D GENESIS

WRITTEN BY
KONO Tsuranori
ILLUSTRATED BY
ttl

Three Years after the Dungeons Appeared



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D-Genesis: Volume 4 [Complete]

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D GENESIS

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04

Prologue

December 28, 2018 (Friday)

Minato City, Daiba

"I'd like to begin by thanking you for your time."

In a small meeting room within the Central Television building, a well-groomed man with slightly boyish features smiled as if trying to hide his exhaustion, and bowed.

"I've already heard the gist from Takanawa," said producer Makoto Ishizuka. "You want to run some kind of dungeon-spelunking program, is that right?"

Even given that this was his last open time slot before the end of the year, Ishizuka hadn't expected the man to schedule a pitch with him so quickly after receiving an introduction from Takanawa at NHK. Doing so indicated either one of two things—admirable ingenuity, or a rush.

Haruki Yoshida. *Originally a TV personality, was it?* While turning over the man's bona fides in his head, Ishizuka listened to his pitch.

Certainly, Yoshida had a point: From skill orb auctions to the release of sensational footage to the unveiling of the ridiculously named Heaven's Leaks, sufficient groundwork had been laid for dungeons to attract mass attention once again. Plus, since dungeon coverage had been treated as a half worn out fad by most networks, the media had been slow to pick up on the trend, outside of a handful of cursory news reports.

But what drew people in was the unknown.

The reason dungeon coverage had been treated as a worn out fad in the first place was that studios had exhausted all the information they could safely gather with which to pique public interest. Dungeon coverage had lost its luster, so to speak. However, if some miraculous new phenomenon were to occur—something which could rekindle the feeling of a fantasy movie or anime having

come to life in the real world—that would be another matter.

Of course such a program would carry the risk of death. But if it succeeded in the ratings, that would be a risk worth bearing. Should push come to shove, Ishizuka could always have this man take the fall.

Everyone in this industry was taking advantage of other people's risks to one extent or another. Anyone who considered themselves above doing so simply wasn't cut out for the job. Even if a bit of recklessness resulted in some new government regulation, the early bird would still have gotten the ratings worm.

"So, what do you think?" the man concluded his spiel.

"I see..."

In April, Central Television would be undergoing a major programming restructure in order to unify several shows under its *Live News* banner. As a result, its late-night lineup would also be in for a shake-up. If they could get in with a special at the start of the April season, they might be able to capture as much as three percent of the late-night audience. With the number of companies releasing products made from dungeon-based resources recently, provided the special had a certain seriousness in tone, it might even have some baked-in sponsors. Of course, that all depended on the content.

"Okay. Let's say I gave you the tentative green light. Timing-wise, we'd probably be looking to kick things off with a special at the top of the spring season. But considering this would be uncharted territory for us, it's a little hard for me to promise a time slot based on nothing but a pitch."

"You're telling me to turn in a pilot?"

"Considering the time frame, I'm not telling you to work miracles, but..."

"I can have one by early next month."

"Really? Well then, I can't wait for you to surprise me."

With that, Ishizuka extended his hand.

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His meeting with Haruki Yoshida finished, Ishizuka descended the steps in front of Central Television's main entrance. Rays of sunlight poked in between

buildings, streaking across the ground. Ishizuka was considering the size of his network's meager late-night variety block, as well as which shows seemed likely to be cut.

"Hnh?"

His thought process was interrupted by the vibration of his phone. Seeing the name on the caller ID, he furrowed his brow, then answered while leaning against the stairway handrail.

"This is Ishizuka spea—"

"I quit!"

The comment from the other side of the line was so sudden that for a moment, Ishizuka hardly knew how to respond.

"Himuro?" he finally got out. "What's going on? I don't hear from you for a few days and this is the greeting I get?"

"You didn't tell me—you didn't tell me we were dealing with *monsters* here!"

Taken aback by Himuro's outburst, Ishizuka almost couldn't comprehend what his old friend was saying. Was this about the request he'd gotten from the head of production the other day to look into Ryoko Saito? That seemed likely. Did that mean her production team had sued?

"Get a grip."

"I *have* a grip! You don't have any idea what I—"

Himuro's voice was so loud that Ishizuka reflexively withdrew the phone from his ear, clicking his tongue and scrunching his face into a grimace.

"Himuro, you're at eleven. I need you down here with me at four."

Once it sounded as though the voice on the other end of the line had relaxed, Ishizuka brought the phone back to his ear, but now Himuro was prattling on about potted durantas, note cards, and this or that other incomprehensible thing. Even the ordinarily cool Ishizuka could no longer conceal his frustration.

"I'm telling you to get your shit together!"

Noticing a group of passersby staring at him, Ishizuka shot back a belabored

smile as if to say “No problems here!” then headed down the steps at a fast clip. Phone still pressed tightly to his ear, he moved towards the comparatively deserted West Promenade.

“Okay, Ryuji. Mind telling me what the hell’s going on?”

He tried calling Himuro by his nickname from their college days. Himuro’s first name was Takatsugu, but because the characters could be read as “Ryuji,” recalling the Japanese word for “dragon”—“ryu”—that was what he was known as among friends.

After a brief silence, Himuro stammered, “I-I threw it away. I know I did.”

“Threw what away?”

“But then it was back in my room... It even had a note card attached!”

“What note card? What did?”

“The pot! The duranta!”

“Excuse me... Duranta?”

From Himuro’s words, Ishizuka understood it must be some kind of plant, but Ishizuka didn’t know a duranta from a daisy, much less what significance it might have. His confusion was only growing.

“That’s it for me,” Himuro declared. “I’m out.”

“Ryuji, what are you talking about?”

“Mako, I’m saying this as your friend. Stay away.”

“Stay away from what?”

“From the people you told me to investigate!”

“Ryoko Saito? Did her people threaten you with something?”

“No!”

Listening to Himuro’s manic assertions that the situation defied common logic, Ishizuka could only think back on coverage he’d once done on obsessive-compulsive disorder.

“Hey, Ryuji,” Ishizuka tried again. “You all right? You sure you don’t need a

doc—”

“No, damn it, why don’t you get it?!”

“Get *what*?”

“Whatever’s *lurking* in that office, it’s not human!”

Ishizuka floundered for a response. He could only imagine that Himuro was indeed suffering from some kind of psychiatric disorder. What had happened to reduce the once great Ryuji the Fireball to this?

“Listen,” Ishizuka said at length, “I got it. I’ll let you off the job.”

“It’s too late for me.”

“Too late?”

“But you can at least save yourself. I’m warning you, get out while you still can.”

With those words hanging in the air like a dire proclamation from beyond the grave, Himuro fell silent.

After a moment, Ishizuka spoke up. “Ryuji?”

No sooner had Ishizuka said his friend’s name than the phone gave off a soft electronic click, signaling the end of the call.

“‘You can still save yourself’...?” Ishizuka repeated.

The sunlight which had been so strong up until then had disappeared behind the clouds, and a cold wind pricked Ishizuka’s skin, causing him to shiver.

“What the hell was that about?”

Despite Himuro’s warning, Ishizuki had already had a connection in the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications start pulling strings. There was no backing out now.

Come to think of it, though, I have *felt like I’ve been being watched recently...*

Ishizuka raised his head, surveying his surroundings.

The West Promenade was empty, and for a moment he was overcome by the strange sensation that he was the only person left on Earth. Yet still he could

feel a pair of eyes boring into him from somewhere, as if from some window up above.

He traced the facade of the Central Television building with his vision, landing on the window where the head of production's office should be. He wondered if he weren't the one whose risks were being taken advantage of now. He was beginning to regret having ever taken on this request.

JDA Headquarters, Ichigaya

Just before noon, Miharu Naruse paid a visit to the public relations division of the Dungeon Management Section.

"Oh, Miharu? If you're looking for Section Chief Saiga, he's not here," her female coworker said, looking up from her desk.

"Really?"

"He's been running all over since this morning. It's been wall-to-wall appointments." She leaned in, whispering to Miharu. "Can you believe it? The infamous MIA Saiga. As in, 'Meetings? I abstain.'"

Saiga's renowned disdain for meetings wasn't due to a lack of cooperative spirit. No one with that attitude could survive in a leadership role. It was simply that he abhorred meetings which he felt were a waste of his time.

"'MIA Saiga'!" Miharu laughed. "That's too much!"

However, she had a sneaking suspicion as to what was keeping her boss occupied.

***

"So they want to rent the large conference room?" Saiga had asked her yesterday.

"That's right," Miharu had answered.

The official entrance to the Yoyogi Dungeon perimeter sat some distance away from the entrance to the dungeon proper. Within those grounds, the JDA had constructed a building equipped with locker rooms, showers, and other

amenities including public rental spaces.

The large conference room was one such public space—a generously sized room situated on the building's first floor.

"Can't they just submit an application?"

"It's more that they'd like to...occupy it."

Saiga repeated the word slowly, as if trying to verify what he'd heard. "'Occupy'?"

The JDA offered longer rental options, but those were at most meant to span the duration of a short conference or event. The facilities were never intended for long-term private use. The possibility had never even been discussed.

"They want to start some kind of training program for dungeon explorers. Apparently they'd like to use the conference room as home base."

"A training program? You mean like the kind coaches sometimes run?"

Athletic coaches the world over, attributing tales of improvements in athletic ability to something in the dungeons as an environment, had set up training camps in relatively safe areas within them. Such activities had been compared to high-altitude training in mountains—although no one had ever verified any concrete results.

"I don't have many details, but according to them, they have a method of rapidly increasing explorers' abilities. Miyoshi called it 'boot camp.'"

"'Boot camp'?"

The term "boot camp" originally referred exclusively to American military training camps, but in time had come to refer to all military-styled drill programs. In Japan, it probably owed its spread to a high-intensity workout routine known as *Billy's Boot Camp*.

"So a way to show beginners the ropes?" Saiga asked.

"From the way they described it, it was actually going to be reserved for intermediate explorers and above."

"Let me get this straight. They claim to not only have a way to rapidly increase

explorers' abilities, but one that only works for already-veteran divers?"

It was common knowledge that serious explorers could slowly improve their abilities over long periods of dungeon-diving and monster-hunting. Periodic health exams and fitness reports had been testament to that much. The efficacy of athletic training camps may have been in question, but there was no doubt proper exploring did the body good. However, was there really a way to replicate similar results in a condensed span of time?

"I don't know," Miharu shrugged. "But Miyoshi seemed confident."

Saiga slumped back in his chair. Folding his arms, he furrowed his brow in concentration.

This was D-Powers, after all. If they claimed to have a way of doing something, it was safer to assume that they really did.

It wasn't a bad proposition—the JDA might be able to glean useful information as well. However, there was still the matter of their occupying a public-use space.

"Sir, there is, er, one more thing," Miharu added after a pause.

"What is it?"

"Miyoshi asked me to deliver a message."

"A message?"

Sensing Miharu's hesitation, Saiga felt a wave of trepidation wash over him.

"'If we get the room, we may be able to have a *certain device* ready in time for testing season.'"

"A 'certain device'? You don't mean—"

"It's probably the D-Card verifier."

"Ah, there it is!" Saiga groaned.

He'd known he was putting them through the wringer by pressuring them to make the device. Now D-Powers had come to collect. He sighed, then picked up his desk phone receiver.

"Hello. Ah, this is Saiga. Sorry to bother you, but I'm going to need a report on

all conference rooms' operational statuses as well as a rundown of next year's bookings."

Miharu felt a pang of guilt watching her boss make the call. She was already aware of all of next year's bookings. The small and midsize rooms were frequently reserved, but the large one was hardly touched outside of annual events. She'd been the one to suggest it to Miyoshi herself, when asked.

"Okay. We're going to need a hold on it—no more bookings. Yes, through next year. Yes, that's right. Got it. Thank you."

Saiga put down the receiver.

"We can offer the room at a bargain. In exchange, I'm going to need you to have them to finish that verifier—even if you have to hold their feet to the fire."

"I'll pass that along. Incidentally, they're planning on meeting with a manufacturer tomorrow—seems like the idea is to iron out production count and delivery details."

"They're planning to work over New Year's?"

"Possibly."

"Why do I have a feeling this isn't going to come cheap?" Saiga gave a defeated chuckle.

He couldn't imagine anything good coming out of running up a debt with D-Powers, but it was the only option they had left.

"Should I tell them we'll offer the room as part of our payment plan?"

"You do that," Saiga said.

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What was keeping Saiga busy today was undoubtedly approval for the conference room, along with the matter of the D-Card verifiers.

