rundown of the rules,” Azuma continued, “but before that, I want you to agree to one thing.”

“What?”

“Mind leavin’ that shoe-locker key of yours with us?”

Yuki looked to her side. A block of pure gold sat atop a rock. Yuki believed it to be this game’s key item.

“That means joinin’ our team,” Azuma said. “You’ll realize it after hearin’ about the current state of the game, but it’s near impossible to clear this game solo. There’s another team besides ours, but they stopped recruitin’ new members. It’s a win-win for you and us. Sound good?”



“Sure,” Yuki replied. Her immediate priority was to learn the rules of the game. She handed her shoe-locker key to Azuma.

“Thanks.”

Azuma accepted the block and passed it to another teammate, who then disappeared into the grove surrounding the bath, presumably heading to a stash of shoe-locker keys.

Azuma began to explain, “This game’s largely divided into three areas.”

## **(18/41)**

The first area was the open-air bath, their current location. It consisted of a single large bath surrounded by a grove of trees, and it served as the base for Azuma’s team. With no shortage of hiding spots, and a wall of steam covering the entrance, it was easily defensible while being difficult to attack.

The second area was where players had first woken up—the indoor bath area, which featured rows of individual baths. The facility had likely been specifically prepared for this game, as it had an unusual layout and was larger than an ordinary bathhouse. A small number of shoe-locker keys had been hidden inside the baths, so Azuma and other players had been conducting a search when Yuki first spotted them.

The third area lay beyond the exit to the indoor bath and stretched from the changing room to the entryway. This section of the venue was thought to contain shoe lockers that could be opened with their keys. Azuma’s team had yet to see it for themselves, so that was information they had obtained from what she had dubbed the “entryway crew.” Like with the open-air bath, the entrance to the area was covered with thick steam, making it a perfect spot to set up an ambush.

There was only one entrance between the open-air bath and the indoor bath area, and one entrance between the indoor bath area and the changing room. As far as Azuma’s team could tell from their investigation, there weren’t any secret passageways or doors.

“The most important point is that this is an escape game,” Azuma continued.

“You’ve probably figured this out by now, but those blocks are key items. Victory means bringin’ ’em out of the bath area, reachin’ the entryway, gettin’ footwear from the shoe lockers, and exitin’ the building.”

Yuki nodded.

“Thing is, unlike normal escape games, there ain’t any traps. We haven’t looked everywhere, so we aren’t totally sure, but we haven’t run into a single one. Instead, there’s an even nastier element to this game... Was your block in your shower stall?”

Yuki had no reason to lie, so she replied, “Yep.”

“There wasn’t one in mine. If you ask around, you’ll hear answers goin’ both ways. That means *there ain’t enough keys for everyone*. So—”

“There’s a hard cap on the number of players who can escape,” Yuki finished Azuma’s sentence.

In many games, the number of victors was determined in advance, perhaps to make balancing the difficulty easier. In Yuki’s experience, these kinds of games had a survival rate hovering around 70 percent. As such, there were likely only seven-tenths as many shoe-locker keys as players.

“And because there’s a cap, players will end up fighting over the keys,” Yuki continued. “That makes this a competitive game of sorts, too.”

“Yuki, say you woke up earlier and found nothin’ in your stall. What would you do?”

“Well, I’d probably try to find the exit.”

“And say you reached the entryway and found out you needed a key. Would you go back to the indoor bath area?”

“I wouldn’t,” Yuki responded immediately. “I’d wait in the entryway for someone to show up with a key.”

There were two main strategies for clearing a game with a key item: Make the effort to *search* for the item or *steal* one from another player. Anyone confident in their own strength would find the latter option to be far less of a hassle.

“Figures. I’d do the same,” Azuma responded. “So right when the game

started, a bunch of players crowded round the entryway. Each time an unsuspectin' sheep came by, they'd all fight over that one key. Yuki, what would your plan be in that situation?"

"Form an alliance." Once again, Yuki answered instantly. "Fighting over a key each and every time is way too inefficient. I'd work together with a number of players and try to secure enough keys for our group."

"Exactly. So the entryway players banded together. And 'cause they can't escape until they get enough keys for all of 'em, more and more players and keys gathered in the entryway. And the important fact is that the larger the team, the stronger it is. That's why they kept mergin' with others, causin' their numbers to swell."

Mimicking what many little kids often did in a bathtub, Azuma used her towel to form an air bubble in the water, visibly representing the word *swell*.

"But the growth ain't sustainable," she continued. "After all, people started fightin' over keys because there weren't enough for everyone. So the entryway crew stopped recruitin' new members when they were comin' up on the supposed limit."

"...How big is their team?"

"Thirty, by our estimates. They're the largest bloc of players in this game and make up the majority."

Yuki did some calculations in her head. If there were thirty keys, that would place the total number of players at fewer than fifty. Although this game wasn't as large as Candle Woods, it still boasted a sizable player count.

Azuma adjusted her posture in the bath, as though trying to avoid a leg cramp.

"That's pretty much how things've panned out," she said. "It's not like I saw it all go down, so it could be different...but probably not by much. Anyway, we know two things for sure: One, there's a team by the entryway. And two, we're the ones who missed out on joinin' 'em."

Azuma looked around to her teammates before continuing. "In other words, we're the latecomers. We're in the same boat as you. If we walked to the exit

with keys, the entryway crew would take 'em away from us, so we had no choice but to hide out here. The most we can do is search the baths and find as many keys as we can.”

Azuma made eye contact with Yuki. “That’s all. Any questions?”

“Right...” Yuki took a moment to gather her thoughts. “You said the other team has around thirty players by your estimates, but what are you basing that on? The numbers carved into the blocks?”

Each of the shoe-locker keys had a number on it. Yuki’s had the number 9. It wasn’t difficult to imagine that the number of keys equaled the highest number of people who could escape.

“That’s part of it, but it’s also 'cause of the number of shower stalls. There’s around fifty, so if you take the average survival rate of seventy percent, you get thirty-five. Take away a few for any keys that might’ve already been used, and you get thirty.”

*That makes sense*, Yuki thought. The number of phone-booth-size shower stalls where they had woken up would be equivalent to the number of players.

“How many players are on your team?” Yuki asked.

“Includin’ you and me, twelve. There ain’t any teams besides us and the entryway crew. And I doubt there are any neutral players or anyone who’s still asleep.”

“How many keys have you collected?”

“Yours makes ten. Eight were from our shower stalls, and two we found in the baths.”

Yuki thought that was a lot. Assuming there were thirty keys in total, ten was quite a large number of them. As long as their keys were kept safe in the base, it would be impossible for the entryway team to escape with all their members. Which meant the other team’s next move would likely be—

“What stance has the entryway team taken against yours? Have they tried to steal your keys?”

“Nope. At least, not yet. Both our teams are peacefully searchin’ the baths.

We've fought over newly discovered keys, but those were minor scuffles at most. The other team doesn't know we've got ten of 'em, so they probably think searchin' will get 'em across the finish line.

"Still..." Azuma changed the tone of her voice. "I doubt that'll last for long. At some point, they'll get impatient and charge in here. That's why we've been gettin' ready..."

As Azuma said that, she grabbed the mirror knife that had caused Yuki great trouble earlier. Yuki had held it once herself, so she knew it was not just a glass shard wrapped in cloth—it was more than sharp enough to cut through human flesh.

"That's impressive," Yuki said. "It's not the most durable weapon, but other than that, it seems more than usable."

"Glad to hear such praise from a pro like you. But...what's your honest take? You think we've got a chance to survive?"

Yuki looked at Azuma. Then she glanced around at Azuma's teammates, who were now her own teammates.

"No worries," Yuki replied. "While we have a disadvantage in numbers, we have plenty of advantages, too. That includes these mirror knives and the fact that the enemy will be forced to go on the offensive. And besides...I can't speak for the others, but you're quite the fighter, Azuma. I think we can do this."

Yuki hadn't said that as lip service. The other team had thirty players, while theirs had twelve. Yuki had faced such a disadvantage several times in the past. Besides, this game wasn't strictly competitive—it was an escape game. There was no need to confront the other team head-on. Sidestepping the other side to escape was another path to victory. In Yuki's mind, this situation did not constitute a predicament.

However, while she had expressed reassuring words aloud, she did feel a degree of unease internally. First of all, she was off her game. The gears in her body felt out of place. Her actions were stiff, due to thoughts of the Wall of Thirty clouding her mind. Her poor condition was evident in the fact that she had swallowed the wrong capsule and that her right cheek still stung from Azuma's punches. Yuki's mentor, Hakushi, had referred to the Wall of Thirty as

a “curse,” and at this very moment, Yuki was feeling adverse effects commensurate with that description.

She was also anxious about the leader commanding the entryway team. Not only were they in charge of a large group of thirty players, but the rules had no stipulations for alliances, which meant the possibility of betrayal was always on the table. Managing such a team would be no easy feat. Yuki figured that whoever was leading the charge was no amateur—it had to be a player of a similar caliber as herself, someone with a wealth of experience who had played in more than twenty or thirty games. In all likelihood, it was someone whom Yuki had met at least once before.

The question was—who exactly was the enemy commander?

**(19/41)**

Mishiro sat on a massage chair in front of the shoe lockers.

**(20/41)**

The massage chair was not in operation, nor was it powered on. It would be the height of foolishness to use one in the middle of a death game. Mishiro was sitting on it for two reasons: to be in full view of the shoe lockers and to demonstrate her standing to other players.

Mishiro glanced to the side. The wood plank floor led to a step, beyond which was a tile floor—the *entryway* of the building. Although Mishiro couldn’t see the exit from her current position, she remembered it was around ten yards away. That meant a physical distance of ten yards was all that stood between her and clearing the game.

Yet the reason Mishiro did not head for the exit could be found in the odor of burnt flesh in the air. The corpses of five players lay in the entryway, all of them electrocuted. Apparently, a high-voltage current was flowing through the tile floor. Three of the players had died before Mishiro had arrived. After that, a fourth player had fallen in and died in a struggle against another player. Then a fifth had shown up, asserting that touching the floor with only one foot at a

time would keep players safe from the current, before being proved wrong in the most gruesome of ways. Another player had fashioned wooden shoes out of floor planks she had destroyed, but after two guns set up around the exit turned to point at her—likely a trap to deter rule breakers—she was forced to abandon her escape in disappointment. Everyone who had seen that knew they couldn't escape without following the proper procedure—obtaining the necessary shoes.

Mishiro looked out in front of her. Shoe lockers filled the area. They were small compartments, as one would expect for a communal bathhouse. Each individual locker had a hole in the bottom left for a block, the majority of which had already been filled. Mishiro had confirmed that all open lockers contained shoes, along with the fact that wearing them in the entryway would prevent a player from getting shocked.

That was why Mishiro could clear the game right now if she wanted to.

The reason she chose not to was because she had more than her own life in her hands.

Mishiro was leading a large group composed of the majority of players in the game. She couldn't leave until their team had collected enough keys for everyone. Since their alliance was not bound by any rules, she would not be penalized for betraying her team and clearing the game on her own, but considering it was possible she could run into her current teammates in a future game, deserting them would not be a good idea. The drawbacks and benefits of betraying them aside, she had no intention of making such a petty-minded play.

Mishiro heard footsteps from beyond the shoe lockers. A girl came flying through the curtains that divided the entryway area and the changing room.

"We did it!" she yelled, rushing up to Mishiro with the same energy. "We wiped out their entire team! That's five extra for us!"

The girl showed off the items in her hands to Mishiro: five bright, shiny shoe-locker keys.

This player went by the name of Riko. She was a tiny girl reminiscent of a small animal, and she was Mishiro's protégée. They had met in Mishiro's thirtieth game, and Riko had grown greatly fond of her mentor.

“Excellent work,” Mishiro replied.

Riko inserted the five keys into the corresponding shoe lockers. Her hands now empty, she returned to Mishiro.

“Please do the thing!” Riko closed her eyes, and an expression of eager anticipation formed on her face.

“.....”

Meanwhile, Mishiro looked slightly troubled. After quickly glancing at her left hand, she brushed it over her protégé’s head.

Riko’s face melted with glee.

“I am surprised you do not tire of this...,” Mishiro said, moving her hand back and forth.

The petting served as a *reward*. As their mentor-protégée relationship evolved, at some point Riko had started demanding that Mishiro stroke her head. Mishiro had no idea what was so delightful about having one’s head rubbed, but judging by Riko’s expression of bliss, it evidently brought her pleasure.

Riko gestured at her neck with a finger, as if telling Mishiro, *Here too*.

“.....”

Mishiro looked down at her right hand.

Then she used it to tickle Riko’s neck.

Riko’s face exploded with ecstasy so intense that it would be almost inappropriate to show the game’s audience.

“I did not get a prosthetic for this purpose...” Mishiro sighed, her left hand on Riko’s head and her right hand on Riko’s neck.

This was a regular occurrence. The two of them were close enough to meet not only in games but also in their private lives, and since Riko would demand a reward for the most trivial of achievements, such as arriving to their meeting on time, Mishiro had given countless head rubs. On top of that, Riko had grown more demanding as of late and would request extra services like neck tickles.



Although that seemed to be enough to satisfy her for now, if the trend continued, Mishiro would possibly need to acquire a third arm. Riko was a capable, hard worker, so without these demands, she would be the perfect, adorable protégée.

As her hands were getting tired, Mishiro pulled the plug on the reward.

“That’s the end of that.” She gently patted Riko’s cheeks.

“Wah... Thank you so much...”

“The game is still ongoing. You must straighten up.”

“...Right!” Riko slapped her cheeks. “Should we go attack the team over there next?”

“No, we’ll stand by for a while longer. The situation has changed.”

“Huh? Did something happen?”

“The reconnaissance squad we sent out has yet to return. It is fair to assume they have been captured—or rather, killed. Although the enemy has only been responding to our attacks up until now, they have finally shown a will to go on the offensive.”

“Does that mean they’re attacking as their last resort?”

“Perhaps. Or someone new may have joined their team. It’s possible a player who recently woke up is influencing them.”

“...This late in the game?”

The players in this game had started at different times. They had been stuck inside shower stalls until being brought aboveground.

In this game, the early bird got the worm. At first glance, it would seem unfair for players to wake at different times, but perhaps the organizers thought it would make things more entertaining. In reality, the game had progressed in a way that completely diverged from the original ruleset.

“If the reconnaissance squad got captured...that means *the secret’s out*.” Riko looked toward the changing room area.

“We weren’t attempting to hide anything, so there’s no issue,” Mishiro

replied. “You should take this opportunity to rest. Why not make use of this bathhouse and take a dip in the water? See if you can locate any unrecovered keys while you do.”

“You got it!” Riko gave a forceful salute, slamming her hand against her forehead. “See ya!”

In the same manner in which she came, Riko stomped on the wood planks and disappeared. Freedom from the girl brought a certain melancholy to Mishiro, like how one would feel after escaping a crowd of people.

Mishiro leaned against the chair and muttered, “She’s a real bundle of energy...”

Riko was the kind of girl who absorbed the vitality of those around her. Simply talking to her for two or three minutes wore Mishiro out. Mishiro was proud of her ability to manipulate others, honed through playing game after game, but it failed to work on Riko and Riko alone. Instead, whenever the two of them were together, *Mishiro* was always the one being pushed around.

Still, having Riko around was a delight. Although Riko was undoubtedly a handful, Mishiro was quite happy to have someone fawn over her so genuinely. That was something unfathomable for her past self, who could only command others with an overbearing attitude and form surface-level relationships. Riko’s presence made Mishiro feel she had achieved considerable growth as a player. It made her think it was well worth it to have overcome the struggles she had faced with the Wall of Thirty.

“...Still...,” Mishiro murmured, staring at the ceiling.

She pondered the existence of a new player—someone who had woken up several hours late, when the endgame was nigh. If such a player did exist, she must have been quite capable, considering she had rallied the open-air bath team to battle.

Who could it possibly be?

**(21/41)**

Yuki and her team were doing all they could to prepare for a final showdown.

First, they took inventory of their current firepower. Their team consisted of twelve players, including herself and Azuma. Besides Yuki, everyone on the team was a rookie with fewer than ten games under their belt. Azuma was the only one with any semblance of combat skills, while the others could accomplish only as much as a normal teenage girl. To ensure she would not mistake her teammates for the enemy, Yuki committed to memory the faces and names of the others.

In terms of other resources, their team had a few dozen mirror knives, like the one that had given Yuki trouble earlier. They also had access to several traps that made use of natural objects in the grove surrounding the open-air bath. These had not been set up from the start of the game; rather, the team had crafted them at some point to protect their stash of keys. Yuki found the traps to be quite impressive and inferred that the team would be more suited for defense than offense.

The girls then investigated the surrounding terrain—the grove, the heavily steamed section around the entrance, and the indoor bath area as well. In the course of their investigation, they ran into a group of girls from the entryway team who had likely been sent as a scout force. With only mirror knives on hand, Yuki's team decided that killing them would be too much of a pain, so they settled for knocking them out cold and tossing them into shower stalls. The enemy players would remain unconscious for several hours, and Yuki's team impeded them further by using objects to block the shower doors from outside and wounding the girls so that they would each be unable to use one of their legs. Realistically, it was safe to consider them out of the game. Their success at reducing the enemy's numbers raised the morale of the open-air bath team, even if they had taken out only a handful of players.

After returning to base, they began a strategy meeting. In light of their terrain advantage and the fact that their team was more suited for countering than attacking, everyone agreed to adopt a strategy of an offensive retreat. As the most capable melee fighters, Azuma and Yuki would comprise the vanguard, while the other ten players would bring up the rear. Their plan was to gradually whittle down the enemy's numbers by pulling back the front line of battle through guerrilla tactics, such as making hit-and-run attacks in the steam and

throwing knives from afar.

And so Yuki's team took up their positions and waited for the time to come.

## (22/41)

Around the entrance to the outdoor bath, the cool air leaking in from outside lowered the temperature, making it easier for water vapor to condense into droplets, thereby resulting in heavier steam. Yuki could understand the principle behind this phenomenon thanks to her night classes, where she'd been slowly expanding her knowledge base. That being said, she hadn't actually been able to put this together on her own, making sense of things only after Azuma had explained them to her.

At any rate, Yuki and Azuma were hidden in a wall of steam, where visibility was so bad that they could barely see the space in front of them. Being the two best fighters on their team, they would engage in guerrilla tactics when the entryway team passed through.

"Think we can pull this off?" Azuma asked. Although she was right next to Yuki, the heavy steam prevented Yuki from making out the other girl's expression.

"Probably," Yuki answered.

Victory would mean ending the game with a majority of their team alive. It did not mean decimating the entryway team—that was never going to happen. If they managed to cull the enemy forces by a certain amount, the other team would likely seek a ceasefire.

The biggest issue in the game was that the number of players who could survive was fewer than the total number of players. Put another way, *if the number of living players became less than or equal to the maximum possible number of survivors*, the remaining players would be guaranteed to clear the game. At that point, it would be unreasonable to battle to the death until one side was completely wiped out. Both sides would benefit from negotiations once the total number of players had decreased a certain amount.

Currently, the open-air bath team had twelve players, while the entryway

team had about thirty. Since the number of remaining shoe-locker keys was also estimated to be thirty, it would take twelve players dying for the game to end. In practice, however, both sides would probably want more leeway and wait until fifteen or twenty players had bitten the dust, but regardless, the teams would begin peaceful negotiations long before either side was wiped out. Both teams would certainly feel resentment toward each other after losing their allies, but no player would be foolish enough to throw away a guaranteed victory *for that silly reason*. As such, the game would end in an amicable settlement with a key-sharing agreement.

Thus, the conflict that was about to begin was neither a campaign of annihilation nor a war to protect shoe-locker keys from the enemy.

It was a battle to determine which team would shoulder a larger share of the remaining twelve deaths.

That was another reason that Yuki's team had settled on a defensive strategy. They would win not by wiping out their opponents but by chipping away at the enemy forces until they reached the golden number.

“.....”

Inside the wall of steam, Yuki and Azuma waited anxiously. Much time had passed, but the entryway team showed no signs of appearing. Since their scout force had been taken out, were they taking a cautious approach? Whatever the reason, Yuki had time on her hands. Her minutes alone with Azuma ticked on.

When there was nothing else to fill the time, Yuki had a go-to topic of conversation with other players. She would ask why they had joined this industry, where human life had little value. Yuki went so far as to open her mouth, but before she could speak—

“Hey.” Azuma preempted her.

Forced to quickly change the shape of her lips, Yuki responded, “What?”

“Why'd you decide to play death games for a living?”

Yuki was taken aback at being posed the very question she had planned to ask.

“Um... Well...”

The phantom girl tried to answer, but—

“.....”

“...Yuki?”

Yuki brought her hand to her throat.

She couldn't say it. The same thing had happened with Mr. Kaneko. Out of form as she was, she couldn't bring herself to say that she was aiming to clear ninety-nine games.

Instead, Yuki offered an alternative reason. “...I guess it's because there weren't any other paths for me. I didn't mesh well with the normal world. I joined these games wanting an escape, and things progressed from there.”

“Huh. Same as me, then.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. I mean, ain't it obvious? You think a forward, masculine girl like me can fit into society?”

That was a difficult question to answer.

“Well, I don't see a problem,” Yuki said, going for a diplomatic response. “It's not like you refer to yourself in the third person or anything like that, at least.”

“Ha-ha, you're right about that... But I guess for me, it's less about not fittin' in and more about not wantin' to fit in.” There was a tinge of emotion in Azuma's voice. “Dunno why. Wearin' a uniform, actin' friendly... None of that stuff should be impossible or painful, but for some reason, it never worked for me. It's much easier to slash at someone's neck to kill.”

“What would you do if someone said they'd free you from these games?”

“Huh?”

“Let's say someone offered to find you a proper job so you wouldn't have to play in these dangerous games anymore. How would you respond?”

Of course, Yuki had Mr. Kaneko's proposal on her mind. She just wanted to put the question out there.

A swatting noise emitted from where Azuma stood; she must have thrown a punch.

“I’d give ‘em a good smackdown,” she answered. “Sure, I had no other path, but I’m here ‘cause I wanna be. I’d be pissed off if someone said they’d find me a ‘proper’ job, like I’m some kinda charity case. An asshole like that deserves a punch.”

“I totally get you.”

“You askin’ that ‘cause someone said somethin’ to you?”