"So what are you up to, Miharu?" her coworker asked.

"Oh, nothing. Just thought I'd update the site a little before checking in with the chief."

"You mean the Information Bureau homepage? This wouldn't be about

Mining, would it?”

Miharu gave a slight nod.

“So it’s already been verified?” her coworker marveled. “But remind me, did we send out an investigation team?”

“Something like that.”

“‘Something like that’? Really, between you and the chief, the Dungeon Management Section’s keeping more secrets than a war room! Speaking of, you said you were going to check in with him, so I *suppose* you have an idea what all these meetings are about.”

“Come on! I’m just a full-time handler. I don’t know what all the bigwigs get up to.”

“Hmm... Suspicious!”

“Nothing suspicious at aaaall!” Miharu trilled.

With a wave and a smile, she turned and walked into the hall, leaving her coworker to shout after her, “Communication is the bedrock of any working relationship, you know!”

The D-Card verifiers were an issue of utmost urgency, but tomorrow the JDA would be shutting down for the New Year’s holidays. If they didn’t do everything they could to push the issue through in the next few hours, they wouldn’t get another chance until at least the fourth—and if they were unlucky, the seventh. If they had to wait until then to start preparations, having the verifiers ready in time for the National Center exams would become a distant dream.

Miyoshi said they were going to discuss production numbers this morning...

When Miharu had stopped by the D-Powers offices that morning, Asha had still been asleep, while the two members of the party were getting ready to head out.

They were bantering back and forth, asking how the other’s stomach was holding up and whether they felt recharged for tomorrow.

“I *was* hoping to loaf around all day,” Miyoshi said, “but thanks to a certain

JDA, here I am, nose to the grindstone at the crack of dawn."

Miyoshi played it off as a joke, but Miharu could sense the genuine frustration in her words. The verifier request had only come up the night before yesterday. The JDA was lucky D-Powers had been willing to respond at all.

Asha's bodyguards scurried around the premises, engaged in some sort of urgent business. Miharu asked about what they were up to, but all Miyoshi would say, with a grin, was that they'd "have their hands full" tomorrow. Come to think of it, Miyoshi and Kei had been discussing some kind of outing, but what could have all these black suits in such a tizzy? Was being a bodyguard simply always that stressful?

"Ah, Sakurai!" Miharu called out, spotting the JDA internet communications manager in the hall.

Miharu passed Sakurai the memory card containing all the data she'd compiled on Mining, insisting that it be published today.

Chapter 5

D-Powers, LLC

December 29, 2018 (Saturday)

Yoyogi-Hachiman, Office

“I’m so sorry!”

After we got back from Comiket, we found Naruse waiting for us outside the entryway to our office. What’s more, she suddenly started apologizing!

“Hold on!” Miyoshi interrupted. “Thank you for the, er, thought, but we don’t even know what this is about.”

“Oh, right! You see...” Naruse launched into her explanation of the problem that had arisen last night.

Apparently, our woes started with a media interview request.

“At first, it was just a request to talk to the explorer whose commercial license was tied to the skill orb auctions.”

The Dungeon Management Section had responded with a simple, “Unable to accommodate your request,” but that hadn’t stopped more inquiries from pouring in without end.

“But then several days ago, the requests stopped altogether.”

Their communications manager, relieved, assumed the media had finally gotten the message, but it was late last night, just before leaving, that they learned the world wasn’t so kind.

“Usually, the requests would come to the Dungeon Management Section’s public relations division,” Naruse explained. “But this time, it came straight from the MIC through one of the directors at the JDA.”

The MIC—or the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications—was the

agency overseeing broadcasts and communications in Japan. Someone in the media having connections there they could leverage with the JDA wasn't unlikely, but what really shocked us was that not only had the JDA agreed to set up a press conference with D-Powers, but spread word as if it already had!

"You signed us up for..."

"...a press conference?!"

Dumbfounded, Miyoshi and I spoke almost in unison, then turned to look at one another.

"Miyoshi, what the heck did you do to that Himuro guy?"

"What? Come on, that's got nothing to do with this! He was after *Saito*, remember?"

"I dunno," I mused. "He did have your ID number and our address in his notebook."

"Aaaargh," Miyoshi groaned.

What had probably happened was that Saito had been used as the lure, while the one they were really fishing for was her "coach." Still, where the heck had Himuro gotten Miyoshi's commercial license ID and our address from?

"Naruse," I said after a pause. "What's up with JDA security?"

Taking the opportunity, I decided to bring up our previous apprehensions about the leak of information on the D-Card verifiers and Miyoshi's commercial license.

Seeming concerned, Naruse promised to look into it.

"By the way," I continued, "this 'director'..."

"That would be Executive Director Mizuho," Naruse answered sheepishly.

Ah, that old codger! Still, I couldn't deny that the ability to compel others to comply with whatever completely absurd request popped into his head and have them brush it off as just "Mizuho being Mizuho" was a formidable power.

"Before he came to the JDA, was Mizuho with the MIC?" I asked.

"Apparently he worked for the Ministry of Posts and Telecommunications

before it was dissolved into the MIC and the Postal Services Agency. It's possible he still has connections there."

"That explains it. He must have wanted to look big for one of his old cronies."

"It certainly seems believable."

To Mizuho, the request to get in touch with D-Powers might as well have been word from God. Thus, in the midst of his discussion with his MIC connection, the press conference had transformed from a mere suggestion into a reality.

Still, he couldn't just arbitrarily set the date and time. If it wasn't a day we could make, Mizuho would be forced to eat crow.

"So you're here to confirm a date?"

"That's right," Naruse said. "I'm so sorry."

"I dunno. Seems like a pain. Maybe we just ignore it."

We could always let Mizuho fall on his face.

"I'm not sure I'd recommend that," Naruse responded. "Executive Director Mizuho has been known to hold grudges."

"Ah, he does seem like the type," Miyoshi commented.

Come on, Miyoshi! What's up with the peanut-gallery act? You've got skin in the game too!

"Kei, think. What's the media after? A juicy scoop like the figures behind the orb auctions, right?"

"Yeah. That does seem like their most probable target."

Recently, dungeons didn't exactly feel like front-page news. Even with Evans Dungeon's recent capture, news outlets had hardly touched on familiar topics like the strategies used on its monsters or new inventions derived from its drops.

At the heart of this phenomenon was likely the fact that dungeon footage was often gruesome, if you could get your hands on it at all. It was hard to sell a story without visuals—a picture was worth a thousand words.

The JDA being bombarded with requests for the footage of the Wandering Manor that Naruse had uploaded the other day was proof of how desperate networks were for something they could air.

But if a picture were worth a thousand words, the kind of words that could almost close that gap would be ones indicating cold, hard cash—like the eye-popping prices attached to skill orb auctions.

“Plus there’s Heaven’s Leaks,” I noted.

“What? That’s not on us! We just offer a proxy domain service.”

“The request came through the MIC. They manage electronic communications across the country. You don’t think they could tie the site to us if they wanted?”

“This is an invasion of privacy!” Miyoshi protested.

“Relax. I just said, ‘if they wanted.’ But even then, the most they could get would be the server and domain holder info. They wouldn’t be able to prove who was actually doing the translations. I’m sure we could weasel our way out of that.”

“You sure? You’re not exactly Mr. Silver-Tongued.”

“Ha ha, well, I am the honest type! Better to leave the sneaky stuff up to you!”

“What’s that supposed to mean? You’re saying that like I’m some kind of villain!”

“Ah, hey, come on! It’s just that you’re so good at—”

“So good at *what*?”

Seeing Miyoshi’s bloodthirsty grin, I decided to throw in the towel and shifted my gaze away.

After she was done showing me who was boss, Miyoshi turned to Naruse.

“Naruse, the press conference request was just for ‘D-Powers,’ right?”

“That’s right,” Naruse answered. “Why?”

A mischievous smile spread across Miyoshi’s face.

“Heh heh heh. Kei, why don’t we give them what they want? We’ll have them dancing in the palm of our hand.”

You really do *sound like a villain!*

“What do you mean by that?”

“Duh! Could we have asked for a better PR opportunity?”

“PR?”

“They asked for ‘D-Powers.’ They didn’t say whether that was the *party* or the *company*.”

I was beginning to get it. We’d turn the situation around, and make all the journalists who had gathered for the scoop on D-Powers’ orb auctions play the main role in our new company’s advertising campaign. The D-Powers who had collected and run the sales for the orbs was D-Powers, the party. They would be a legally distinct entity from D-Powers, LLC, the dungeon-services comp— “Wait a minute. You mean you used that stupid name for our company application too?”

“You’ve got a lot to learn about business, Kei. It’s all about consistency.”

“Well, thanks to you, we’re *consistently* stuck with these dumb names.”

Despite having fun with Miyoshi’s wording, I could see the benefits of recognizability, so maybe my own ideas didn’t *consist* of anything better.

“But even if the media cover the conference, they don’t actually have to run the story. You sure this is a good idea?”

“Oh, we’ll give them something to run,” Miyoshi declared with an air of self-satisfaction. “We *can* be pretty outrageous, after all!”

At that last comment, Naruse nodded a bit *too* vigorously.

Before I knew it, we were going through with the press conference under the name of our mid-registration limited liability company, working out presentation details and a date.

“Can we bring up the verifier?” I asked.

“Of course. That’s a company product. Same with the status-measuring

device. I don’t want to leave any wiggle room for them to try to claim dungeon taxes on it.”

“By the way, Naruse, what happened with all of that?”

“Ah, I almost forgot!” Naruse clapped her hands together. “I ran your request by Saiga yesterday.”

Yesterday we’d done our own legwork too. We’d left Asha to recover from her curry pilgrimage, postponing sightseeing until the afternoon, and gone to visit Midori at Tokiwa Lab.

Tokiwa Lab

Edogawa City

“Is this some kind of joke?”

Midori hadn’t held back when we showed up at Tokiwa Lab to discuss the email we’d sent the previous day—our request to create the D-Card verifier, complete with Miyoshi’s schematics.

We’d finally gotten to the point of an RC stat-measuring device and were ready to move into talks for production, and now we’d thrown a wrench in the works, asking for a new device entirely. It was only natural to wonder if we were out of our minds.

“It’s more like...” I paused. “A social obligation.”

“Social obligation?” Midori chuckled. “I didn’t know that expression was in your dictionaries.”

“Well, yeah, we’re quick learners.”

“But hey, based on the schematic, construction shouldn’t be too difficult. Plus, unlike the stat-measuring device, this one should actually do numbers, right, Boss?” You could almost see the yen signs in Nakajima’s eyes as he pored over the schematic.

Fair enough; our potential client base *would* be nothing less than every testing center in the world. Demand didn’t get much bigger than that.

“All very well and good,” Midori conceded. “But aren’t you forgetting the casing? A metal casing order will put us at least a month out. The National Center exam is in just over two weeks.”

“We could try 3D printing the cases, but even then... There’s fused deposition modeling—but that comes at the cost of stability...” Nakajima folded his arms and tilted his head, looking puzzled.

After a moment, I tossed out the idea I’d been considering since last night: “What about polypropylene boxes? Like the kind from one hundred-yen

shops?”

I was talking about the translucent, white-lidded, soft plastic boxes carried in almost every store. In other words, plastic food containers.

“Polypropylene boxes? You mean like the kind used to store leftovers?” Midori asked.

“Uh, yeah.”

“Oh man, that really takes me back,” Nakajima said dreamily. “I used to use plastic food containers or cardboard boxes as casing for small electronics projects back in middle school.”

In that moment, I felt closer to Nakajima than ever before. The shameful truth was, I’d done stuff like that too. Housing a first circuit board in an empty cookie box was something of a formative experience for us techies. “I bet you tried making a crystal radio when you got your first soldering iron too!”

“You bet! Can’t get many crystal earpieces these days,” he lamented, referring to the antiquated earphones that had once been paired with the small DIY radios.

Right, right! Plus, afterwards, the ground wires would come undone and you couldn’t get sound anymore. Man, those were the days.

“Okay, grandpas! That’s enough shop-class talk,” Miyoshi interjected.

“What? You mean a dyed-in-the-wool nerd like you never messed around with a homemade circuit board?”

“Please. Some of us were into *girly* things.”

“‘Girly things’...?”

I couldn’t picture Miyoshi having ever been into “girly things,” but there are some things the universe dictates just shouldn’t be said.

“Okay, let’s say we use food containers,” Midori spoke up again, her expression deadly serious. “What price are you planning to sell these at?”

“Well, what are our base costs?” Miyoshi enquired.

“Let’s see. It doesn’t need any transmission components, and we can use

simple red and green LEDs for the verification results. After that there's the power button and its corresponding LED, and then the buttons for operation. For the main sensor there's the D132, and...wait, D132?!" Nakajima furrowed his brow. "Miyoshi, why is the sensor a D132? Wouldn't SCD28 be better?"

"Very good, Nakajima!" answered Miyoshi. "That's exactly right."

"Then...I'll get started on the corrections."

"That won't be necessary. Please go with the D132."

Judging from Miyoshi's smile, there was some kind of method to her madness.

"But in terms of both cost *and* functionality, the SCD28 would be better suited. Also, what's up with this filter? It doesn't seem to have any purpose at all!"

"Very astute. That's exactly what anyone would think, *provided they knew how the software worked*."

"*Huh?!*"

"Nakajima, this here is pre-release hardware. With the time crunch, we haven't even had a chance to apply for a patent."

"Sure, but..." Nakajima began, as if intending to say that if the patent were an issue, that would be a simple matter of filing the proper paperwork.

"Kei." Miyoshi turned to me. "Hasn't something seemed fishy to you about all this from the start?"

"You mean the 'insider-trading' thing we talked about the other day?"

"'Insider trading'?" Nakajima scrunched his brow in confusion and looked to Miyoshi and Midori. "He did say 'insider trading,' right?"

"Think about it," Miyoshi continued. "If test providers truly thought there was no way to verify whether or not someone had a D-Card, there'd be no reason to bother us. That's a simple, 'Sorry, no can do.'"

"That's true."

No matter how urgent the circumstances, sometimes you'd have no choice

but to give up and explore alternative solutions. There'd be no reason for the test providers to be hung up on the idea of D-Card verification enough to keep bothering us—at least not ordinarily.

To begin with, the consequences for the test providers themselves were minimal. Students who cheated on the test with telepathy would come out ahead, but the losers would be the other test takers that year, rather than the academic institutions themselves.

"There's no major loss for them even if we don't have the devices done on time, so why the rush?" Miyoshi asked.

"They still have to try everything they can before giving up, even if it's just for appearances," I answered, only half-believing my own words.

"'Try everything they *can*.' But in this case, they're hung up on one possibility they *can't*. Even if we could build the device—and from their perspective, there's no guarantee of that—the odds of us having it done by the start of testing are basically zilch. In other words, all those emails were sent in the name of something they should have known was doomed from the start."

"Well, when you put it that way, it does seem pretty suspect."

"And yet we got hounded by them. Absolutely flooded with emails from testing locations across Japan. Doesn't that strike you as strange? Almost like someone was exerting outside pressure?" Miyoshi folded her arms, placing her right hand over her left elbow, sticking out her right pointer finger dramatically. "Almost as if having the devices rushed out before patent was the goal?"

Only a select few in the JDA knew about our plans for the stat-measuring devices, and only Miyoshi and Nakajima knew the technical details themselves. Even Midori and I only understood the gist. Considering that we hadn't even applied for a patent yet, no one could have secured the device's details through leaks in the patent process either.

"You think someone is trying to wrestle in on our technology?" I said.

"I think someone's trying to put us in the ring."

Adopting her best Sherlock Holmes aura, Miyoshi looked back and forth between Nakajima and me. "It's *elementary*. We have to assume any

information pertaining to the devices from this point forward will be leaked."

Part of me wanted to believe Miyoshi was overthinking, but maybe that was heedless optimism. I couldn't deny that the timeline seemed strange. Saiga had asked Naruse if we might be able to construct D-Card detection devices, and the very next morning, a mountain of emails had wound up in Miyoshi's inbox.

If information on our party were being leaked from somewhere, details on the stat-measuring and D-card verifier devices would be no exception.

"So," Miyoshi continued, "for the sensor, we'll be going with the D132. I thought we'd go with something a little more expensive, more ill-suited for its task, and with intellectual property rights held up for as *looong* as possible by a single older company that's fallen slightly behind the pack. The filter is to obscure how the software works, so the more the merrier on that front."

Also, Miyoshi explained, the sensor had to be something we'd ruled out for use in the stat-measuring device.

"I see." Nakajima broke into a grin. "A truly cunning ruse. I tip my hat to you."

"Midori, is it really okay to leave everything up to those two?" I asked, gesturing to Miyoshi and Nakajima.

"If you want to get in their way, be my guest. I'll hire you as a manager if you come back alive."

Watching the two of them cackling over their schemes like two evil geniuses in their secret underground lair, I decided it was better to remain where I was. "No way." I shook my head. "It'd be like jumping into a pool of piranhas."

"Now you get it."

I didn't like the thought of being made to dance in the palm of someone's hand, but watching Nakajima and Miyoshi, for a moment I almost felt bad for whoever was on the other side.

"So, let's say we go with the food containers," Nakajima said. "Our manufacturing costs would come to about four or five thousand yen per unit, give or take. Then there's just labor and assembly."

"That sets our price at about...one hundred thousand yen apiece," Miyoshi

announced matter-of-factly.

Midori and I bolted up.

“One hundred thousand yen?! Are you kidding me?! Our cost-percentage is going to be 0.5 percent! Miyoshi, they’ll come after us with pitchforks and torches!”

“You’ve got to be joking!” Midori blurted out. “You’re talking about something that’s mostly three light diodes and two switches slapped together inside a box for leftovers! Where do you get one hundred thousand yen?”

“Remember the case where that 1.4 million-yen CD player was found to be using the same motherboard as a 20,000-yen counterpart? I think that’s enough evidence to say that components aren’t what make the price,” Miyoshi protested.

I wanted to argue that that was just in regards to the digital processing component and not the other parts of the equipment, but she was right in her basic point.

“We can justify the bulk of the price as going into the rush. Plus, Midori might not get much work out of Nakajima for a few weeks.”

“Huh? Am I going somewhere?” Nakajima asked.

“How does the sound of back margins grab you? Say to the tune of twenty thousand yen per unit?”

“It sounds like you say ‘Jump’ and I say ‘How high?’!”

“You two...” Midori kneaded her brow.

Still, seeing the offer hadn’t been vetoed, Nakajima unfurled the relevant order forms on the table and began running through them with Miyoshi.

“There’s nothing too obscure in the components, so it shouldn’t be hard to procure the necessary parts. How many were you planning on for the first batch?”

“I guess as many as we can make.”

“With a small lot, I could contract the circuit construction with a third-party

manufacturer.”

“Better not,” Miyoshi said. “That’s going to be a huge red flag.”

It would be like putting up a neon sign on the devices that said “Come steal me.” If whoever was behind this whole thing were at all the suspicious type, they’d balk at the obvious trap.

“Then we’ll make them ourselves. Circuit breadboards would save us work on soldering, but we’d have to worry about parts being knocked loose. Though once we get into our rhythm, soldering might be faster too. If I do the main circuit boards, we could have—let’s see—maybe ten done per hour?”

“That fast?!”

“That’s assuming I have an assistant to line up the parts. I’d want someone for final assembly and testing too. If we hit the zone, we could pump out two million—or, okay, maybe not, but at least one hundred per day!”

“Nakajima, those back margins are, of course, going to the company,” Midori stated with a coy smile.

“I, er... Of course, Boss.”

“But I suppose you *can* consider some of them earmarked for a bonus.” She sighed.

“Oooh, someone’s a softie!” Miyoshi cooed, earning her a knock from Midori.

“By the way, Miyoshi,” Midori continued. “I’ll remind you this is still Tokiwa Lab. Back margins or not, there are still our contracting fees.”

“Ah, very astute! I was wondering when you’d bring that up.”

“‘Astute,’ nothing. That’s standard protocol.”

“Tell that to Nakajima. He didn’t even ask. Maybe you’ll have to dock his pay.”

Midori chuckled, then leaned in and whispered to Miyoshi.

“So then, our cut?”

“We’ll count the back margins as expenses, and split the rest fifty-fifty.”

“Deal.”

“Wait, so the back margins are just a dangling carrot for Nakajima?” I asked, butting in.

“You can’t trust someone who would blow every bit of profit on equipment upgrades with delicate money matters,” Midori answered.

That may have been true, but I couldn’t help but feel sorry for Nakajima, busying himself with schedule preparation and issue triage while his soul was being auctioned off. Absorbed in his work, he was oblivious to Miyoshi and Midori’s conversation.

“We could have a part-time worker to help with assembly, although there’s no guaranteeing who we’d get,” Nakajima commented. “Posting to job-searching sites could also risk an information leak.”

“We could always help out, right, Kei?”

“Both of us?”

“Of course!”

“In the meantime, I’ll start prepping the main circuit boards,” Nakajima said.

“Don’t let me down,” Miyoshi commanded. “Starting tomorrow, we’ll be aiming for one hundred units a day. In the meantime, let’s get enough parts for twelve hundred, and rush order anything you can.”

“Tomorrow? That’s the twenty-ninth!”

“Tomorrow was supposed to be part of the New Year’s holidays, but what are your thoughts, Nakajima?” Midori asked.

“I’ll order everything I can today! Plus, Akihabara should still have shops open through the thirtieth. Anything we can’t get now will have to wait until the fourth, so let’s make as many as we can and then, once we’ve used up all our parts, take a break until after the holidays.”

Watching the fired-up Nakajima, I could see that his STEM career had inured him to a certain degree of inhumane working conditions. Still, while knowing it wasn’t healthy, I couldn’t help but feel a tinge of admiration.

“Officially, Tokiwa is closed from tomorrow until the sixth,” Midori commented. “I can’t tell you how to spend your time off, but it’ll be hard to

count work done over the holidays as part of company pay.”

Ah, of course. There’s that issue.

“But I suppose we *could* treat it as a holiday work request and match it with compensatory days.”

“Come on, can’t we just call it a little holiday part-time job? Let me make a little cash on the side!”

“Suggestion heard but summarily rejected.”

“Oof. Ah, well. It is an offshoot of the stat-measuring device, so I guess it’d be hard to count as an entirely separate project.” Taking his rejection in stride, Nakajima promptly dove into the task of contacting parts manufacturers.

“Now, with that out of the way.” Miyoshi turned to Midori. “Have you given any more thought to the matter of the company partnership?”

“Ah, right.” Midori unfolded her arms, sticking her hands into her lab coat pockets. “Since it was originally my grandfather’s, I brought it up with the family, just in case.”

This must have been the family meeting Naruse had talked about the other day. Had they actually approved the partnership? I suppose she felt it was best left up to Midori, so we hadn’t heard how it went.

“Miharu was fully on board.”

Of course Naruse would have known that despite the ridiculous-seeming proposal, it wasn’t a scam or a swindle. At most she might have been concerned about her sister’s company being absorbed, but Miyoshi’s promise that Tokiwa Lab would continue to operate independently seemed to have set her at ease. Although as a result, it complicated the matter of how we could handle investments.

“Glad to hear it. Can we get down to brass tacks on production of the stat-measuring device then?”

“Nakajima?” Midori called.

“H-hold on. Just a second. There...we...go.” Reaching a stopping point in his orders, Nakajima unfurled an extremely large paper schematic across the table

in front of us.

“What is that?” I asked.

“Production designs for the stat-measuring device—which, by the way, *please* think of a name for this thing—with each module split up into its own plans. We’ll contract each module to a different manufacturer.”

Standing over the schematic, Nakajima explained the ins and outs of each module. “Afterwards, we’ll assemble the modules here. Since this isn’t an everyday item, it’s unlikely we’ll be producing enough to justify the cost of full automation.”

“In other words, you don’t expect this to sell.”

Taken aback by my bluntness, Nakajima scratched his head, plastering on a strained smile. “Well, given that our main demographic is *serious* explorers, we are dealing with a fairly limited user base.”

Fair enough—this wasn’t exactly a toaster oven. If we could sell them at twenty or thirty thousand yen apiece, some curious tech enthusiasts might buy them as an expensive toy, but it was still a niche product.

“We were thinking that with the amount we’re expecting, we’d only manufacture the casing, and then assemble the modules here with a little good old-fashioned elbow grease.”

“Which would also allow us to use my grandfather’s old factory,” Midori added.

Tokiwa Lab had originally been the site of Midori’s grandfather’s manufacturing plant. The lab sat on what had once been the factory parking lot, and at the point it was converted, most of the old buildings had been left intact. Or to put it less generously, her family had been too stingy to have them torn down.

“It would save us time and money compared to new construction.”