“No, that’s not it...” Just as Yuki was trying to play it off, her mouth froze. She raised her guard. “They’re here.”

“I noticed, too,” Azuma said.

Yuki sensed a large number of players approaching, heading straight for the two of them. Yuki grabbed the mirror knife at her feet with both hands. Azuma did the same.

“Let’s do this.”

“Yeah.”

After that brief back-and-forth, the two of them fell silent. They steeled themselves for the imminent battle.

The knives in their hands were not meant for throwing. It would be near impossible to hit a target in such heavy steam, and all that would accomplish was informing the enemy of their position. Instead, the smart decision would be to wait until the enemy came within reach of their blades.

So the two of them waited. Before long, they sensed not only the presence of the enemy but also the sound of footsteps paired with sloshing water. Yuki strained her ears—

“.....?”

*That’s odd, Yuki thought. Are there that many of them?*

There were far more sets of footsteps than Yuki had expected. It wasn’t just ten or twenty players—it was closer to thirty. Azuma and the others had

estimated there were around thirty people on the opposing team, which meant virtually all of the enemy's forces were oncoming.

That also meant that few players were currently on guard in the entryway. To make a comparison to soccer, it would be as if every single player on a team, sans the goalkeeper, was around the other team's goal. Not even the elementary schoolers would make such a thoughtless play. If those guards failed to notice Yuki's team slipping past them—a possibility made quite likely by the steam—they would allow their enemy to reach the entryway. Their defenses were stretched far too thin.

Yuki considered the situation. Was the enemy trying to make them think the entryway was vulnerable? Maybe the guards there were few in number but excelled at combat and would stop anyone from getting through. That would be the opposite formation as that of the open-air bath team, which had placed their best fighters out in front. If Yuki's team assumed the entryway was vulnerable and attempted to charge through, the enemy's rearguard would stop them and buy time for the vanguard of thirty players to return and launch an attack from both flanks. That was quite possibly the enemy's plan—to completely wipe out the open-air bath team.

Or could it be—?

The moment the second possibility crossed Yuki's mind, she heard footsteps from the open-air bath.

"Um... Azuma! Yuki!"

Someone had called out to them in a whisper. Yuki turned in the direction of the voice and saw a silhouette in the steam. It was one of her teammates.

"What's up?" Azuma asked in a hushed voice.

"Something strange is happening."

"What?"

"There are *sounds coming from the bamboo wall*, like someone's scraping it..."

"...Huh...?" That reaction came not from Azuma but from Yuki.



Yuki's mind went completely blank, as if she'd spat out her soul with that one breath. Her head felt far heavier than the cloud of steam surrounding her.

An intense shock came upon her hollow heart. A jumble of anger, regret, and embarrassment that made her want to hit herself. The exact same feeling had assaulted her in her previous game, along with the game before that.

*Why? Why didn't I realize it? Why didn't I check for myself?*

Yuki's legs moved faster than she could think. Without paying any attention to her footing, she dashed into the open-air bath.

"Wait... Yuki?!"

A voice and the sound of footsteps came from behind. They were Azuma's. The girl was following Yuki, but Yuki didn't respond or even cast a backward glance. At this moment, she had no mental capacity to spare.

*Why?*

Once again, Yuki questioned herself.

*Azuma said that this game is largely divided into three areas. Why did you automatically believe that? Sure, you were impressed with her knack for fighting, but that doesn't change the fact that she's a rookie in her seventh game. Why didn't you think of the possibility she may have made an error in judgment? Why didn't it occur to you to ask if there were really only three areas, or about any of the other rules? Isn't questioning everything the secret to survival? How did you forget the key to being a player? When did you get so lazy?*

*Before the final showdown, you closely investigated the soon-to-be battlefield—the open-air bath. That should've been plenty of time for you to get a look at the bamboo wall. Why did you not think anything of it? You knew the venue was a bathhouse. So why didn't you think of the obvious possibility? What's wrong with your brain? Is it made of bamboo?*

*Don't you dare blame this on the Wall of Thirty.*

*Unbelievable. You're such a bonehead.*

Yuki escaped the steam and leaped into the open-air bath. She crossed the

water, sprinted through the grove, and rushed at the bamboo wall as if she was going to tackle it. The wall stood at nearly three times her height, and although there were no protrusions to use as handholds or footholds, Yuki scaled the wall with stunning technique.

She peeked over to the other side.

Beyond the wall was *a second open-air bath*—along with a large contingent of players from the entryway team.

## (23/41)

Mishiro opened her eyes while sitting on the massage chair.

Before her were *two sets* of shoe lockers, standing side by side. Each held thirty-five pairs of shoes across seven columns and five rows, adding up to *seventy pairs* in total. Considering the total number of shoes, as well as the number of shower stalls set up *in both baths*, the starting number of players was likely *one hundred*. Adding together the sixty-five members of the entryway team and the dozen or so members of the open-air bath team, the current player count stood at just under eighty.

The shoe lockers to Mishiro's left were opened with blocks of pure gold, while those to her right were unlocked with blocks of *pure silver*. Furthermore, each set of keys was numbered independently of the other. That was why, despite the game starting with a hundred players, the largest key number was 35. As long as players remained in the open-air bath and the indoor bath areas, it would be difficult to realize the truth of there being two baths.

Beyond the shoe lockers were separate sets of curtains that led to the two changing rooms. Bathhouse curtains normally indicated *men* and *women*, but since all the players were girls, the curtains in the venue did not separate baths based on gender. Rather, the word *gold* was written on the left set of curtains, while the word *silver* was on the right. Naturally, the keys hidden in the respective baths matched that color.

Mishiro's alliance had just wiped out the team taking shelter in the silver bath. Their next target was the team in the golden bath, but since they now had

full access to the silver bath, Mishiro had proposed a plan to attack them from the rear, going through the bamboo wall of the silver open-air bath. Their ambush would be highly effective as long as the enemy didn't realize more than one bath existed.

The sound of energetic footsteps from the golden bath's changing room informed Mishiro of the results of their strategy.

"We did it, Mishiro!" Riko dashed out of the changing room, brushing away the curtains with her head. "Your strategy worked! We stole the keys from the open-air bath team!"

Mishiro was surprised. "Really...? So quickly?"

"Yes. It was a big success!"

*That was remarkably easy,* Mishiro thought. *The players in the silver bath put up much more of a fight.*

"Are there any casualties on our side?" Mishiro asked.

"Only minor ones! A few girls were injured, but everyone's alive!"

"How many keys did the team in the golden bath have?"

"Get ready for this—they had a whopping ten of them!" Riko stuck out both of her hands.

Mishiro glanced at the shoe lockers. They had nearly completed the set of silver keys and had already gathered a majority of the golden ones. Ten more keys meant that they would have access to enough shoes for everyone on the entryway team to escape.

Mishiro then looked at Riko's hands, which were thrust out in front of her. All ten of her fingers were splayed out to indicate ten keys, but Riko had not a single one of them in her possession.

"Where are the keys right now?"

"The others split up and are bringing them back as we speak! They're too heavy for me to carry all by myself!"

After the successful raid on the silver bath team, Riko had returned with all

five of the keys they had swiped. However, this time, they had obtained twice as many, and the density of gold was twice as much as that of silver. Indeed, it would be *somewhat* difficult for Riko to carry all ten by herself.

“That’s all I have to report for now! Look forward to more good news!”

Riko did not demand the usual reward—perhaps she thought there was no time for that—and turned on her heel.

“Wait one moment,” Mishiro said, facing Riko’s back. “Where are you going now?”

“Huh...? I figured I’d go back in and protect the keys. The enemy team will probably put up a desperate struggle...”

That made sense to Mishiro. Since her team now had the necessary number of keys, the golden bath team would be stuck if they used the footwear to escape. That meant the enemy would have to strike back as soon as possible.

Mishiro had no objections to Riko’s assessment. However...

“You wait here,” Mishiro said. “Stand guard in my stead and ensure no weasel attempts to escape from under our noses.”

“In your stead...?”

“I will take your place.” Mishiro stood up from the massage chair. “It would be dishonorable if I did not at least show my face for the end.”

The leaders who naturally emerged out of death games fell into one of two categories: “soldiers” who fought on the front lines, and “commanders” who issued orders from the rear. Although Mishiro fit the archetype of a commander, she had resolved to step forth into the open at critical junctures. That was because simply waiting at the rear for an entire game would make others think she was slacking off.

Mishiro pushed Riko by the shoulders and made her sit on the massage chair.

“No, but...,” Riko protested.

“What is it?”

“Are you sure about this, Mishiro? After all, this game is your...”

Riko seemed concerned. Mishiro wondered what she was so worried about, before realizing that this game was a personal *milestone*. It appeared Riko was concerned that Mishiro was facing some sort of curse like the Wall of Thirty.

“Players only face misfortune around their thirtieth game,” Mishiro said. “*This game* should present no issues for me.”

Riko still looked worried, so Mishiro rubbed the girl’s head to forcibly shut down her protests.

“I am counting on you,” Mishiro whispered into Riko’s ear. “As always, if anything should happen to me, you are free to *go all out*.”

Riko nodded. Mishiro patted the girl on the shoulder, then turned her back to the entryway.

## **(24/41)**

Yuki’s team fought their hearts out.

## **(25/41)**

A second open-air bath. The implications of that were obvious. Just like how ordinary bathhouses had separate baths for men and women, this game also had two baths. Yuki’s team watched helplessly as players from the entryway team opened a hole in the bamboo wall and infiltrated their base, fully realizing that their plan had been foiled.

The existence of two baths also meant the number of players—and enemies—was twice the amount they had estimated. While the large difference in team size certainly did Yuki’s team no favors, being attacked from both flanks was quite devastating. Since they’d been caught off guard by the shocking truth, they were unable to coordinate as things quickly fell apart.

Despite the circumstances, Yuki’s team had still fought their hearts out.

But these games offered no consolation prize.

It took little time for the entryway team to steal the shoe-locker keys hidden in the grove and leave the open-air bath. The pitter-patters of more than forty

sets of feet faded into the distance, leaving behind only the forlorn figures of the open-air bath team, who looked like they had just been mugged.

## (26/41)

“Is...everyone here?” It was Azuma who called out to her teammates. Her voice sounded strained, as if she had gotten injured. “Respond if you are.”

“I’m here,” Yuki answered. She was lying face up with arms and legs outstretched in the middle of the grove.

Despite being a phantom, Yuki was out of breath. Her exhaustion resulted from her attempt to steal back the golden blocks from the entryway team. However, not even she could achieve success against a force numbering over forty strong.

“Hiwada, here.” “Karin too.”

Replies came from all over the open-air bath.

“Eleven, huh?” Azuma said, confirming the numbers once the voices stopped. “Where’s Sugiyama?”

“Over there,” someone replied. “...Um... She hit her head on a rock, so...”

The girl trailed off. Not a single soul asked her to finish the sentence.

Out of their team of twelve, eleven players had survived. In Yuki’s eyes, that was not a bad outcome. The raid force from earlier had probably been instructed only to steal shoe-locker keys, as twelve players were too many to attempt to kill. Although eleven was not a bad number of survivors, they were in dire straits.

“My bad, team,” Azuma said. “Didn’t realize there were two bath areas...”