Under normal circumstances, constructing a new steel-frame building would take three months plus one month for each floor. With the upcoming Olympics and recovery from the Great East Japan Earthquake straining construction

resources, too, there'd be almost no way to expedite the work.

"We were told we could have the old place up and running in a month," Midori continued.

"That's perfect!" Miyoshi responded.

"'Perfect'?"

Sensing the conversation might run long, I took a quick glance at the time.

"I'm going to go contact Asha," I declared.

"That's great, Kei, thanks!" Miyoshi responded, already absorbed in her next topic.

Waving at everyone over my shoulder, I stepped out into the hall.

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"The other day I asked a little about Tokiwa Lab's stock distribution, but could you still take new investors?" Miyoshi said.

"You don't beat around the bush. As a private company, we're allowed authorized shares at a rate of ten times our currently issued ones. However—"

"For tax purposes, you want to remain a small-to-midsize company. Don't worry. Right now, I'm only thinking about brushing up against the one hundred million-yen mark."

Under corporate law, any company with under one hundred million yen in capital was considered a small-to-medium-size enterprise and subject to more lenient taxes. However, since more capital drew more investors, that was a bridge every growing company would eventually have to cross.

"You want us to put out every share? Unless they're non-voting shares, my stake would drop to six percent."

"Not if you buy them all. They'll still be your stocks."

"Where am I supposed to get that kind of money?"

"A loan!"

"A loan?!"

“We’ll finance you.”

“I’m not sure about this, legally speaking.”

The line between gifts and loans was murky. Between family members, nearly any large transfer would be considered a financial gift, subject to substantial taxes. Unrelated parties had more leeway, but it was only natural to wonder which side Miyoshi’s proposal would land on.

“Gift, loan, either way we need to increase your capital. It’ll be hard to take big investments with your company at its current size.”

“Big investments,” Midori laughed. “And where are those supposed to come from?”

“A guardian angel.”

“‘Guardian angel’? Believe me, I walked around looking for investors until my feet fell off, and they’re not exactly lining up. Where exactly is this heavenly benefactor of yours?”

The previous year, Midori had run a frantic search for investors in her startup, only to be laughed away each time.

“We already have one lined up.”

“Sure you do,” Midori countered, exasperated. Her eyes narrowed. “And exactly how much were they willing to throw into this money pit?”

“The other day Ke—Yoshimura said he’d be ready to put in about ten billion yen.”

“*T-T-T-T-Te—*”

“*Ten billion yen?!*” Nakajima shouted from behind the frozen Midori.

Kei had figured mass-producing the D-Card verifiers would take a large initial investment. Given the demand, the operation would quickly grow to an unbelievable scale.

“Managing production seemed like a pain, so he’d rather have you handle it.”

“What?”

“He’s allergic to work.”

“But ten billion yen on a whim? What does he think money is? He didn’t *seem* like the ultra-rich type.”

Miyoshi chuckled. “You can say that again.”

“S-So I’ll have t-ten billion yen for research funds?” Nakajima gasped, sputtering back to life with the grace of a broken robot.

“Nakajima!” Midori snapped.

“Yipes!”

Midori delivered a swift, playful karate chop onto the rebooted Nakajima.

“Anyway,” Miyoshi continued, “we were hoping to foist it onto you. If it’s okay, that is. Money is apparently no object.”

“But you need us to increase our scale so we can take on large investments first.”

“You got it. It might sound weird, but I consulted an expert and this is the best way to have you retain control of the company while legally investing large sums. First, though, we need to shore up your capital as high as it can go.”

With a small company, there was the risk of investments being held as de facto financial gifts by the tax agency. As the final decision on that front rested with the tax agency rather than the parties involved, it was important to avoid improper appearances at all costs.

“This is assuming the other stakeholders in the company don’t mind having their voting rights reduced by nine tenths.”

“That should be all right. It’s all family, and just around five percent each. They’re more interested in seeing growth and dividends than maintaining voting power. If anything, they’ll be elated to see the value of their stocks go up.”

“Officially, our investment is going towards the manufacture of the new tech. But it looks like we won’t need that much for the stat-measuring devices.”

“It seems likely.”

In addition, since the initial batch of D-Card verifiers would be handmade,

they wouldn't require a large sum either.

"So go ahead and spend the rest on whatever you need for the lab."

"They do exist! Guardian angels really *do* exist!" Midori cried.

Nakajima practically lifted off the floor. He was already rattling off all the fancy new equipment he was going to buy. "I'll need that one, and that one, and...oh, one of those! I never thought I could afford it, but maybe one of those too!"

"Take it easy, Nakajima!" Midori cautioned. "We don't want to blow our whole windfall right away. You hear me, right? Nakajima?"

"Heh heh heh heh...ha ha ha!"

"There's ROMMEDICA on April 11! Medical Show Japan in Osaka on June 13! Medical Taiwan four days after that? You want to at least wait for those, right? Nakajima, *cool your jets*!"

"*Bgwah?!*"

Midori socked Nakajima clean in the jaw, sending him tumbling backwards.

Miyoshi looked on fondly. "Are you two always like this?"

Midori plopped down in a chair, recollecting herself.

"Midori, don't take this the wrong way. But are you and Nakajima...an item?" Miyoshi asked.

"Wh-What? Where'd you ever get a preposterous idea like that?"

There was never a wrong time or place for juicy gossip. Judging from Midori's flustered reaction, Miyoshi guessed she was right on the mark.

"You two just seem like you don't have any boundaries," Miyoshi remarked.

"Years of working together will disabuse you of any of those."

"You should take care of him." Miyoshi glanced at Nakajima, his eyes still spinning circles on the other side of the table. "He really is something special. Although he doesn't look it."

"He did design the bulk of the essential components for our hardware

himself," Midori reminisced. "As far as not looking it, I suppose he and your Yoshimura have that in common."

Miyoshi thought of Kei, out in the hallway calling Asha, and smiled.

"I suppose that's true."

After that, the conversation moved further into the logistics of the company partnership, manufacturing costs, and sales prices. In the end they had worked out a rough schedule for production.

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"Hey, Miyoshi," I called from the doorway. "It's about time we got going."

Their conversation seemed to have reached a conclusion, and we had to meet Asha soon.

Saying goodbye to Midori and Nakajima, we headed for the exit.

"Ah, hey, wait up, Miyoshi!"

Nakajima stopped us just short of the doorway, looking like he'd just remembered something.

"What is it?"

"The RC1 prototype for the stat-measuring device. I stripped out some unnecessary components and adjusted the accuracy based on the data you gave me."

"Whoa, what? You work fast."

"Well, subtraction is easier than addition. Not having to worry about the aesthetics helped too. By the way, I am *really* going to need you to think of a name."

"A name?"

"Yeah! I'm about to put through an order for the casing with the company that designed most of the shells for our lab. I can't ask for a logo if I don't even have a name."

A name? To tell the truth, I didn't have much confidence in our abilities there. After all, we'd wound up calling our party "Dungeon Powers." What was even

more embarrassing, and further proof of how ill-suited we were to the task, was that we'd kind of grown to like it.

"Got it. We'll get back to you soon," I promised.

"We have our hands full with the verifiers, and any design work for the measuring device will have to wait until after the holidays anyway, so no rush, but knowing by the first would be nice."

"Roger. We'll come up with something by then."

With that, we took off from the lab.

"What are we going to do?" I asked Miyoshi.

"No clue. Any ideas?"

"None. Time to unleash our secret 'Hire Someone Else to Do the Work' technique?"

"Maybe if it were an entire advertising campaign. I don't know who's going to sign on just to think up a name."

"Yeah. Not a lot of money there, huh?"

Lately it was practical concerns that seemed to be giving us the most trouble.

Annotations

RC version: "Release Candidate version." The trial version of a product which could go to production so long as no problems are found. "RC1" marks the first prototype among RC versions. If there are additional fixes, the next prototype becomes "RC2," and so on.

ROMMEDICA: An international medical instrument equipment trade fair held every year in Bucharest.

Medical Show Japan: A medical equipment exhibition held each year in Japan. In 2019, it was held in Osaka. Comparatively small-scale.

Medical Taiwan: Became Taiwan's only medical equipment and healthcare trade show following the merger of MEDICARE TAIWAN and Taiwan International Senior Lifestyle and Healthcare show SenCARE in 2019.

Yoyogi-Hachiman, Office

“So, it depends on how quick we are once we get into our flow, but we should be able to pump out around one hundred units per day.”

“What?!” Naruse responded. “Really?!”

Taking out her tablet, Naruse began reviewing the same dataset Miyoshi had been looking over.

“There are 693 testing sites total, with the largest being Mie University with 4,634 examinees. The others surpassing four thousand examinees are Hokkaido, Tokyo, and Niigata. Four total.”

“Even verifying one person per second, with one device, the verification process for crowds that size would take over an hour,” I groaned.

“Not only that. We’d need time for people to move to the testing hall too,” Miyoshi added. “You can tack on at least five seconds per person for that.”

Even with the number of examinees having dropped from previous years, we were still looking at 576,830 test takers.

I couldn’t see being given more than an hour for verifying ahead of each test. If Miyoshi were correct about it taking close to five seconds per person, the number of people we’d be able to verify with one device in one hour would be 720.

“With around eight hundred units, we should be able to get everyone done on time,” I concluded.

“Then we’ll want to aim for at least one thousand.” Miyoshi borrowed Naruse’s tablet and scrolled through the data again. “There are plenty of locations with fewer than 720 test takers.”

“In that case why not two thousand? Might as well cover all our bases.”

Twenty days remained until the date of the test. At a rate of one hundred units per day, we could have two thousand devices ready.

“Right now we’ve only secured enough parts for twelve hundred. We can’t guarantee we’ll be able to hit two thousand, no matter how fast our pace is. It all depends on the components.”

Our worst-case scenario would be promising two thousand and being unable to come through. It was better to play it safe. Until we went into production, there were still too many unknowns.

Having worked out the numbers, Miyoshi began composing some kind of email.

“Naruse, on that note, we haven’t heard anything regarding the delivery method or what the JDA’s budget is.”

We’d gotten moving on development due to the urgent nature of the request, but without a formal order or budget, was it really safe to plow forward with production?

“I-I’m sorry. I didn’t expect things to be quite so unproductive with the New Year’s holidays. Everyone *should* know how urgent this is,” Naruse grumbled.

“Ah, speaking of! Kei! With people taking Friday off as vacation, we’re looking at nine days of holiday!”

Friday was the fourth—the sole working day between the New Year’s holidays and the following weekend. The number of people taking it off to string together a longer break would be no small sum. Now we were beginning to understand the terror of an organization where everything hinged on group approval. Individuals might think nothing of taking an extra day off, but any one absence could gum up approval processes. In a crunch, the ones who bore the burden of reduced timelines were always the subcontractors at the end of the line. This was one of the spots where the exploitative working conditions that often plagued Japanese companies began.

“Without a decision until the seventh, forget two thousand units, Kei, I don’t see how we could *ever* even safely commit to a thousand.”

Naruse, who had been listening to our overly pointed conversation with a beleaguered smile, picked up her phone. Shooting us a look that begged for forgiveness, she took the call that had come through.

“This is Naruse speaking.”

Probably the superior she was in contact with earlier.

“Think it’s that square guy again?” Miyoshi whispered.

“Probably. But he’s a section chief, right? I thought this when he decided to entrust orbs to us too, but is it really okay for him to make those kinds of decisions at the level of section chief?”

“He’s probably just good at laying groundwork—already has the approvals in advance.”

“Hm.” I paused. “He doesn’t seem like he’d be such a good team player.”

Still, you could never judge by appearances. I cocked my head, watching Naruse on the phone. If her section chief had managed to work his way up in such a stuffy organization, it was probably like Miyoshi surmised.

“Is that right? Yes! Yes, all right!” Naruse said into her phone. “I understand. Happy New Year to you too!”

“Happy New Year”? Are they planning to ignore us until after the holidays then?!

Setting down her phone with a sigh, Naruse turned to Miyoshi and me. “What is the price per verifier set at?”

“Ah?” Having been waiting for an explanation on our end, for a moment I was at a loss as to how to respond. “Ah, erm...”

The question of whether we really intended to sell a plastic food container stuffed with cheap equipment for one hundred thousand yen raced across my mind.

“That will be one hundred thousand yen per unit,” Miyoshi replied without missing a beat.

So we really are going through with this? God, please forgive us our greed!

“Very well,” Naruse said. “You have the JDA’s approval, so please carry on as planned.”

“What?!” Our eyes just about popped out of our heads.