“You shouldn’t apologize,” Yuki interrupted. That was her rule of thumb—players who gave a verbal apology had higher odds of dying. For that reason, even though Yuki also felt guilt at not having realized the truth, she dared not express it aloud. “Instead, let’s turn our eyes to the future. What will we do now?”

Nobody offered a response.

“The other team probably has enough keys,” Yuki continued. “Once that raid force reaches the entryway, it’s game over for us. The entryway team will escape with their members, and we’ll be left behind. This is no time to be lying down.”

“...You’ve got a point there,” Azuma said.

“At the very least, we have three different options. The first—do nothing. We keep quiet as the entryway team escapes, and then search for *extra keys* they don’t use or any keys that are still hidden in the baths. That should allow some of us to survive.”

“Some of us...?” someone questioned.

Exactly—choosing that option would mean fighting among themselves to claim the remaining spots for survivors. Yuki wanted that option to be the last resort, if at all possible.

“The second—we chase after the enemy to steal back our keys,” Yuki continued.

“Wait, there’s no way...”

“Yeah, we did just lose to them. Which means there’s little chance of success. That rules out this option, too.”

Yuki rose to her feet before going on.

“The third—we charge into the entryway, all or nothing.”

Suddenly, the air grew tense.

“You’re suggestin’...a *suicide attack*?” Azuma asked.

“There’s no reason we need to feel attached to our original keys. The entryway team has dozens of others, so we can use those instead. As long as we reach the entryway, they’re ours for the taking. Their defenses should be weak right now, so there’s some hope of success.”

“‘Weak’...? Aren’t there around twenty of ‘em who stayed behind?”

Initially, they’d estimated there were thirty players on the entryway team. In

light of the revelation of there being two baths, however, they'd adjusted that to sixty. Since the attacking raid force was composed of more than forty players, that left around twenty enemies standing by in the entryway. The calculation was an extremely simple one.

Charging into enemy territory without a plan should have been an option to be avoided at all costs. The open-air bath team had made preparations so that they wouldn't have to resort to that. But at this stage, Yuki couldn't think of any other way out of their predicament.

"I won't force it on anyone," Yuki said, looking around at the other girls, who appeared hesitant about the idea. "Only those of you who want to join, join."

She was fully aware that her voice sounded far colder than before.

**(27/41)**

Five girls raised their hands.

Including Yuki, that made a total of six players. As their chances of success would rise with a larger group, Yuki wanted to persuade the remaining five players to join, but they were quite obstinate. It seemed they were counting on the possibility Yuki's suicide mission would be met with a counterattack—with fewer players to fight over leftover keys, that meant higher odds of survival. Yuki didn't have the time to try to convince them. Once those forty-plus players from earlier returned to the entryway, Yuki's squad would truly have no chance of survival. They had to move ahead with their plan, even with only half of their original numbers.

Since the entryway team had vanished through the bamboo wall into the other bath, Yuki's squad decided to head through the bath they themselves were in. Although steam filled the area, the terrain of the game was extremely straightforward. As long as nobody got in their way, all they would have to do was run in a straight line toward the exit.

The six players ran without exchanging any words.

Shortly afterward, they reached the section of the room with heavy steam.

"...Dammit..." Yuki muttered.



She was in a sour mood. Her heart had grown cold, but despite that, she couldn't think straight. Although she sensed she was entering crisis mode, her thoughts wouldn't clear. Her body felt heavy. A mysterious feeling of nausea spread through every inch of her body, as if she had woken up after less sleep than usual, or as if she had suffered a string of losses in mahjong or poker.

She couldn't shake off a certain doubt that pestered her mind. She was resisting with all her might to not voice it out loud.

Yuki's squad charged into the heavy cloud of steam. Although she felt signs of the enemy all around, she paid them no heed. She kept running to stave off her nausea.

"Guh..."

The groan came from Azuma, who was at the rear of the line.

Yuki couldn't help but react to the girl's voice. Looking back, she saw that the five silhouettes that were supposed to be following her had been reduced to four. Behind them, Yuki sensed someone thrashing around violently on the tile floor—Azuma. The girl was resisting being restrained by members of the entryway team.

"Don't stop!" Yuki yelled at her four remaining teammates. "We can't afford to let up now! Confuse the enemy and push through!"

Although she thought she hadn't made a great case, the other four began to move their legs again, as though intimidated into action. Of course, Yuki also resumed her flight.

They had just arrived at the critical juncture.

Yuki's mind roared. *Is this the end? Is this where I die?*

**(28/41)**

Mishiro looked down at the player who had now become a corpse. The girl had the face of a boy and, in accordance with her appearance, had quite the vitality, too; it had required ten whole players to hold her down and drown her in a bath.

“Let’s move on,” Mishiro instructed her teammates before chasing after the five players who had run past them.

She caught up immediately, thanks to her teammates farther ahead who had slowed down the runners. Just as she had done earlier, Mishiro tripped the player at the rear of the pack and worked together with several teammates to drown the girl in a bath. Two down.

Her team killed a third and a fourth player in exactly the same manner.

As the one-sided battle continued rather mechanically, a thought entered Mishiro’s mind.

*How ridiculous.*

The situation was not worth taking seriously. Mishiro had thought the enemy would have more fight in them, but was this the best they could muster? The player who had entered the fray several hours late like a true hero turned out to be nothing special. Whoever it was had been too careless to notice the fact that there were two baths and so foolish as to endanger their entire team by resorting to a suicide attack. Mishiro thought back to her shameful performance in a game long, long ago and snickered. This mysterious player was no match for her, nor could they even hold a candle to that phantom girl.

*Allow me to admire the foolish look on your face,* Mishiro thought.

After successfully eliminating a fifth player, Mishiro drew close to the final runner.

She attempted to trip the player in the same manner, but with this being the sixth time, her enemy appeared to sense the danger. Before Mishiro could stick out her leg, the player turned their entire body around.

And then—

**(29/41)**

And then—

The two girls were reunited.

They exchanged no words.

Still, everything was made clear. The two of them fully understood each other's position.

Yuki understood—that the princess she was face-to-face with for the first time in eight months, Mishiro, was the leader of the entryway team. That the girl had kept playing death games despite the loss of her arm. That she had grown capable enough to lead the entryway team, to toy with the open-air bath team throughout the entire game, and now, to have her hands inches away from Yuki's throat.

Mishiro understood—it had been this wretch. The phantom girl, the one who had knocked Mishiro off her pedestal in the past, was the player who had joined the open-air bath team late. She was the one who had wiped out the entryway team's scout force, who had failed to figure out the trick of this game and had allowed her team's keys to get stolen, and who had directed her side to launch a Hail Mary suicide attack. It had to have been her.

Yuki...couldn't move. Her whole body was frozen, as if nails had been hammered down into her vital spots.

Fog clouded her mind, and she had no idea why. Maybe she was surprised to encounter an unexpected opponent, maybe the curse of the Wall of Thirty that was affecting her form had peaked at this very moment, or maybe she was experiencing a sudden bout of vertigo after spinning around so vigorously. Or perhaps all three of the above had occurred at once, and her brain had stalled due to being unable to process the information. For several seconds, despite facing the last moment of her eleventh hour, Yuki stood as still as a scarecrow.

Mishiro...had a mirror knife in her left hand. She had swiped it off the boyish player. She had no way of knowing it, but the girl in front of her had fallen into a daze and would be unable to properly defend herself. If Mishiro simply brought down her knife, she would have easily claimed Yuki's life right then and there.

However, Mishiro made a motion not with her left hand but with her *right*—the one she had recovered after vowing to take revenge on the girl before her

very eyes.

After sticking out her right hand straight in front of her, Mishiro struck the phantom girl's face—by slapping her on the cheek.

And then Mishiro shouted—

“—What is this farce?!”

## **(31/41)**

It was quite a loud smack, which meant the force of impact had been fairly trivial. A loud noise signified that the majority of the kinetic energy had been converted into sound energy. Thus, the damage inflicted on Yuki should have been negligible.

However, since Yuki had taken a shaky stance, she lost her balance in spite of the weak slap. She fell backward onto the tile floor, then sat up in a motion that seemed unimaginably slow given that she was in the middle of a death game.

What awaited her was a knee to the face.

“What is this farce?! What is this farce?! What is this farce?! Huh?!”

As Yuki remained on the floor, Mishiro continued to shower her with kicks, each of which came paired with an angry jeer. Yuki remembered Mishiro as someone with a far more sophisticated vocabulary, but it had been quite a while since last they'd seen each other; perhaps Mishiro had abandoned her refined speech patterns.

No—that wasn't it. Yuki had *caused* Mishiro to abandon it. Yuki had infuriated Mishiro so much that the latter was unable to maintain her composure.

“I demand you explain yourself! Is *this* the performance of a Candle Woods survivor?!”

Perhaps Mishiro's anger had subsided somewhat, as she returned to her princess-like tone from the last time they had met. Since her kicks had stopped, too, Yuki escaped by scuttling away.

Yuki expected Mishiro to say, “*Hold it right there,*” but in reality, Mishiro

shouted—

“Stay away!”

Those words were directed not at Yuki but at the many members of the entryway team around them.

“Keep your hands off her! That wretch is *mine*! If you dare get in my way, I will not hesitate to beat you to death!”

## **(32/41)**

Yuki fled. Mishiro gave chase. Seeing the phantom girl make a pathetic escape only fed Mishiro’s anger. She had not come all this way to witness this sorry sight.

A single phrase swirled around in her head.

*I can’t stand her.*

*I can’t stand her. I can’t stand her.*

Mishiro couldn’t stand the fact that the girl was fleeing with her tail between her legs, couldn’t stand being shown such a pathetic maneuver. Everything Mishiro had done up to today was for the sake of taking revenge on Yuki, the phantom girl who had once humiliated her. Yet what on earth was *this*? It was pointless to win against a weakling. Their final showdown needed to be far more dramatic—a Mishiro who had crawled up from the depths of hell against a Yuki who had become far more superhuman since last they met. They would fight tooth and nail, and in the end, Mishiro would emerge victorious. That was how it had to be. Otherwise, Mishiro’s deepest desire would remain unfulfilled.

As Mishiro chased after Yuki, memories resurfaced in her mind.

She thought back—to her ninth game. It was the first game she’d played in after getting more or less accustomed to the new arm she had received from the prosthetic craftsman. She learned the hard way that her confidence had been misplaced. Over the course of the game, not only did she lose her prosthetic forearm, but she also lost her right upper arm, forcing her to pay the craftsman another visit. As far as Mishiro could remember, that experience was

far more humiliating than what she had gone through in her eighth game.

Mishiro thought back—to her seventeenth game. It was an escape game set in an abandoned school, in which players would be penalized for breaking “school rules.” With a decent number of games under her belt, Mishiro had grown arrogant without realizing it. She was forced to acknowledge a basic tenet of human error—the greatest danger lurked when one started feeling settled. As a consequence, Mishiro lost her hands, feet, and a number of organs. Stripped of most of her movable body parts, she’d needed to crawl across the finish line like a caterpillar. That game had been the one where she had sustained the most severe injuries.