Naruse had responded without even a moment's hesitation. One hundred thousand yen per unit at one thousand units would be one hundred million yen. You could double that if we shipped two thousand units.

I sat in disbelief that the authority to approve such an outrageous sum had been transferred to Naruse over the phone. "Is this the extraordinary power of a full-time supervisor?" I quipped.

The JDA never ceases to amaze me.

Naruse put on a bitter smile. "To quote Section Chief Saiga: 'No matter what, we have to say "yes," so agree to whatever they want.'"

Ordinarily such a call would be beyond Saiga's grasp, but it just so happened that this year the Dungeon Management Section had come into a substantial windfall that would be taxed away if unused. Those overflowing coffers came from our auctions' administrative fees. Saiga was confident they'd work something out with the funds the Dungeon Management Section had accrued even if this transaction fell through. That was the word according to Naruse.

"Arrghh, we blew it!" Miyoshi cried. "Why didn't we ask for one million yen per unit while we could?!"

"Does your greed know no bounds?"

"Squeezing every ounce of profit out of a situation is Business 101, Kei! We left money on the table! Ah well. Wave the consumption tax and I guess we'll call it a deal."

I'd never known Miyoshi to leave anything on the table. While she put on a big show for Naruse, she must have known that companies were exempt from consumption tax in their first year anyway.

Naruse propped up her tablet, attached a portable keyboard, and began drafting a preliminary contract. She was using a template that had been readied with everything but the final details, so the work went by quickly.

Suddenly, the clacking of the keyboard stopped, and Naruse looked up at us.

"Is this transaction a sale? Or a rental?" she asked.

Naruse knew we hadn't submitted a patent application. Accordingly, the

danger of turning over the verifiers to the JDA wholesale must have flashed across her mind.

“We’ll leave that up to you. Unless Kei has other thoughts.”

“No thoughts here. Whatever’s easiest for the JDA is good with me.”

I couldn’t help but laugh inside at having had the question thrown my way.

What other thoughts could I have? Treating the transaction as a sale would have alerted our would-be technology thief to the trap.

This way, whatever the outcome was, we could cover our tracks by making it look like we were just complying with the JDA.

Miyoshi nodded, then turned back to Naruse.

“In exchange, you can do me the favor of adding a clause stating that the JDA ‘must endeavor to prevent the leak of information regarding the device to third parties.’ Or something like that.”

“‘Must endeavor to’...?”

Preventing a leak and “endeavoring” to prevent a leak were two entirely different things. The former rendered any leak a breach of contract, while the latter didn’t ensure that would be the case.

“Are you sure you want to go with that wording?” Naruse asked.

Phrasing it like this would at most allow for the levy of a penalty if information were leaked, but stopped short of declaring it a breach of contract. Was the idea simply to provide an incentive for the JDA to focus on security? We could see Naruse’s wheels turning. No matter how hard she thought this through, though, no amount of ordinary logic would lead her to the fact that this was Miyoshi’s cunning trap. Instead, it would appear as though we simply wished to spare the JDA any unnecessary trouble.

“As a favor, for always being so good to us,” Miyoshi said, flashing a frighteningly convincing smile.

“You’re a real demon recently, you know?” I whispered to Miyoshi.

“You mean a cute little imp?” Miyoshi said, touching her pointer finger to her

bottom lip and giving me a mock sexy look.

Well, I don't know about the first bit, but 'imp' maybe.

"That should do it for the draft. Last, there's the matter of whether we're contracting the work to D-Powers, LLC, or D-Powers the party. I'll run the draft by everyone at the JDA as soon as the offices open next year, and we should have the final copy ready for you shortly after."

"Thanks," said Miyoshi. "We'll get to work producing as many units as we can over the break."

Nakajima will, you mean...

"Also, this isn't just because of the devices, but..." Naruse added.

"What?"

"You have a tentative okay for the room."

"Seriously?!"

The conference rooms in the Yoyogi Dungeon Grounds building were in high demand. Ordinarily, it would be impossible for one individual or party to try to lease them long term.

"I guess we're even then," Miyoshi said with a tinge of disappointment, but there was no hiding that she was happy with the results.

"I'll tell Saiga you're happy with the arrangements. Then—when should I say you'd like to set the press conference for?"

"Hm." Miyoshi paused. "We'll need some time to finish setup for the company, and then time to prepare for the event after that. Still, I'd like to aim for as early as possible after the new year. For right now, can you just tell them we'll do it?"

"Understood. Will you be around through the holidays if we need to get in touch?" Naruse packed up her tablet.

"I don't know about Miyoshi, but I'll be here. What about you, Naruse?"

"I might go visit my parents for a bit. It's not far, so I can still be around if anything urgent comes up."

“Got it. Well then, happy New Year.”

“Happy New Year.”

Naruse waved us goodbye from the entryway, and then took off towards the street.

“Ugh. I really feel like we let the JDA get one over on us,” Miyoshi grumbled.

“You can’t win ’em all. Besides, it seems like everything should work out.”

“I guess we *did* invite some of this. But now our New Year’s plans are ruined.”

“You know, I think we just might be workaholics.”

“They say the only people who work over the holidays are those who slack off the rest of the time.”

“You just made enemies of the entire service industry.”

“I didn’t mean it like that!”

Bickering back and forth, we transitioned from the entryway back to the living room.

“Man, I can hardly even keep track of what day it is. I haven’t called any relatives in a while either.”

“*I* still have a sense of what day it is. I’m still in touch with my family too!”

“Are you going home for the holidays?”

“No,” Miyoshi replied, voice sullen. “I don’t think that’s a good idea. I did just quit my job, after all.”

“Yeah...”

“If I go back, all I’d hear would be, ‘Young lady, how could you just quit work like that? Aren’t you thinking about the future?’”

“You could just show them your savings account.”

I wasn’t sure how often Miyoshi updated her bank book, but one glance at its contents would have put her family at ease. What they’d see would be more than the average company worker would make in a lifetime—a number so big as to lose all practical meaning.

“I’m not sure that’s such a good idea,” Miyoshi responded after a long pause. “It might just lead to the collapse of my whole family.”

“Ah. Like those horror stories about lottery winners you hear. Although I haven’t had the pleasure of experiencing that myself.”

If they knew about Miyoshi’s pocketbook, her whole family might quit working and make Miyoshi something like their financial manager. Stranger things had happened.

“Money. Can’t live without it, but there are some downsides to having too much of it too,” I lamented.

“We’re still small folks.” Miyoshi set the coffee she’d been sipping on a plate and shrugged her shoulders, resigned. “Anyway, my plan is to let our new company turn some profit, then go home and say, ‘Hey, I’ve made it! I’ve founded a successful startup!’”

No parent would be thrilled to hear their child had quit the job they’d landed just after college to start a new business without any indication they’d ever been interested in doing so. They’d probably assume their baby was being taken advantage of.

“You should at least give them a call.”

“Oh, I *will*,” Miyoshi pouted.

December 30, 2018 (Sunday)

Sakuragi City, Yokohama

At a corner table in the Tsubakiya Café on the second floor of the Nouveau Mare across from Sakuragi Station, also known as the Yokohama Dungeon Building, two men ill-suited to their surroundings locked eyes with one another.

“Hey, this is good! This is really good stuff, dude!”

A tanned man turned his eyes up from the printed material in front of him, running his hands through his slightly tousled hair, and offered those words of praise to Haruki Yoshida.

After being told to turn in a pilot during his meeting with Ishizuka of Central TV, Yoshida had been running around day and night trying to assemble a staff. His media connections had allowed him success on the production side, but when it came to explorers, let alone a sufficiently high-level one, he didn’t have a clue.

When it came to dungeon footage, *what* they wanted to film would be less of a deciding factor than how far into the dungeon they could go. No matter how incredible the images on the lower levels might be, they’d never be able to capture them approaching the situation like an amateur climber in the Himalayas in winter.

“In other words, we just gotta dive Yoyogi, snag some sick footage for this pilot or whatever, and then they turn it into a show.”

Yoshida, who had been taking appointments with any explorer he could book who had a relationship to the entertainment sphere, was left somewhat perplexed by his oddly exuberant meeting partner, along with the strange, slightly strained lilt of the man’s Kansai accent, a manner of speech not often heard in Tokyo.

“Bro, count me in!”

***

Yokohama Dungeon had appeared when a certain large shopping complex opposite Sakuragi Station was still under construction.

Like The Ring in Groom Lake, the dungeon had adopted the layout of an existing subterranean structure, and so was thought to be nine floors in total, in line with what had been the building's underground parking garage.

For a time, the completion of the building had been in question, but the owners had managed to seize the opportunity by sealing off the basement floors and slapping the moniker "Dungeon Building" on the structure, opening for business from the second story up as if nothing in the world were wrong. That was Japan for you. The first floor remained unopened to the public, having been converted into a dungeon-monitoring facility.

Because the basement floors had been rendered indestructible by their conversion into a dungeon, the owners got to trot out the line "You can just think of it as having extra reinforcement for the foundation," which, at the time, had gotten Yokohama Twitter in an uproar.

Due to the preexisting structure on which it was based, Yokohama's dungeon wasn't as sprawling as Yoyogi's. At a meager nine levels, the fact that it hadn't been captured probably owed to a certain unique property.

With the exception of its first floor, corresponding to the top level of the former parking garage, all of the other floors of the dungeon were boss rooms. Whenever any boss was defeated, a treasure chest would appear, and the dungeon boasted great variety in terms of boss and treasure chest spawns. That was how it had come to be known as "the Loot Box Dungeon."

A boom of speculation had propelled it to a certain level of popularity, but its fire had just as quickly faded. Now it was hardly frequented at all.



Its drop-off likely stemmed from two factors.

First, the respawn timer on its bosses was four hours, an awkward amount of time to wait whenever someone had felled a boss before you. Even if you thought to kill time by defeating weaker monsters, within the boss rooms, no weaker monsters would spawn.

The second, and perhaps greater reason, was in the strength of the monsters themselves.

In a nutshell, Yokohama's monsters were unbelievably strong. Yokohama's floors could be said to be about eight times more difficult than their equivalents in Yoyogi Dungeon. That is, the second floor of Yokohama would be on par with the difficulty of Yoyogi's sixteenth. The Japan Self-Defense Forces team which had initially tried capturing the dungeon had been forced to turn back at its third level.

"Why not bring a tank in through the car entrance?" That had been a popular question at the time. However, the Japan Ground Self-Defense Forces' tanks were too tall to fit through the entryway, which had been designed for commercial vehicles.

Ultimately, the owners had sealed off the vehicle entrance with thick metal doors, and in time, access to the dungeon had come to be restricted to explorers of WDA Rank B or above.

***

The man before Yoshida seemed enthusiastic about the proposal, but if Yoshida were too eager, the man might become wary of the offer. Still, explorers of his talent were rare.

Norihiro Kunai, age thirty-one. He'd been diving Yokohama since the dungeons had first appeared, and accumulated a level of fame among a certain segment of explorers for his YouTube show and channel, Real Dungeon Yokohama. As a host, he performed under the name Loot Box Dungeon Master Tenko.

A vision of the pilot was crystalizing for Yoshida, and Tenko could certainly take the fore. More importantly, though, he was Yoshida's only promising lead—indeed, his only lead at all among explorers of sufficient skill. He wanted—no, needed—Tenko to take on the role.

"You see the vision! You understand perfectly!" Internally cringing at his own words, Yoshida decided to try appealing to the YouTuber's vanity. "It's true what they say. You Yokohama divers really are built different!"

"Wha—? Don't get me wrong, bro. I don't dive."

"I'm sorry?"

This was the Yokohama Dungeon expert Loot Box Dungeon Master Tenko, was it not? He didn't dive? What kind of joke was this?

"Are you telling me you're not currently actively diving Yokohama?" Yoshida inquired.

"Bro, gimme a break, man. Look at this."

Tenko pulled out his WDA-issued license card. The rank displayed there was *—C?!*

"Rank...C?" Yoshida was slack-jawed. Given Tenko's activity in Yokohama, Yoshida had assumed he must have at least been a B. If he weren't, he couldn't even access the dungeon.

"See? They closed the dungeon off to everyone below B, so now I can't even get in!"

"Then...the Loot Box Master of Yokohama can't even..." Yoshida's voice trailed off, sounding parched.

"Listen, don't blame me! I was divin' before they put those doors up, bro!" Tenko closed his eyes and crossed his arms, leaning back. "Man, those were the days," he added dreamily.

You've been implying that you're still diving Yokohama this whole time! That isn't anyone's fault but your own! Yoshida wanted to shout. However, he held back.