Mishiro thought back—to when she confronted the Wall of Thirty. The game venue consisted of an entire village, and players were tasked with vanquishing a man-eating beast that descended on the settlement night after night. This was a problem for Mishiro, as her encounter with that beast in Scrap Building had instilled in her a fear of wild animals. Even the barks of stray dogs would cause her to subconsciously curl into a ball. As for what happened during the game, well, Mishiro was honestly foaming at the mouth with fright on the first night. The second and third nights, all she could do was tremble in fear. What brought back her composure was meeting a girl who had gotten her right arm gnawed off, just as Mishiro had experienced in the past—Riko. If the girl hadn’t lost her arm, Mishiro probably wouldn’t have taken her as a protégée, nor would she be here right now.

Her journey had been anything but straightforward.

Despite everything, she was still facing forward for the sole reason of taking down that wretch.

*And yet...,* Mishiro thought. *While I’ve been hard at work, what on earth has she been doing?*

“Die!” Finally, even the most direct of insults flowed out of Mishiro’s mouth. “Enough toying with me! Repent with your life!”

It was then that Yuki showed her first signs of resistance from beyond the steam.

“Wh-what are you talking about?! Did I do something to you, Mishiro?”

“Do you intend to play dumb?! You wretch! How do you think I’ve felt...?!”

Mishiro was no longer able to control herself. She blurted out everything that entered her mind.

“What’s the deal with your pathetic performance?! You’re no different from how I used to be! What happened to the goddess who appeared before me on that day long ago?!”

Her words must have cut deep, as they elicited another reply from Yuki.

“Don’t put me on a divine pedestal!” Yuki snapped. “I’m human! It’s perfectly normal for me to be off my game sometimes! I’m still giving it all I’ve got!”

“Silence!” Mishiro shouted, making it difficult to interpret whether she desired a response. “‘All you’ve got,’ you say? My efforts have been far more desperate than yours! I began by recovering my losses, and even rejected everything about my past self! I have fought through far more trying experiences than you! That is why we now face this outcome!”

“—Shut up! I know that already!”

An object cut through the steam and flew toward Mishiro. It was a mirror knife. But there was no need to evade the frantic attack. The weapon passed by the right side of her body and slid onto the floor with a clatter.

Mishiro caught up to the phantom girl. She grabbed the girl’s wet hair and pulled her closer. At the same time, Mishiro swung down the mirror knife she was holding in an underhand grip.

“You disappoint me!” Mishiro shouted as she carried out her attack. “I have not fought through *forty* games to be reunited with such a pathetic wretch!!”

**(33/41)**

Upon hearing those words...

...Yuki felt a great commotion in her heart.

**(34/41)**

At this point, even with her scalp being pulled back and the tip of a blade inching toward her, Yuki still found herself unable to conjure a single thought. With her mind completely blank, she had been moving her body and engaging in dialogue entirely thanks to her nerves.

And in her empty mind, something began to bud.

It exploded and filled Yuki's head for a brief moment, before gradually coming together and forming two sentences.

*Forty games?*

*A jerk like her?*

Compared to all the insults Mishiro had hurled at her, that truth stung the most.

*Mishiro. That nasty player who acts like a snobby princess. I figured she'd be below me for all of eternity. But this jerk. This asshole... She overcame the Wall of Thirty long ago, and now she's risen above me. She's talking down to me. I can't stand this. So—*

*I won't accept dying like this,* Yuki thought.

*I won't. I don't want to die this way. I'm ready to accept death whenever. I don't care if I lose my life in an unexpected traffic accident. I'd even be fine dying to the curse of the Wall of Thirty. But there's no way I'll ever accept defeat at the hands of this piece of shit. This is the one death I refuse to comply with. I'd rather go out choking on a pill. I can't stand the thought of being killed by this second-rate player.*

Before Mishiro's knife could reach her flesh, Yuki felt another stir in her heart.

She regained the ability to breathe subconsciously. Her head grew cold, dropping to the same temperature as that of her heart.

*Right—I get it now.*

*This must be how she felt back in that abandoned building.*

Reflexively, Yuki grabbed hold of Mishiro's knife.



A second later, pain coursed through Yuki's hand. That was the natural result, for she had clutched the blade of a knife. Since picking up a broken mirror shard was dangerous in itself, the risks of grabbing one that had been polished into a weapon were obvious.

Just as how a cornered rat would bite a cat, people often put up a last-ditch resistance when staring death in the face. That was especially true in these games. Despite that, a look of surprise came to Mishiro's face, as though she thought the impossible was happening.

Yuki was surprised at what she'd done. She had defended herself on instinct. That feat would have been impossible for the girl she'd been a few moments ago.

The two of them stared at each other in disbelief for a second or two.

The first to return to her senses was Yuki. Inches away from Mishiro, she headbutted the girl in the face.

".....!"

Mishiro staggered back.

Taking advantage of the opportunity, Yuki fled.

"Hold it right there!" The shout came immediately afterward, followed by the sound of footsteps.

Sprinting across the floor of the indoor bath, Yuki focused her attention on her surroundings.

She sensed the presence of numerous players around her. They were Mishiro's underlings, members of the entryway team. The vast number suggested that the forty-plus players from earlier had already returned. It appeared they were standing around idly, loyally following Mishiro's order to stay away from Yuki, but if their leader died, they would be freed from their chains and almost certainly attack. The situation could be summed up in a single word: *hopeless*.

Yet Yuki's heart did not waver. A single phrase kept repeating in her mind.

*I'm not gonna die.*

*I'm not gonna die.*

*I'm not gonna die.*

*"I'm not gonna die!"*

The moment Yuki shouted that out loud, pain shot through her right foot. She tumbled onto the floor and slid across the tiling. As she slipped, Yuki glanced at her right heel.

Sticking out of it was a hair accessory shaped like an orange.

She had stepped on the tip of the orange leaf. Had someone dropped it? Luck was not on Yuki's side—the curse of the Wall of Thirty was still in full force.

Now unable to support her body weight with her right foot, Yuki changed tack to avoid the pain—by crawling on all fours. She found the method to be rather practical. It eliminated the risk of slipping on the wet tile floor, and by keeping low to the ground, she could use the steam as cover. In fact, Azuma had used a similar trick by crouching down to catch Yuki off guard during their initial encounter. Crawling was possibly the most optimal method of movement in this game.

Just as she had finished that thought, she reached her destination. Without losing any speed, she scooped up the mirror knife on the floor.

She had run in an arc to retrieve the weapon she had thrown at Mishiro. Now, the two of them were on equal footing. In fact, Yuki would have an edge. Thanks to the steam cover and Yuki's determination to keep quiet, Mishiro likely hadn't noticed she had picked up the knife. Mishiro would think her to be completely unarmed.

Yuki turned around. A dark silhouette in the steam was approaching at reckless speed. Moments later, Mishiro appeared within point-blank range, brandishing a knife.

With one hand, Yuki parried the oncoming attack, and with the other, she swung her mirror knife. It appeared Mishiro had truly been caught unawares, as a look of surprise once again formed on her face—

But Yuki's knife failed to penetrate the girl's body. The blade bounced off the

girl's flawless skin and shattered quite readily.

This time, it was Yuki's face that was colored with surprise. Indeed, the knife's biggest flaw was that it had been made of mirror glass, an extremely fragile material. Though it hadn't appeared damaged, it must have gotten cracked when Yuki tossed it earlier.

The frozen hands of time began to tick once again.

Yuki crossed her arms and curled over to protect herself from Mishiro's knife. Since the Preservation Treatment would immediately stop any bleeding, a knife would not do much damage, as long as it failed to hit any vital spots. And in Yuki's current pose, all those spots were guarded.

However, Mishiro's next attack was not with her knife.

Instead, she *shoved* Yuki's crossed arms. Although the blow did not have much force behind it, since Yuki's center of gravity had been lowered, Yuki readily tumbled into the bath behind her.

It was a medicinal bath. Due to the colored water, she was unable to see anything, even with her eyes open. As bubbles vigorously spewed out from her mouth and nostrils, Yuki attempted to raise her head above water, but before she could, Mishiro shot her arm through the bath and pressed Yuki's head against the bottom of the bath.

Yuki was fully submerged. Her supply of oxygen had been cut off.

She stopped blowing bubbles and grabbed Mishiro's arm. It felt nothing like human skin. That meant it wasn't her left arm—it was her right. Mishiro had lost her right arm in a past game, so this one had to be a prosthetic. Wherever she procured it from, it was made out of a hard material. Recognizing the futility of struggling against the girl's arm while underwater, Yuki changed tactics and instead began violently flailing her legs. As Mishiro stood there, Yuki managed to hook the girl's legs and pull her closer.

It was far more difficult to keep your footing in water than on land. Yuki had carried out an atypical sweep, but both of Mishiro's legs readily gave way. From underwater, Yuki heard the sound of Mishiro slamming her head against the edge of the bath.

After being freed from Mishiro's clutches, Yuki lifted her head above the surface.

Mishiro was facing the opposite direction. She was cradling her head in her hands and attempting to step out of the bath, but Yuki closed in on her. Just as Yuki was inches away from her opponent, Mishiro abruptly turned around.

A memory surfaced in Yuki's mind—from when the two of them had first met. After Yuki had gotten close to Mishiro, the girl swiftly turned around. As her trademark princess curls blocked Yuki's field of vision, she'd then clawed at Yuki's throat with sharpened nails. What Yuki had fallen for back then was likely Mishiro's signature move.

This time, however—

“I've seen through your tricks!”

As Yuki shouted that out, she swung her right arm *out of the water*. A large amount of medicinal bathwater splashed onto and around Mishiro's face.

Since Mishiro's hair was now damp, *it was no longer voluminous enough to fully obstruct Yuki's view*. That allowed Yuki to dodge the knife that came swinging at her throat.

Yuki landed another headbutt, making Mishiro flinch and drop her knife. Before the weapon could fall into the bath, Yuki caught it.

In a single smooth motion, she thrust the knife at Mishiro's throat as *payback*.

“.....!!...!!”

Mishiro reached her arms out toward Yuki. But that was all. Moments later, they drooped into the water along with the rest of her body. There was an expression of deep peace on her face, one that not even the most relaxing of baths could induce.

Yuki stepped out of the water.

“Good game,” she whispered in a voice low enough for no one else to hear.

She didn't check to see if Mishiro was alive or dead.

Yuki headed for the exit on all fours. Although she sensed hostility coming from countless enemies around the exit, she had no choice but to go for it. Charging forward was the only option available to her.

She had taken down Mishiro, the leader of the entryway team. However, that was all Yuki had accomplished; winning the fight didn't mean Yuki would be crowned the next leader. Though it appeared she had been gaining notoriety as a player lately, the others would certainly not give her a free pass. There was no avoiding a battle with the rest of the team.

Numerous footsteps began closing in on Yuki.

*Bring on the extra innings, she thought. I won't lose to your followers, either.*

**(37/41)**

Riko sat atop the massage chair, deep in thought.

She was reminiscing about the start of her relationship with her mentor.

**(38/41)**

Riko did not have an admirable reason that she could tell others to justify playing these games. Her motive for joining was the same as that of the vast majority of players—she felt tired of everything about the world and no longer cared whether she lived or died. That was why Riko had become a player.

In her debut game—a battle against a man-eating beast—Riko had sustained severe injuries. She was bitten all over and lost around half her body. The Preservation Treatment kept her alive, but she would never recover the body parts that the beast had devoured. While the great bodily loss was challenging enough, the mental damage she had suffered presented its own issues. *What will happen to me if I survive like this? What am I supposed to do? I'd much rather be dead*—those thoughts had filled her head.

Still, the reason Riko lived on was because someone had looked after her.

Mishiro. She was an experienced player who had apparently been in her thirtieth game at the time. She frothed at the mouth and fell unconscious as

soon as she encountered the man-eating beast, which caused Riko to doubt her capabilities at first. However, after spending one night together, followed by a second, Mishiro demonstrated more and more of her expertise, and in the end, she led the majority of the players to victory. She had also been the one to save Riko from the jaws of the beast. If Mishiro hadn't stepped in, Riko would have suffered a far worse fate.

"I have a mission," Mishiro told Riko one day.

Riko couldn't remember where they had been when Mishiro said this. Since Riko's body was still maimed at the time, they were probably riding in a car after the game ended. Or was she lying on a hospital bed? Maybe they were heading to meet the prosthetic craftsman. In any case, no matter where or when it had been, that was how the conversation began.

"A player by the name of Yuki once trampled my pride. I continue to play in these games so that I may exact my revenge on her the next time we meet."

Riko had not heard that from Mishiro only once. In fact, Mishiro brought up the phantom girl so many times that Riko lost count and even began to wonder if Mishiro had gone senile. Yuki—a player who resembled a phantom. Apparently, she and Mishiro shared a deep connection that dated back to a past game.

"Is that...your entire reason?"

Every time, the same thought would enter Riko's mind. She usually kept it to herself, but on that occasion, she'd posed the question to Mishiro.

"It certainly is," Mishiro answered. "It was most frustrating. I refuse to stand inferior to her. Humans are perfectly willing to risk their lives for a reason as simple as that."

Was that really true? Riko didn't know for certain, as she didn't even have "a reason as simple as that."

"It appears that what you lack, more so than arms and legs, is a *mission*," Mishiro said. "Shall we start by fixing that?"

Players who had sustained severe injuries that even the medical technologies of the organizers could not heal—having their limbs be blown to pieces by a

bomb or devoured by a beast, for instance—were by no means lost causes. Although recovering one's original limbs would be impossible, attaching new ones was within the realm of possibility. Behind the scenes of the games, a prosthetic craftsman served players who had lost parts of their bodies yet still desired to play on. Mishiro made the appropriate arrangements for Riko.

“Um...” Upon learning that, Riko asked Mishiro a question. “Why are you being so nice to me?”

Not only had Mishiro rescued Riko from the clutches of the beast, but she was also supporting her physical and mental rehabilitation. Riko had no idea why Mishiro would go to such lengths for a stranger.

“Nice?” Mishiro snickered. “I am not so honorable a woman.”

Riko still remembered the look on Mishiro's face back then. She wore a sinister expression—one that could not be matched by even a witch stirring a bubbling cauldron.

“How should I put it...?” Mishiro continued. “Riko, how would you define your ‘self’?”

“My self?”

“Of the things that exist in this world, how much would you consider to be part of one's self? Would you include clothes, glasses, and piercings? The strands of hair and nail clippings that come off one's body? How about the prosthetic hands and feet that will soon be attached to you?”

Riko couldn't understand Mishiro's question. All that Riko thought of as her “self” was her body, which had now been reduced to half its original form. She answered as such.

“I would propose a slightly broader definition,” Mishiro replied. “Although I would not include the examples I listed, I strongly consider my mission, along with the results that come of it, to fall within the boundaries of ‘self.’ If I request a hitman to kill someone, for instance, I would judge myself to be responsible for the killing.”

That was an easy-to-understand example. In that case, Riko would reach the same conclusion.

“Now, here is a question that arises.” Mishiro stroked Riko’s cheek. “Say *I let someone live, guided them, and instilled in them a goal*. What if there was someone whose entire existence *was the product of my actions*? What if there was someone who was entirely subordinate to me? Would you not consider the accomplishments of that person to be the same as my own? Would you not consider that person *to be part of my ‘self’*?”

In that moment, a warmth came to Mishiro’s eyes.

Of course. Mishiro had nothing sinister planned for Riko. She was simply welcoming Riko as a part of herself.

“For the sake of honesty, I will say that you are not the first person I have done this with—you are the fifth. Of the four who came before you, two have perished, but the other two are thriving. If you live long enough, I will certainly introduce you at some point.”

Mishiro brought her face closer. “Now, let us return to the topic of your purpose,” she whispered into Riko’s ear. “I will grant you a mission to fill your hollow soul. You will be my protégée, Riko. *Until your dying breath.*”

*So that’s how it is*, Riko thought.

Mishiro was expanding the scope of her self. She was seeking someone who would serve as her right hand—no, more than that—someone who would give up their body for her. *That was precisely* why she had saved Riko and why she was going to such lengths for her. Riko, who was spiritually empty, would be a perfect vessel.

Mishiro was by no means a kind soul. Riko understood deep down that she *was frightening*.

But what frightened Riko even more was the fact that she accepted Mishiro’s demand. It was entirely accurate that Riko lacked a mission—the one thing she needed most. Mishiro’s words had sent thrills through Riko.

*I want to serve my savior*, she thought. *I want to be useful to her. I want her to whisper more orders into my ear.*

“I will give you your first order.”



Every last cell in Riko's body hung on Mishiro's words.

"If I fall to that wretch, you will take over in my stead."

## (39/41)

After Yuki had wiped the floor with ten players, nobody else stepped up to challenge her.

Perhaps as a result of Mishiro's strong leadership, the players on the entryway team excelled in teamwork, but their individual abilities were nothing more than ordinary. Besides Mishiro, their team seemed to be made up of all rookies. Yuki had also started to recover her form, so she was able to easily slip through the enemy's line of defense.

Yuki crossed the changing room and stepped through the curtains into the entryway.

The sight before her did not betray her expectations. What first caught her attention were two sets of shoe lockers. Then Yuki turned to the side and saw a second set of curtains. They had the word *silver* on them, while the curtains Yuki had come through bore the word *gold*, suggesting that the shoe-locker keys hidden in both baths were made out of different materials. Beyond the lockers was an area for removing one's shoes, and beyond that was the exit—the ultimate goal for all players. A number of silent corpses littered the space before the exit, likely the result of those players attempting to escape without shoes.

Besides Yuki, there was only one living person around.

A young girl was sitting on a massage chair. She gave off the impression of a small animal, and in reality, she was also quite short in stature. Even though she hadn't been leaning far back in the chair, her feet did not reach the floor. When she spotted Yuki, the girl's face twisted in surprise, and she immediately jumped off the chair.

"Wait—are you Yuki?" she asked.

"You know about me?"

“Mishiro always talked about you...”

Those words caught Yuki’s attention—they implied this girl and Mishiro had met before today. Perhaps she was Mishiro’s protégée.

Seemingly mustering as threatening a voice as she could, the girl asked, “How did you get here? What happened to Mishiro?”

“What do you think happened?”

“I’m the one asking the questions here!”

“I don’t know,” Yuki answered, walking toward the shoe lockers. “This is an escape game. I don’t need to check if my opponents are dead or alive.”

She came before the lockers and saw silver blocks inserted into the ones to her right. Each set of lockers had thirty-five individual compartments, for a total of seventy, and at least sixty of them already had keys inserted. That was likely more than the total number of players on the entryway team.

Yuki approached the lockers to borrow a pair of shoes, but the girl came over and barred her path.

“What do you want?” Yuki asked.

“Mishiro ordered me to not let anyone open the lockers.”

“Right.” Yuki ignored the girl and kept walking.

The girl wouldn’t budge. “Mishiro told me I could go all out if anything happened to her.”

“Be my guest.”

The girl offered no reply. Instead, she charged across the wood plank floor straight at Yuki.

Yuki thought she could easily dodge the attack. She thought she had kept enough of a distance to evade anything the girl tried, even if a Gatling gun came jutting out of her chest.

However, that was a miscalculation. Yuki bore the full brunt of the girl’s charge and was sent flying against the wall.

For a second, Yuki was unable to process what had happened. But her stupor lasted only a second, as pain ran through her back immediately afterward, screaming at her to snap to her senses. Yuki shook her head to clear her mind before looking up.

The girl was right in front of her—and throwing a punch. Yuki put up her guard, but since she had yet to fully recover her form, in the back of her mind, she knew that had been the wrong thing to do. It was pointless to defend—she needed to be *dodging* attacks at all costs.

The girl's fist made contact with Yuki's crossed arms—  
—and *stabbed through*.

Both of Yuki's arms bent at a spot with no joints.

“Ah—”

She looked down. After snapping both of Yuki's arms, the girl's fist had gone no farther. Yuki again raised her head to see that the girl's swing had reached its physical limit. It appeared the girl had been standing too far away to reach beyond Yuki's arms and pierce her chest.

The moment after Yuki processed that fact, the much-awaited pain finally hit her.

“GAAAAAAAAAAAAAAH!! AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAH!! AAAA—”

Yuki's screams were interrupted by a punch to the face.

Yuki raised her arms—which were *dangling* at the ends—in an attempt to guard her face, but that did nothing to stop the girl's onslaught. A second punch came. Followed by a third. And a fourth. And a fifth. The punches continued at a constant rhythm, and every single one of them landed with ferocious power that belied the girl's small form. It felt like she was being struck with a dumbbell. Yuki was certain no human fist could generate that kind of force.

It could only come from a prosthetic arm—just like Mishiro's.

While the thrashing continued, Yuki realized that the girl's legs were also

artificial. As evidenced by Mishiro, these games allowed prosthetics, as long as they didn't have taser functionality, hidden blades, or other weapon-like features. Not only were players permitted to embed armor inside their body in the same way as that psychopath from once upon a time, they could also equip themselves with *prosthetic arms made from rigid material that could consecutively land powerful punches or high-performance prosthetic legs that would grant them agility far beyond the capacity of their formerly human body*. Although bringing in outside weapons was prohibited, there was plenty players could do while still abiding by the rules.

Yuki had no idea exactly how the girl had modified her body, but regardless, her weight and muscle strength were certainly not those of a small girl. It would be unwise to consider her a human. Yuki had to view the girl as a human-size killer robot.

The girl continued her relentless assault. As Yuki's arms became more and more mangled, she waited for an opportunity to counter. Unlike the girl in front of her, Yuki hadn't equipped herself with any cyborg-like features—her body, from her head down to her toenails, was exactly as she had received it from her parents. Mishiro, the girl's mentor, had been forced to use a prosthetic for her right arm, but the rest of her had seemed completely human. Even that psychopath, who had considered it naive to go into death games without stronger equipment than one's opponents, had gone no further than shielding a number of her vitals.

Why were all of them fixated on keeping their original human body?

The answer was simple: Everyone knew that a player who had discarded their own flesh and blood could not live for long.

Yuki lifted her human knee, hitting the girl in the jaw. Even while being backed against a wall and taking nonstop punches, Yuki had opened enough space to raise her knee. The girl's head was apparently still human, and she exhibited the natural human reaction to being struck in the jaw—losing her balance and becoming momentarily immobilized.

Taking advantage of the opportunity, Yuki slipped past the girl and dashed toward the shoe lockers. The impact of the tackle from earlier had caused a

number of the locker doors to open, revealing clunky shoes like the kind used for bowling. With her arms out of commission, Yuki stuck one foot into a locker and pulled out the shoes, ill-manneredly slipped them on using only her feet, and stepped into the entryway.