"But hey, that doesn't matter now," Tenko said.

It very much does *matter*, Yoshida wanted to retort, but again he kept his mouth shut. He couldn't afford to walk out of this meeting. The first floor of Yokohama Dungeon didn't produce treasure chests. Since the man had a reputation as the Loot Box Dungeon Master, that meant he'd at least dived the second floor. That would put him on the sixteenth floor of Yoyogi, in terms of experience.

"So give me the scoop. What's the content?"

"Well, as I've explained, it's a pilot episode in order to get a full show."

"No, man. I mean what floor of the dungeon are we explorin', bro?"

"Oh, that. As long as we can get some footage with *oomph*, any floor should do."

"Now there's an idea. But where're we gonna find this *oomph*y footage, bro?"

Reviewing the information on Yoyogi Dungeon, it seemed like the tenth floor might be best. They could use some assimilation potion and wander around safely capturing footage of the shuffling hordes of undead. Or perhaps the genomos on the eighteenth floor would be better. Yoshida had heard through the grapevine that explorers from multiple countries had been focusing their attention there.

That just left the recruitment of a handful of other known explorers.

"What about someone like the Campbell Witch? That'd be sick."

The Campbell Witch was a world-famous light magic user. Field extinction spells were her specialty, and if the rumors were true, she could give them footage so spectacular anyone would mistake it for Hollywood special effects. Of course that depended on her allowing any use of her footage in the first place. Not many first-rate explorers were willing to reveal their techniques.

"Heh. If I could afford someone like her, I'd be able to fund my own show three times over." Yoshida flashed a weary smile.

"Then we head for the eighteenth floor?"

"If we can, I'd like to, of course. However..."

Their number one limiting factor in how far they could dive would be the

quality of their explorers, but a close runner-up would be their equipment's battery life. Using heavy lighting equipment would prove difficult. Relying on compact LEDs would illuminate about three hours of continuous filming. Consumer-grade video cameras would last about two hours, and even bringing in two-kilogram professional-grade ones would only extend their time to five.

Yoshida clutched the handle of his Blue Fluted Plain Royal Copehnagen cup, brought it to his mouth, then drained the remaining coffee in one sip.

"I'd like to get footage of the manor," he stated in a resolute tone.

"Whoa! The manor?! You mean that crazy house the JDA uploaded footage of? That place crawling with creepy eyeballs?"

Yoshida nodded.

If they could get detailed footage of the manor, then forget one three-month season—they'd have enough content for half a year. Plus they'd have an unbelievable climax built in. If they made it out alive, that is.

"You got some kinda death wish, my dude?" Even the enthusiastic Tenko couldn't help but raise an eyebrow.

"Come on! You're a content creator! You have to be able to see the sheer value here!" Yoshida's cool demeanor had faded, and he raised his voice at Tenko.

"I dunno, bro." Tenko shrugged. "You know anything more valuable than your life?"

Veteran explorers took heed of their own limits. From what Tenko had seen in the footage, setting foot in the manor would only mean inviting certain death.

"Of course not," Yoshida replied, "which is why I have a plan to spawn the manor in a place where we're not at risk."

A life-risking exploration in a place where your life wasn't at risk? If Yoshida had a plan to do that, Tenko wanted to hear it. Although in that case, why Yoshida needed Tenko at all was a mystery.

"If you've got an idea, bro, c'mon, spit it out."

"You know what it takes to get the manor to appear?" Yoshida asked, his tone

indicating he was about to let Tenko on to some great secret.

“You gotta defeat 373 of the same monster within one day. C’mon, bro, no ordinary person can do that. For starters, where’re we gonna find that many of the same monster in one place?”

To meet that quota within ten hours, they’d have to defeat one monster every minute and a half, without breaks. Yet even *finding* two of the same monster could take longer than a minute and a half.

“What if I told you there was a place perfect for meeting just those conditions, and in relative safety?”

“I’d tell you you were outta your mind, but...” Tenko paused for thought. A place of relative safety, where a large number of the same monster appeared, somewhere in Yoyogi Dungeon. An idea struck him. “You mean Yoyogi’s first floor?!”

Yoshida gave a knowing grin, but to Tenko, that was only evidence of Yoshida’s inexperience.

Sure, the first floor of Yoyogi was crawling with slimes—to the point where, once you were a little ways in, it was rare there wasn’t at least one within view. However, slimes were renowned for their resistance to physical attacks. He couldn’t imagine being able to keep defeating them at a rate of a minute and a half each. Not unless Yoshida had some kind of fire magic user on board.

“That’s an awesome plan. You got some kind of fire mage with you?”

Of course, even then, fire magic couldn’t be used limitlessly. To draw a comparison to popular fiction, something like MP seemed to drain when a person used magic, requiring time to recharge.

“I was thinking about myself, a cameraman, and maybe an equipment manager.”

“Nah, bro. That’s film production staff. I mean who else you got for protection?”

Yoshida was silent.

“Don’t tell me...”

“I was hoping I might be able to have you help with further recruitment.”

“Ah, we’re in way over our heads!” In other words, Yoshida hadn’t considered their approach to combat at all. “Hold on. Then how were you planning to defeat all those slimes?”

“They’re slimes, right? Even a beginner can manage—”

“Sure, bro, they *can*. But how *quickly*? You ever tried hitting one of their little jelly butts?”

Even striking as hard as you could, it would often take five minutes before you worked your way to their small, solid cores. Defeating a slime wasn’t as easy as it looked.

“I’m sure we can figure something out.”

“‘Figure something out?’ C’mon, bro, that’s...” Tenko started to protest, but he was beginning to see the allure.

Ever since the entry restriction had barred him from diving Yokohama, he could feel his stress mounting. As the Loot Box Dungeon Master, he couldn’t simply take off and shift focus to Yoyogi. If a viewer spotted him and it came out that he was barred from Yokohama as a C Rank, it would be the end of his career. Yoshida’s pilot might provide just the excuse he needed to finally let off some steam.

“You know what, crazy man? All right. Why don’t we give it one shot?”

Yoshida nodded, feeling a wave of relief wash over him. It wasn’t a rejection, at least. He could call that a success for now.

“Then how about tomorrow? Or, if you’re busy, it could wait until the day after.”

“The day after tomorrow? That’s New Year’s Day!”

“The fewer people around, the better. But we could change if you have any urgent plans.”

“Plans? Ah, well, there’s just one day left. I guess I might be able to keep it open. If New Year’s Day is okay with you, then, hey, let’s do it.”

Tenko wondered how Yoshida's proposal would land with any staff who had families, but he wasn't opposed to prompt action. He simply hoped that promptness didn't mean undue hastiness. Still, that was Yoshida's problem. In the meantime, all Tenko had to think about was how to defeat enough slimes.

"All right. We'll meet at 6 a.m. at the entrance to Yoyogi Dungeon on January 1."

"Six a.m.?!"

Tenko could understand Yoshida's eagerness, but enough was enough! Then it dawned on him that, even if they had permission from the JDA to film, as long as they couldn't impose a restriction on the number of explorers coming through, an early, less busy time would be best if they wanted to film somewhere relatively close to the entrance.

With a glance at Yoshida, who apparently planned to hurry not just into location scouting but into actual filming with hardly a moment's delay, Tenko ended the meeting with the one comment he felt that he had to make: "All right. I'm in, but I'm billing you for rush services."

Annotations

Blue Fluted Plain: Royal Copenhagen's flag-bearer porcelain series, known for its blue underglaze (a pattern or drawing applied to the porcelain before the glaze is added). The coffee at Tsubakiya Cafe is served in Blue Fluted Plain cups.

Yoyogi Dungeon, Second Floor

"So, remind me again what we're doing here?"

Despite being swamped with work, here we were in the middle of the afternoon diving to Yoyogi's second floor to check out a small plot of farmland lent to us by the JDA.

"Ever heard of rest for the weary? Besides, if we're not going to help out at Tokiwa Lab, *technically* we have time on our hands," Miyoshi responded.

Most of the service industry would still be working over the New Year's

holidays, but in general companies and organizations were closed, so we couldn't get in touch with any more parts manufacturers. Among our group, the only one who was truly busy right now was probably Nakajima.

In the end we'd only been able to gather parts for the main circuit board. Even if we went to Tokiwa, our only work would be cheering him on. That is, if you could even call that work.

"Besides, our little wheaties should be sprouting soon, so we'd better check them while we can."

"That's right. The guys at JA told us it should take about ten days, huh?"

Our "little wheaties" were a crop of wheat we'd tried planting in Yoyogi Dungeon as an experiment to see if we could get them to respawn. All wheat seeds for agricultural use needed to be purchased from an approved JA—Japan Agricultural Cooperative—branch. First we'd tried heading to Shibuya, figuring there must be one there. Now I don't know if Chieko once said there's no agriculture in Shibuya, but it turned out there was at least no Shibuya JA branch. In comparison to the neighboring Meguro and Setagaya districts, which fell under the jurisdiction of two separate JA locations each, I couldn't help but feel a little left out. Although it turned out Shibuya was a hub of other JAs.

At a loss, we'd searched around, finally coming into possession of some Yanagikubo wheat seeds courtesy of Tokyo Mirai JA.

"It's a trek, but according to the website they're the only branch in Tokyo with wheat seeds," Miyoshi had informed me.

Apparently there had never been much of a push for wheat seeds within the heart of the city.

The clerk at JA Tokyo Mirai, mistaking our purchase as being for some kind of elementary school experiment, had explained that the wheat was best planted in October. They also told us an assortment of fun facts, like that roughly 1.5 square meters of wheat would produce about enough grain to make one bowl of udon.

Thinking rationally, of course, our planting season was way off, but nothing like the concept of seasons seemed to exist on the second floor of Yoyogi in the

first place. Not knowing what to expect, in the meantime we'd tilled the land and planted our seeds at spaced intervals as instructed, starting on December 19.

"We were told to plant them in late October or early November. The temperature never seems to change here, but do you think they'll be all right?"

"Kei, don't ask questions like that now! You'll jinx us!" Miyoshi shot back.

And so we arrived at our little crop of wheat in a hilly area of the outer perimeter of the dungeon floor. We'd planted the wheat in an area of about three square meters, shielded on all sides by three-meter-high acrylic panels. Using wire fencing would only have enticed goblins to climb over.

As a precaution against slimes, we had motion sensors attached to tubes set to spew Alien Drool when any movement was detected. That wouldn't help us if a slime spawned inside the barriers, but in that case there'd be nothing to do but chalk it up to bad luck—we couldn't risk the spray hurting the wheat.

"Now then, let's see, let's see. Ah! Look! Omigosh! There're sprouts!" Opening the door on the acrylic barrier, Miyoshi ran inside and pointed to a collection of small green leaves emerging from two neighboring ridges of soil.

The sprouts along one ridge lagged behind those on the other, but that was due to our having planted them a few days apart.

"How about the saplings?" I asked.

Our field was divided into two parts. In one, we'd planted new seeds, which had just sprouted, while in the other, we'd transplanted partially grown saplings. Miyoshi kneeled down by the saplings, taking out her smartphone to compare them to the pictures she'd taken a few days before.

"No change," she reported with a tinge of disappointment after scrutinizing the pictures. She stood up and brushed the dirt off her knees.

"I guess that proves it. The dungeon won't adopt anything that's already grown."

This might seem like an obvious statement, but it took time to raise plants from seeds. In order to hasten our experiment, we'd tried bringing in some

saplings, then cutting off a leaf from one of them each visit, to see if it'd respawn by the time we came back. However, none of them showed any results.

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We had some idea as to how plant respawns worked here due to a series of experiments we'd run using a nearby tree.

Initially we'd simply cut one of its branches, and verified on return that the cut branch was back in its place. High on our discovery, next we'd tried cutting down the whole tree, and sure enough, when we returned the next day, it was back upright as if it had never been touched.

Finally, we'd tried taking it up from the roots. At that point, it didn't return.

"So once you completely remove something, it doesn't respawn?" Miyoshi wondered out loud.

"Or maybe it does respawn," I responded, "but not at the same spot. That's going to be hard to verify..."

When a monster was defeated, it wouldn't always respawn in the same place. Mobile objects within the dungeon, at least, were placed somewhere else upon respawn, according to—random chance? Or some kind of design?

"We could record every object on the first floor and see if their numbers are consistent, but that seems a little out of our league," Miyoshi muttered.

"At least with the scale of Yoyogi," I agreed.