Just then a drop of water fell from her wet hair and vaporized with a zap after landing on a tile. Yuki realized there was an electric current flowing here, hence the need for shoes with high electrical resistance. All five people lying dead on the floor had likely met their doom via electrocution from coming in contact with the tiles.

“I won’t let you get away!” a voice shouted.

Yuki didn’t turn around, but she heard the sound of someone putting on shoes and stepping into the entryway.

*She’s too late*, Yuki thought. Under these circumstances, the girl wouldn’t be able to catch up. By appearances, the girl was far smaller than Yuki, but considering the material composing her limbs, she was likely heavier, too. Thus, Yuki had the advantage in terms of agility. And since any contact with the floor meant electrocution, it would be too dangerous for the girl to attempt the same kind of tackle as she had performed earlier.

Or so Yuki had thought, but...

“Gah...?!”

A force sent Yuki flying diagonally forward, causing her to slam against the wall of the entryway. She had feared the worst, but apparently, no current was flowing there. With no time to feel relieved, Yuki turned around, her body hugging the wall.

The girl had planted her hands on the floor—*while wearing shoes on her hands*. She had on four shoes—two on her hands and two on her feet.

“...Way to go overboard!” Yuki subconsciously shouted.

The girl pounced forward, with a speed unimaginable for someone so small.

Yuki looked down at the floor. *Fortunately*—unbelievably fortunately, considering her current form—as if every ounce of her luck from the past

several months had consolidated together in *that spot*, her *path to victory* lay right at her feet. It was one that would pose danger to Yuki, too, and could very well have been the final trap brought on by the curse of the Wall of Thirty, but she had no other option. Following a brief prayer, Yuki lifted her right foot.

In doing so, she kicked up a *corpse* that had been lying on the floor.

To be more accurate, it was a powerless kick, as she had done no more than raise her foot. The body did not fly toward the girl; all that happened was that the legs of the corpse came slightly off the ground.

However, that was plenty sufficient. The legs of the corpse made contact with the girl's legs. The girl's face turned pale, as if her head had also been replaced with a prosthetic.

It was a not uncommon occurrence—someone attempting to save another person from being electrocuted would touch them directly and get shocked in a chain reaction, contrary to intentions. That phenomenon was especially likely to occur in this game, as players lacked a proper outfit and had plenty of moisture on their skin.

*You really do hear the crackling, huh?* Yuki thought.

The effects were immediate. The girl, whose name was still unknown to Yuki, collapsed face down onto the tile floor, which only further intensified her torture by electrocution. Yuki wasn't sure exactly at what point the girl had succumbed to the current, but she did not once get back onto her feet. The area fell silent, making the battle that had transpired seem no more than a dream. In that moment, the only sensation Yuki felt was the pain in her arms.

"Haah..." Yuki let out an audible breath. It was not a sigh of relief—or even a sigh at all. She had simply exhaled to release the excess air from her lungs.

Yuki made for the exit. There was a risk that water had gotten on her right shoe when she kicked up the body, so she hopped forward on her left leg. Without tripping or erring in any way, Yuki safely passed through the doorway.

Upon exiting the building, she reached a parking lot. Waiting there were black cars, likely in equal number to the number of players—one hundred. Yuki's agent was standing nearby, as if she had been watching the game unfold with

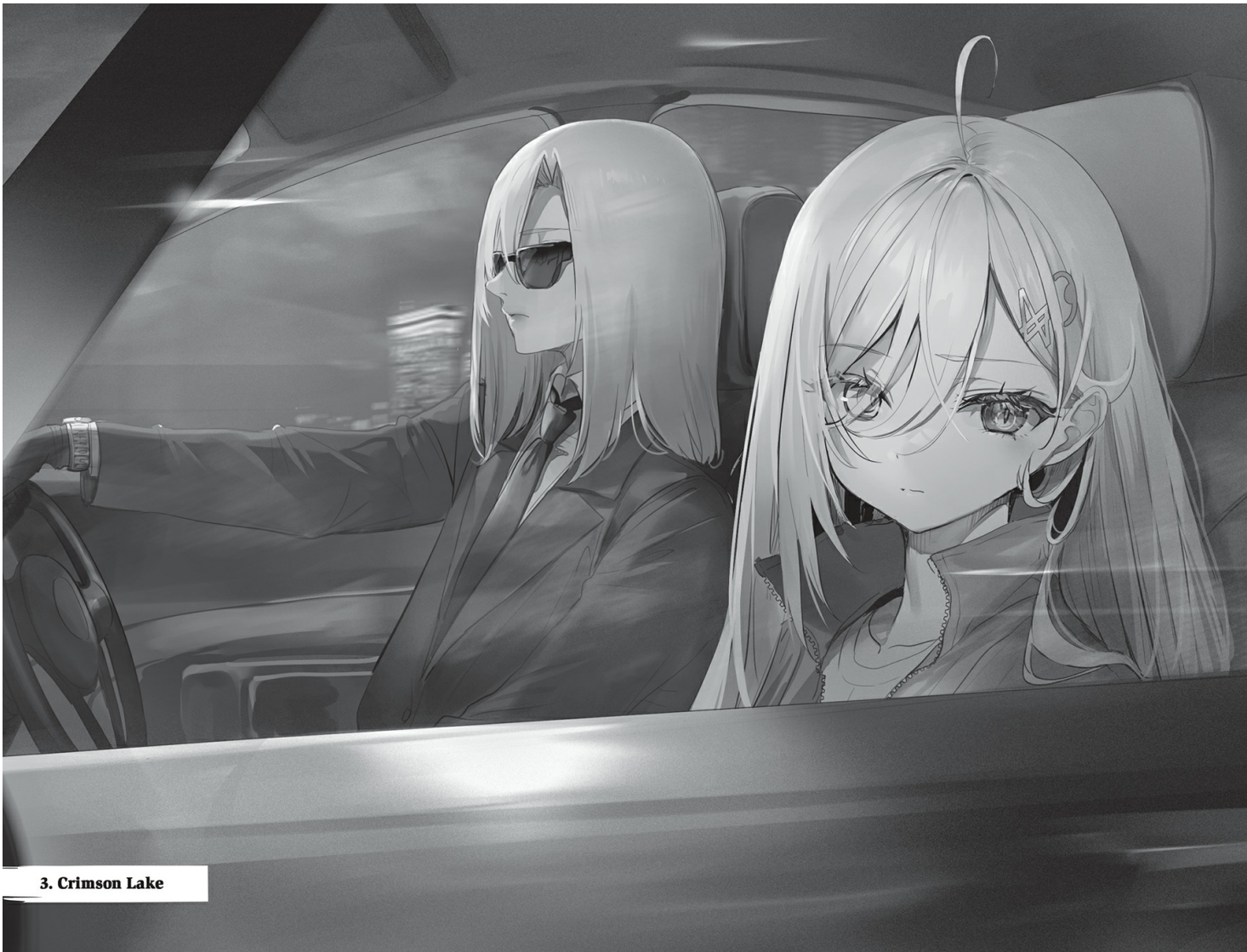
the audience.

“Welcome back,” she said in a nonchalant tone. “While I would like to drive you home... I suppose we should visit the hospital first?”

Yuki looked down at herself. Her body was covered with only a towel, and both of her arms were bent at abnormal angles. She looked like an alien.

Lacking the energy to speak, Yuki dipped her head forward to indicate her assent.

**(41/41)**



**3. Crimson Lake**



**(0/2)**

Player name: Azuma.

She was a truant student who found herself unable to feel comfortable with any group that existed in this world. Instead, she chose to walk the path of a player, an occupation that necessitated only minimal interaction with others. Throughout her entire life, she had fought against the fundamental principle that humans cannot survive alone.

Player name: Karin.

She belonged to a noble family that had fallen from grace. She had been raised like a true princess, but one day, her family suddenly ended up penniless. Lacking a means to thrive in society due to her lavish upbringing, she had no choice but to participate as a player. She never was able to acquire the strength to survive on her own.

Player name: Mizunoto.

She was a fool. Somewhere deep down inside, she believed that she alone was invincible. She had repeatedly played in games while treating the experience like watching an immersive drama. Even when the enemy team held her head underwater, she continued to believe she would be fine, and that fantasy did not waver until the moment she drowned.

Player name: Amon.

She was a player planning to commit suicide. The desire to die was a permanent fixture in her mind and kept her distracted from the game. When the group was discussing the suicide attack, Yuki's voice had scared her, so she raised her hand to volunteer because she did not want to get yelled at. Her mind was in a constant state of panic. Nothing was different for her when she was being drowned.

Player name: Warabi.

She desired stimulation. Although she had gone to school, found a normal job, and got along well with coworkers and bosses, she always felt that something was off. The only time she felt alive was in the games. Once she got a taste, she could no longer return to her insincere self.

Those five players had charged toward the entryway and lost their lives.

Five players who could have survived if Yuki had handled things well.

Additionally, of the five players who remained in the open-air bath, three passed away. One died in the struggle over the two pairs of shoes left behind by the entryway team. Another died after losing her mind scouring a bath for unrecovered keys and hitting her head against the edge. The third realized she had no way of escaping and attempted to prolong her life by subsisting on weeds from the grove around the open-air bath. Although she stuck it out for about a month, she ultimately died of frailty.

Out of one hundred starting players, thirty had died.

Considering the number of available shoes, that was the lowest possible number of deaths—the optimal result of the game. The lack of unnecessary deaths was wholly due to the players' skillful performances. Still, there was no changing the fact that an entire classroom's worth of people had perished.

Even after taking numerous girls, these death games would continue.

There would be no end. Until someone came to break the barrier of ninety-nine.

**(1/2)**

Yuki awoke to being strongly shaken.

She was inside a car—the black car that escorted her to and from games. The scenery outside indicated that she was near her apartment. Yuki finally sensed that the ordeal was all over, that she had overcome the Wall of Thirty.

Sitting in the driver's seat was her agent, who saw through the rearview mirror that Yuki had awakened.

“Good morning,” said her agent. “Congratulations on completing your thirtieth game, Yuki.”

That was all. Although she probably had plenty more things to say, that was all that came from her mouth.

The agents of these games fell into one of two categories: laissez-faire types, who would only do the bare minimum, and parental types, who would go to great lengths to take care of their players. Yuki’s agent was the former variety and would rarely strike up a conversation.

Since Yuki wasn’t much of a conversationalist herself, she usually found that perfectly acceptable, but in this moment, it was not what she wanted. She had to broach the topic herself.

“I have a question,” Yuki asked in a clear voice to ensure she would not go unheard.

“What is it?” her agent responded.

“I was the last to wake in the game.”

“I believe that is normal for you.”

“Except this time, it was important to wake up early. I suspect that players were *intentionally* woken up at different times.”

“Right... Now that you mention it, I suppose that may have been the case.”

“Was me waking up last...a *penalty*?” Yuki asked, touching her stomach.

In all likelihood, the transmitter was no longer inside her. Mr. Tsutomu Kaneko—the father of Kinko, a player in Ghost House—had handed Yuki the device as part of a plot to dismantle the games. It had probably already been removed from her body by the time she woke up inside the shower stall.

Yuki had grown confident in her hunch when she learned from Azuma that she’d woken up last. Of course, this could have been mere coincidence. This was Yuki’s thirtieth game after all, the one that was supposed to be cursed. It wouldn’t be far-fetched if she’d had the misfortune of being assigned the latest wake time out of all one hundred players. However, the alternative made far more sense.