Still, at least we knew that plant life native to the dungeon would respawn in the same place as long as it wasn't completely uprooted. Now if we could just get the dungeon to recognize newly planted vegetation as its own, our project would be a success.

However, that wasn't going to be as easy as it sounded.

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"It might just take more time for the D-Factors to permeate the saplings," I commented. "It's only been ten days."

“But think about it. If it were just a matter of spending a certain amount of time inside a dungeon, anyone who spent a certain number of days here could respawn. We’d be talking about eternal life!”

“Not only that. You might be respawned every time you stepped outside the dungeon. Yikes! Everytime you came and went, a new dungeon clone would pop up! Talk about overpopulation problems!”

I’d said it as a joke, but then Miyoshi fired back with something that truly sent a chill down my spine.

“You know, I’ve heard there are dungeons with doppelgängers out there, but do you think...?”

“Cut it out,” I snapped, genuinely perturbed. “Anyway, it’s probably safer to assume that anything non-native that’s already grown to a certain extent simply won’t be recognized for respawn purposes.”

“Let’s hope. The peace of the world might hinge on that being true.” Miyoshi plucked a leaf from some of the newly grown sprouts, then took some pictures for our records. “If respawning crops grown from seeds we’ve brought in is a no-go, I guess our next step would be to try fertilizing seeds originating within the dungeon itself.”

That was a perfectly natural conclusion, but if that actually worked out, based on her wording, there was one *other* situation I couldn’t help wondering about.

“Hey, Miyoshi,” I said.

“Don’t even say it.”

“I’m just wondering. If seeds fertilized within the dungeon might be recognized as being part of it for respawns...”

“I see where you’re going, and I’d really rather you wouldn’t.”

“What?! But doesn’t it bother you?! What if two humans went down to a dungeon and had s—*ghuff*!”

My thought was cut short by the dull thud of Miyoshi’s elbow landing in my solar plexus.

“Kei, when two *animals* mate, the fertilized egg takes five to seven days to

implant itself in the endometrium. Tell me you're not thinking that someone would be staying in a dungeon that whole time."

"*Ghaff!* Why not tell me that before throwing elbows?" I coughed.

"*Some* animals best remember lessons through physical experience."

"Jeez, who let you off the military base?"

But still, it was an intriguing thought experiment. For instance, if only the fertilized egg were recognized as being part of the dungeon, would only it respawn when the mother went outside? But then, a fertilized egg wouldn't be able to survive on its own, so I supposed it wouldn't make much difference in the end.

"Ah, Kei. That military crack reminded me. What are we going to do about an instructor for the boot camp? We better hurry up and decide."

"Argh, that's right! Maybe we can have someone in the Self-Defense Forces or Secret Agent Tanaka help?"

"Asking Tanaka? He'd definitely just send a spy."

"Then, what? We put up a help wanted ad?"

"Now that you mention it, maybe we should just be happy settling for a domestic spy instead of getting tangled up in an international incident again."

"I don't know about dealing with a secret agent as an employee though. Maybe we should go in the opposite direction and just hire someone based on looks?"

"Using a handsome guy or pretty lady drill instructor as an advertising tactic? I suppose that could work..."

"I was actually thinking we just get a huge macho guy in order to fit the image."

"In that case we might as well aim for an older mentor type... Picture a silver-haired defense forces veteran..."

"Now you're just going off your own tastes! Hey, Miyoshi, maybe if you give them a look every once in a while that implies you know all their secrets thanks

to Appraisal, we can scare off any potential spies."

"What? If I did that, I'd look like an idiot as soon as the second Appraisal user appeared."

"I'm not suggesting you outright lie or anything! Just *imply*! You could give them a little smirk every once in a while and say something like, 'Oh, there are no secrets here!' If I were a spy, I'd be sweating bullets! Although it might just seem like you were being friendly, I guess."

"Kei," Miyoshi laughed, "when it comes to underhanded, devious tactics, you are *nearly* second to none!"

"Well, I do learn from the best!" I said.

At any rate, our urgent need for a boot camp instructor remained.

Annotations

Chieko once said there's no agriculture in Shibuya: In reference to the poet Kotaro Takamura's *Portrait of Chieko* collection. The poem "Childish Talks" begins with the famous line "Chieko says there's no sky in Tokyo."

Shibuya was a hub of other "JA"s: Despite the presence of a "JA Tokyo Minami-Shinjuku Building" in Yoyogi, no organization known as "JA Tokyo" exists.

The URL "jatokyo.or.jp" belongs to JA Bank Tokyo—no connection to the agricultural cooperative. Conversely, "tokyo-ja.or.jp" is the URL for JA Tokyo Central Union, the actual organization amalgamating all JA branches in Tokyo, but it's impressive how each manages to look like a phishing link for the other.

Incidentally, "jatokyo.or.jp" is the link for the JA Tokyo Central Ceremony Center.

And if you thought JA Tokyo Central Union would be the same as the Central Union of Agricultural Cooperatives Tokyo, you'd be wrong—they're two separate organizations.

The space surrounding any use of "JA" is a swirling void of chaos.

December 31, 2018 (Monday)

Yoyogi-Hachiman, Office

“So, to make a long story short, you wouldn’t happen to have any beautiful, talented drill instructors who just happen to have some time on their hands, er, would you?”

“Mr. Yoshimura,” Secret Agent Tanaka said on the other end of the phone, sounding agitated. “Need I remind you that my office is not a staffing agency?”

Given this was New Year’s Eve, no doubt he’d picked up the phone expecting some sort of urgent request for another foreign-agent retrieval. I suppose my request would have been pretty agitating, in that light.

“We were worried that if we put up a general help wanted notice, all sorts of foreign agents might apply,” I explained. “Of course, if that’s fine with you and your office...”

A moment of silence followed.

“I can’t give you an answer straight away. Would you allow me to contact you at a later date?”

“Of course, of course! No problem! I leave it in your capable hands!”

“Ah, before you go,” Secret Agent Tanaka added, “there is one other thing I’d been meaning to run by you.”

“Huh?” I said. “What is it?”

“The building diagonal from the back of your office—do you know who’s taken up residence there?”

“Diagonal from the back of our office?” Come to think of it, I had seen a number of moving vans heading over there recently. “You mean that huge estate-type place?”

“One could describe it that way,” Tanaka answered.

“I don’t know. I’ve just seen a bunch of trucks. Although it does feel like a lot of people have been leaving the area recently. Maybe it’s haunted or something?” I joked.

Tanaka’s next words caught me by surprise.

“You may not be far off from the truth.”

“I’m sorry?” Tanaka wasn’t one to play around. “What is this? Trying to scare me as payback for calling you on New Year’s Eve?”

“Wouldn’t dream of it.”

“Then...what? You know something about the people in that house?”

“Not at all. Please forgive my assumption. If there hasn’t been any trouble, I’d prefer to leave things at that.”

“Whaaat? You mean you’re not going to tell me any more?”

“Well then, until our next chat.”

“Uh, yeah, thanks, I guess,” I said, hanging up.

Seeing me put down the phone, Miyoshi came wandering over.

“You’ve really been practicing how to get under Tanaka’s skin. Is this resentment for not getting to go to Machu Picchu?”

“That’d be *your* resentment, not mine.”

I didn’t have any particular interest in traveling so far off-grid. Although I did have to admit it would be cool to see the Salar de Uyuni—the world’s largest salt flat.

“Suit yourself. What was that bit at the end?”

“You know, I’m not sure myself...”

I explained the conversation to Miyoshi.

“Haunted? Well, the apartment building behind us already seems to have its share of ghouls.”

Miyoshi brought her hands up to the sides of her face and started creeping towards me in an impression of a typical Japanese ghost.

Certainly, lately droves of people had been leaving the area, even though ordinarily move-outs should have been more scattered.

What’s more, hardly anyone seemed to be moving in. It was exactly the kind of situation you might expect if there were rumors the area were afflicted with

some kind of curse.

Although, in the case of the apartment building behind us, there at least seemed to be a rational explanation. Sketchy groups always seemed to be milling about. Occasionally they'd come sneaking over, only to fall prey to the Arthurs' security patrol and be swiftly handed over to Secret Agent Tanaka. They didn't seem to pose too much danger, so right now for our own peace of mind, we'd decided not to pay them much thought.

"The people in that estate are probably just more of the same, right?"

"Maybe," I answered. "I'd like to think so, but judging from how Tanaka was talking, this might be a little different."

"Want me to look into it?"

"No. Let's leave this up to Secret Agent Tanaka for right now. If anything really gets out of hand, I'm sure he'd at least let us know."

Ultimately there was the risk we might be considered disposable, but I still couldn't believe he'd cast us out and cut the string without so much as a word.

"I guess so. In that case, what do you want to do about the Mining auction?"

"Ah, shoot. We still have that on our plates too."

Information on Mining had been posted to the Yoyogi Dungeon Information Bureau website on the evening of the twenty-eighth.

No sooner had its information been published than a deluge of exploration applications from teams all over the world had flooded the JDA, with explorers rushing to Yoyogi's eighteenth level.

"Even over the New Year's holidays..." I lamented.

"Hm?"

"Nothing. Just reflecting on how explorers have it rough too."

"Explorers? Are you forgetting you're one of them?"

"Ah, right! I guess I am! A glorious, infatigable G Rank!" I took out my WDA license card, holding it up to the light. "I guess 'git gud' G is a ways off from your 'speedrunning dungeons' S, huh?"

“There, there.”

“Anyway, besides Mining, what else should we put up?”

Mining would be the crown jewel of our auction this time. Given its relatively high drop rate, in due time others across the world would obtain it, but at this point there were any number of organizations who would be itching to get their hands on one without hassle.

“Let’s see what we have on hand.” Checking Vault, I took down a handwritten list.

Storage x1

Super Recovery x4

Water Magic x6

Physical Resistance x8

Accelerated Growth x1

Undeath x1

Life Detection x2

Magic Resistance(1) x1

Mining x5

Earth Magic x1

Dexterity x1

“Truly, our cup runneth over,” Miyoshi remarked.

“We haven’t used anything since fighting the genomos. Want any of them for yourself?”

“Not right now. I would like to give them all a pass with Appraisal and catalog their effects though.”

“Of course.”

Having a log of all our orb effects would come in handy in a pinch. It might also help us avoid any irreparable mistakes. After all, our current lineup included the ghastly Undeath. I wouldn’t have wanted to use it by accident,

make no bones about it.

“Considering our business model, we ought to keep some Super Recovery orbs on hand.”

One of our company’s main goals was providing dungeon exploration support. When having our boot camp enrollees help out with exploring Yoyogi, we would want a number of beneficial skills in stock.

“Right. A little insurance in case things go belly up. We should hold on to all our first-rank healing potions too.”

“We have plenty of those thanks to those boneheads on the tenth floor. Although we’re low on magic crystals.”

“That’s ’cause we keep using them as treats for the Arthurs. Although it pumps up their stats too, so I guess I can’t complain. By the way, are we sure ones from skeleton drops will still have an effect? There’s no kind of limit on each monster?”

“With no way to directly measure, I can’t be sure, but...should I try asking Cavall next time?”

“Worth a shot. Go for it. So, for the auction...”

“For right now, let’s put up two Minings,” Miyoshi suggested.

“Good idea. Other explorers will probably manage to get it soon, so we should strike while the iron’s hot. Plus, it might be best to hold on to the magic and resistance orbs to offer to boot camp enrollees.”

Now that I was on the other side, I was beginning to understand why the world’s military-industrial complexes had been so reluctant to let any opportunities to get orbs pass them by. Although in our case, I could at least guarantee that anything we had in stock, we’d be able to replenish.

“Speaking of boot camp, if we don’t have any plans over the New Year’s holidays, why don’t we set a little mission for ourselves and do some dungeon-diving?”

“Missions over the holidays? Man, we really *are* workaholics!”

“What? Plenty of other people don’t have the first three days of the new year

off.”

“Come to think of it, when *are* our days off?”

“That depends on whether you think of our current setup as a seven-day workweek or a weekend every day.”

I supposed that was a matter of perspective. Even if you were doing the same thing, your feelings on it could vary greatly depending on whether you decided to call it work or a hobby.

“Ah, what’s life without a little excitement?” I shrugged

“You do love those kind of clichéd Bohemian phrases.”

“Cut me some slack.” However, it was true that I’d get bored with the couch potato life after about three days. “Maybe, just once, I’d like to take a luxury vacation.”

“With the money we have now, you could charter a mega yacht and do one trip around the world.”