“I leave it to your imagination,” her agent replied. “If there is one thing I can say, *that* was not something we could overlook. It concerns our very existence, you see. Although it is inappropriate for us to interfere in the games, we certainly could not turn a blind eye.”

“That tells me everything...”

“Well, what does it matter? You’re still alive.” Her agent’s gaze flitted to the rearview mirror once again. “Although...it appears you are *not without injury*.”

Yuki looked down at her arms. That girl had pummeled them mercilessly at the very end of the game. As if all of that had been a hallucination, her arms were now unbent, but not all of their constituent parts were intact.

Her left hand was missing three fingers, from her middle finger to her pinkie.

“I hear your fingers fell onto the tiles in the entryway,” her agent continued. “We were unable to reattach them with our technology. My sincerest apologies, Yuki.”

Yuki’s fingers had fallen off without her noticing. She was so desperate to flee from the girl that she had no attention to spare. *It’s finally my time*, she thought. The irreversible damage to her body inspired a special feeling inside her, like that of a middle school student getting her ears pierced for the first time.

Yuki couldn’t join another game in her current state. First, she had to start by restoring what she was missing. She would need to pay a visit to that craftsman, the one who had likely assisted Mishiro in the past.

“My sincerest apologies, Yuki,” her agent repeated. “During this game, you were put through needless stress. Rest assured that nothing like this will ever happen again.”

“...? What’s that supposed to mean?” Yuki found those words curious.

In the exact same tone of voice as before, her agent replied, “*I leave it to your imagination*.”

She continued, “If there is one thing I can say, it is that all of us are rooting for you players from the bottom of our hearts. Your willingness to sacrifice

everything for victory, your lack of fear of death that shines through in your actions—there are many people in the world who desire those traits, myself included. Should anything threaten to stand in your way, we will spare no effort to eliminate all such hindrances.”

Yuki fell silent. Her agent had never spoken for so long before. The possibility she was spouting lies to sidestep Yuki’s question seemed unlikely. Her agent had spoken because these feelings were genuine. Her words reflected the convictions she held deep in her heart.

The car came to a stop in front of Yuki’s run-down apartment. Normally, she would have slept the whole ride home, and so her agent would have carried her into her apartment, but since she had awoken early this time, she had to enter her abode on her own two feet.

“I await our next meeting, Yuki.”

Yuki’s agent handed her something wrapped in plastic. It was the outfit she had worn in the game—a thin towel.

Yuki let out a chuckle. Indeed, being handed a towel as an outfit was odd, but there was more to it than that. It was because the words of her agent, someone who was supposedly rooting for Yuki, sounded far more repulsive than what Mr. Kaneko had said some time ago.

Yuki accepted the towel and gave her response.

“Bring it on.”

**(2/2)**

# Commentary

## [Haruki Kuou](#)

Let me begin by stating that this work is unquestionably divisive.

Presumably, those of you reading these sentences are readers who have picked up Volume 2 after having completed Volume 1—in other words, readers belonging to the camp that *approves* of the nature of *Playing Death Games to Put Food on the Table*. Still, progressing further into the story must have come with even greater surprises.

After all, the characters in this work drop like flies.

Typically, light novels are character-driven stories. A captivating protagonist, one or several heroines, and the many distinctive characters around them feature in various adventures and escapades across multiple volumes. That is undoubtedly one of the joys of the medium.

However, *Playing Death Games* categorically avoids that approach. Aside from Yuki, who is framed as the protagonist of the series, characters simply do not survive. Since the story revolves around games where players teeter on the brink of death, the level of immersion with regard to featured characters is extremely high, but in general, that does not carry into the following game. The structure is one that makes it difficult to find “characters to continuously root for” other than Yuki. However, it also has the effect of making parts of the story feel more realistic, since we readers are forced to acknowledge the characters not as “people who will surely survive,” but rather as “players who could lose their lives at any moment.” Because of that, this series has the power to keep readers turning the pages while on the edge of their seats until the very end.

So in that sense, too, this story is quite straightforward.

When I first learned that a series about death games had won the MF Bunko J Newcomer Excellence Award, I first assumed the story featured some kind of

“twist” on the genre. For example, despite being billed as a death-game series, it would be a story centering on back-and-forths between cute heroines, or a thrilling action story about outwitting the gamemasters behind the scenes—those “detours” from the genre subconsciously came to mind. But *Playing Death Games* is a straightforward death-game story. Furthermore, the series does not include depictions more grotesque than necessary, which means it does not rely on gore as a main selling point—the story simply features games in which players die. Although I do not believe this is a work that will appeal to all readers, everyone should be able to acknowledge that it stays true to its title and theme.

And as a troubling point—or perhaps, a delightful point—even with its subject matter, *Playing Death Games* also has a side that graciously tries to entertain its readers. Regarding this, I will clearly sing its praises. As soon as the story transitions into “daily life” sections, Yuki’s narration becomes more relaxed, with even casual descriptions being presented in a way to elicit giggles from the reader. In contrast, when the focus turns to hard-core game-clearing mode, the story cuts out unnecessary information and sucks the reader in. This is a small detail, but the use of fractions to indicate chapter divisions adds a nice touch. Since the denominator signifies the “end of the game,” readers gain a far more intuitive sense of the story than they would with only numbers or symbols. Those sorts of small considerations can be noticed throughout.

All these efforts have gone into improving the quality of the work, without any underhanded reliance on characters and settings, with the full understanding that the subject matter will not appeal to everyone. That is precisely the reason why this series offers a unique, stimulating experience.

# Commentary

## Ghost Mikawa

“This is strangely off.” That was my honest impression after reading Volume 1 of *Playing Death Games to Put Food on the Table*. Although I have enjoyed death-game stories of all forms, including novels, films, and manga, this work felt strangely different from anything I had ever seen before—the key word being *strangely*. The curiosity of wanting to find out who lives and who dies, unexpected plot developments that hit you like a bolt from the blue, masterfully designed game gimmicks, the ugly—or noble—side of human nature that surfaces in extreme situations... There is no end to the list of engrossing elements found in death-game stories. And like many works belonging to the genre, as a matter of course, this series incorporates those elements as well. So what made it “off” to me? I am embarrassed to admit that, at the time of finishing Volume 1, I was still unsure. I was unable to clearly explain why I felt that way as a reader—all I could say was that each of the engrossing elements seemed slightly out of focus and blurry.

However, after reading Volume 2, I finally ascertained the reason behind that hazy feeling—this series, while covering the unordinary subject matter of death games, also handles familiar topics in everyday life.

Beginning with the protagonist, Yuki, the major characters of this series are not driven to action because of a desire to survive. To be precise, they *want* to survive, but survival is not their ultimate goal; it is no more than a means to an end in order to achieve a different objective. Their objective is not financial gain, either. While there are minor characters who are primarily motivated by money, Yuki, Mishiro, and Hakushi are different. Wanting to set a record for consecutive victories, refusing to play second fiddle to a rival, hoping to be the best—those commonplace emotions are their driving forces. Any human who has ever played a game or sport has likely felt the same at least once in their



life. The same applies to the challenges faced by the characters. They end up in difficult situations out of inattention rather than inevitability; they undermine themselves by becoming preoccupied with superstitions; their pride gets in the way of their decision-making abilities—these characters are cornered by carelessness and inexperience, which we see in ordinary everyday life. If done inelegantly, these kinds of depictions may result in a work that is perceived as lacking depth. However, seeing them in Volume 2 as well suggests they are very much intentional, and in fact, their existence has been clearly indicated from the very beginning through the title of the series.

*Playing Death Games to Put Food on the Table.*

Exactly—the most engrossing element of this work is neither magnificent tricks nor the ugliness of humans in extreme circumstances. Consider a story depicting the day in the life of an office worker who wakes up early in the morning, goes to work, makes it through the day while experiencing discord with colleagues and superiors, and returns home. Except it does not take place in an office or a school or a sports competition—it is set in a death game. A documentary that closely follows characters with the fictional occupation of death-game player, and above all, the protagonist, Yuki—that is the true identity of *Playing Death Games to Put Food on the Table*.

The accounts of this girl in a fictional profession will likely change in accordance with stages of her life. I eagerly await the next volume to see how she evolves.

## Afterword

Hello, this is Yushi Ukai. Like in the previous volume, I will humbly take charge of this section.

Thank you very much for reaching the end of this volume.

How was Volume 2 of *Playing Death Games to Put Food on the Table*? After Candle Woods, the phantom girl Yuki has found her footing. This volume followed her in taking on the biggest hurdle that separates ace players from second-rate players, a milestone achievement, the curse plaguing the death-game industry—the Wall of Thirty.

After thinking about when death-game players would show their true mettle, I decided to go with a dramatic come-from-behind story. Nowadays, keeping ugly emotions bottled up inside seems to be a recommended practice, but there are perhaps a not insignificant number of cases where those emotions can also save oneself. Players obsessing over trivial matters and butting heads is, as expressed by Ghost Mikawa, an ordinary occurrence in an extraordinary setting and, as expressed by Haruki Kuou, a true representation of characters who play death games to put food on the table.

To speak of a personal matter, this is the first thing I have ever written in high expectation of compensation. As a result, there are things I have gained (e.g., pressure) as well as things that have been dispelled to a degree (e.g., psychological complexes). And I can see the reality of that is influencing my writing. Right now, I am thinking that I must manage this new mindset as soon as possible.

I would like to express my warmest gratitude to my editor, O, for working with my hostile story and to Nekometaru for drawing the far too many characters I create. I would also like to offer my deepest appreciation to Ghost

Mikawa and Haruki Kuou for their commentaries. Now that there is pressure weighing on me, I will lean into that force and deeply bow to everyone.

And with that... May we meet again.

“...We  
meet  
again.”

“It’s painfully obvious what we need to consider—why did she die?”

From wandering an amusement park  
in a uniform to roaming a beach in  
a swimsuit, we play death games  
to put food on the table.

“Do you see  
any land on  
the horizon?”

“Another three players who’ve  
crossed the thirty-game mark.”

“Not directly. But I’ve heard  
the rumors. From your *mentor*,  
that is.”

“Do we have to sleep  
in our swimsuits?”

“...Good game.”

“I’d rather die  
than fall into  
your hands!”

I, Yuki, overcame the Wall of Thirty.  
After restoring my lost fingers, I made  
a full recovery. I also reached my next  
milestone by clearing my fortieth game.  
It seemed like it was all smooth sailing  
from there. However, that was when  
dark clouds appeared on the horizon.

“Whoever gets targeted, no hard feelings! Sounds good!”

“It’s my style to *skirt* the rules  
rather than follow them.”

Cloudy Beach—my forty-fourth game,  
one that featured veteran players with  
more than thirty games under their belt.  
What I saw there was a corpse cut into  
many pieces, which brought to mind  
that sickening psychopath. We players  
roamed around an isolated island in  
the middle of the ocean, in search of  
the killer. And as if making a mockery  
of us, the bodies kept piling up. Then  
I encountered the successor of that  
*woman* from Candle Woods.

“There are still only two victims.  
Another player must die before  
the game can end.”

PLAYING DEATH GAMES TO PUT FOOD ON THE TABLE

Volume 3 coming soon from 

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