A cruise with no other passengers... Maybe I could try to invite someone else, but—ah, the only other person I know with all that free time is Miyoshi.

“Nah. All I can see is myself holing up in my cabin and reading manga on my tablet all day.”

“The staff who came to call you to dinner would be appalled.”

“Maybe we Japanese are just bad at letting off steam.”

“Hey, don’t lump the rest of us in with you! That’s not a Japanese thing!”

“So what would you do?”

“Me? That’s a given. I’d scarf down lots of tasty food!”

“You call that letting off steam?”

Either way, as long as we were restricted from international travel, this was all hypothetical. Come to think of it, what did we have to do to get rid of that prohibition?

“Hey, Miyoshi. How do you think we clear up that travel ban?”

“I don’t know. Get to a point where our going outside Japan doesn’t pose a security risk?”

“Ugh, that’s way too vague. Why not at least give us criteria we could comprehend?”

“I suppose if we really pushed the issue, they might let us go with security detail.”

“A vacation under state surveillance? No thanks.”

“State *security*, Kei. Hey, maybe with the power of the state behind us, we could get reservations at restaurants we’d normally never be able to!”

I could just picture Secret Agent Tanaka’s reaction: “Mr. Yoshimura, need I remind you that my office is not a concierge?” I smiled.

“So, getting back to the matter at hand, besides Mining, Accelerated Growth seems kind of interesting, doesn’t it?” Miyoshi pointed to the corresponding orb in our inventory list.

Accelerated Growth could be obtained from ordinary goblins, but its drop rate was a staggering one in 1.2 billion, placing it far on the rare side of all skill orb drops we’d seen. What was more, having examined it with Miyoshi’s Appraisal, its effect was a doubling of the rate of SP acquisition.

“The one that doubles your acquired SP? Maybe...”

Doubling SP acquisition was quite a cheat, but it came with a proportionate downside—or maybe it was more accurate to say “side effect.”

“Being capped at 60 in all stats is a pretty steep cost.”

“Kei, having a 60 in all stats would put you in the top percentage of all explorers on Earth.”

Ah, that’s true. To have a 60 in all stats, you would need at least 360 SP. If we figured a natural 50 percent SP distribution, you would need to have accumulated at least 720. Ordinarily, that amount of SP would only come after a level of experience putting you on par with those at the top.

“I think it seems pretty useful, all things considered.”

There was no telling how far you could go into dungeons with those stats, but it was certain that you wouldn't be struggling with most currently documented floors. Even if we posted a note about its drawbacks as part of the item description, we'd still have plenty of people who would bite.

"If only you could delete skills later, this would be the most hotly demanded orb we have," I observed.

"The price would skyrocket, no question. All right, let's put that one up and draw some eyes."

"What should our last one be?"

Just then, the buzzer sounded from the front gate.

Miyoshi took one glance at the intercom camera and then called my way.

"Kei! It's Simon."

"Simon? Shouldn't he be hacking and slashing through the eighteenth floor like the main character of a *Dynasty Warriors* game right about now?"

"Maybe something happened." Miyoshi shrugged, then undid the gate lock.

Soon we heard a knock at our door.

"*What's up, Simon*?" I said in English, greeting him at the doorway. "*Is something wrong?*"

"*Hey, Yoshimura!*" Simon answered. "*Actually, I came to ask a favor.*"

"*A favor?"* I asked, eyeing him cautiously. *"What is it?*"

"*No need to be so on edge. Actually, it's a pretty simple question.*"

Apparently an American VIP was thinking about visiting Meiji Jingu Shrine for "ni-nen mairi," or the "two-year shrine visit"—an overnight pilgrimage to the shrine straddling New Year's Eve and New Year's Day. It was quite the popular event with both local and foreign tourists.

"*What?! Are they crazy?! Over the New Year's holidays?! Do you know how many people will be there?*" I asked.

"*Hey, that's why I came for the trusted local perspective! All we've heard is that it gets pretty crowded.*"

“*Wildly crowded! Crazy crowded! We’re talking about a completely different level of ‘crowded.’*”

From New Year’s Eve through the first few days of the new year, Meiji Jingu would be a frothing sea of people.

Let alone the rest of the shrine grounds, over the span of a few days after New Year’s, more than three million people total would be crammed into the shrine’s narrow main path. Over the course of an entire year, its visitor count was said to reach a staggering ten million people, and nearly a third of them were concentrated into the three days after New Year’s alone. There would be no way to guarantee the safety of a VIP in that setting. Forget staving off an attack, with the ocean of visitors arriving in the two-hour “two-year visit” span, I couldn’t even guarantee they would be able to reach the shrine.

“*They said they wanted the authentic tourist experience, but it sounds like they might have bitten off more than they can chew*.”

The coin collection “box,” if you could even call it that, put out at Meiji Jingu for New Year’s was a sprawling monstrosity spanning several meters across. Visitors were always directed to fan out to the left and right, but most aimed straight for the center.

“*I’d recommend against bringing a VIP anywhere near there. Really.*”

If things went south, they might even be taken out by an errant five-hundred-yen coin to the head.

“*It’s basically a carnival attraction to see how many people at the front you can hit in the back of the head with your change.*”

Miyoshi, who had been listening, stifled a laugh.

“*You should at least urge them to choose an early morning on a different day,*” I added.

An experienced government official should understand the risks and acquiesce. At least I hoped that would be the case. I didn’t want to think any government official would be so childish as to insist on going regardless.

“*That bad?*”

“*Worse! Plus, the people around will all be civilians, so you can’t just shove your way through to the front.*”

“*Got it. I’ll deliver the message. Thanks for the help.*”

The current matter having reached its conclusion, Miyoshi flagged Simon’s attention.

“*Say, Simon, since we did you a favor...*”

“*What’s up?*”

“*You wouldn’t happen to know any good drill instructors, would you?*”

“What?!” Before Simon could even answer, I bellowed out a response in Japanese.

Miyoshi, what’s the big idea?!

“*A drill instructor? What for?*”

Miyoshi gave a basic rundown of our boot camp idea.

“*In other words, you and Yoshimura are going to teach intermediate explorers how to get stronger?*”

“*Don’t be ridiculous. If either I or Yoshimura tried to square up with advanced explorers like you, we’d wind up in the hospital*. *We have the know-how, but we can’t run the program ourselves*.” Miyoshi shook her head. “*So, we don’t mind whether they’re currently enlisted or retired, but do you have any good candidates with a decent level of Japanese who could help run the course*?”

“*You mean like a Ronald Lee Ermey type?*”

“*Aw, yeah! You get it! That’d be perfect! Argh, his eyebrows were to die for! I can’t believe he’s gone...*”

They were talking about the drill sergeant-turned-actor who, following a career of playing authority figures after having been cast as Sergeant Hartman in *Full Metal Jacket*, had passed away this past April. The fact that the news had first been announced on Twitter was, I guessed, a sign of the changing times.

“*Of course I get that the more qualified the candidate, the harder it would be to pull them away from their posts*,” Miyoshi added.

Simon, who had been sitting with his arms folded deep in thought, suddenly perked up.

"*You know, I might know just the person for the job! They're originally a United States Marine Corps sergeant. They'd be perfect!*"

"*Are they still enlisted?*"

"*Actually, I'm not sure what their status is. I first met them when they were dispatched to the Dungeon Strike Force*."

"*Then they're running a team in the DSF?*" Miyoshi sounded disappointed. *"That's going to be hard to step away from.*"

"*I wouldn't worry about that*," Simon chuckled. "*You think the DSF wouldn't jump at the chance to embed a spy in the most suspicious party in the world? Nah, brass'll be crying tears of happiness*."

"*Erm*..."

"*Hey, look, jokes aside. This person is actually a backup member for our team, so the DSF won't be hurt to lose them. Come on! They're a shoe-in!*"

A backup member for Team Simon? That would put them on par with the world's top explorers, wouldn't it? Also, that "spy" crack definitely didn't seem like a joke.

"*We'd be thrilled,*" Miyoshi responded, "*but won't receiving secondary income be a problem for the DSF?*"

"*Ah, yeah. Double salary. That's a toughie.*" Simon furrowed his brow as if trying to recall some kind of specific employment rule, but the answer he came up with a moment later was surprisingly cavalier. "*Hm, you know... I can't remember. But we can probably just call it part-time side work and not get in any trouble*."

"*You've got to be kidding me,*" I groaned.

Was this really going to be okay? The thought of getting yelled at by some bigwig from Washington filled me with dread.

"*Say, Yoshimura. This 'boot camp.' Can we sign up too*?"

What? You can't rely on military training from civilians! ...is what I wanted to shout, but I kept my mouth shut.

"*Don't you have military training to attend?*"

"*Yeah, but I'm interested! You know, in seeing your special know-how*."

"*Our what?*"

Miyoshi came back over to where we were sitting, cup of hot coffee in hand.

"*Ah, that's the stuff*," Simon remarked, taking a whiff. "*Is brewing your hobby?*"

"*You could say that! Although Yoshimura is more Team Japanese Tea, so it's nice to have someone who properly appreciates my hard work. Now then, you wanted to sign up for the boot camp, was that right?*"

"*Your ears play no tricks,*" Simon responded. "*We really had it in for ourselves after about the twenty-ninth floor of Evans. We could stand a little self-improvement regimen.*"

Team Simon should have had plenty of SP piled up. Raising their stats wouldn't be an issue in and of itself. My concern was the surrounding politics...

"You know," I interjected, "*we do ask that boot camp enrollees help us out with exploring Yoyogi*. *It's almost like a service contract.*"

I sent a mental signal out with every ounce of my power begging him to please realize how fraught the situation was and reconsider. Surely America wouldn't want its top explorers tied up in private business obligations.

"*No worries,*" Simon said. "*We don't have any urgent orders right now, so we should be able to help out.*"

No good. Simon's mental receiver appeared to be broken.

"*You sure you can just promise like that?*" I asked. *"Isn't there some kind of obligation to turn over dungeon resources to the United States, or something like that?"*

"*Ah, that's the Dungeon Department's business. The DSF was originally formed as a rescue task force for The Ring. Our obligations stop at rescues and*

dungeon-conquering. I'm sure they'd appreciate it, but we're not particularly obligated to turn over any spoils to the boys at the USDD."

The Ring. That was the name of the large particle accelerator in America which had been converted into a dungeon—probably one of the most famous dungeons in the world.

The dungeon had formed in the middle of an active experiment, destroying the accelerator and replacing its interior—multiple kilometers of circular tubing, not to mention the operations rooms—with a dungeon based on the preexisting structure. The incident had left no survivors. Its circular shape, inherited from the accelerator, had left it with the nickname "The Ring."



The formation of Yoyogi Dungeon had nearly caused a crisis as well, severing the Chiyoda Line, but loss of life had been averted. At any rate, it would have been nothing on the scale of The Ring, which had not only been one of the first, but among the deadliest dungeon formation incidents.

Still, our current problem was how to get Simon to back down. I passed the ball to Miyoshi. *Miyoshi, it's in your court! Don't let me down, please!*

Miyoshi met my pleading gaze. Every bit of her confident look seemed to say "Don't worry. Leave it to me."

Miyoshi MVP! Miyoshi began to speak.

"*Understood. We'll enroll you as our first student once all the paperwork's been filed.*"

Whaaat?! The ball had hit the backboard, rebounded, and been captured and dunked by the opposing team. Miyoshi, what are you doing?!

"Ah, not just me," Simon said*. "I'd like to bring on the whole team."*

"*But that's four members, isn't it?*" I protested. "*And then if the drill instructor is also DSF, you might as well be training at home base!*"

"*I don't know if that's true,*" Simon countered. "*You're the ones coming up with the curriculum, right?*"

Miyoshi approached me with a smug grin on her face and whispered into my ear. "Kei, think about the advertising opportunity! Some of the world's top-ranked explorers would be our first enrollees!"

"You would be thinking about that," I mumbled. *What about the international political turmoil we're almost certain to find ourselves in?*

I glanced at Simon out of the corner of my eye. He was sipping his coffee without a care in the world. He took one last swig, then set the empty cup on the table.

"*Simon, would we have your permission to make the fact that you and your team had enrolled public?*" Miyoshi adopted a customer-service-style smile.

Simon raised an eyebrow. However, after only a moment's hesitation, he

nodded. Utterly defeated, I offered my concession.

"*Got it. We look forward to having you as our first students,*" I said.

"*All right. We'll have the drill instructor get in contact with you. Should we have them come by directly?*"

"*We'd prefer the JDA conference room, if you please*," Miyoshi passed Simon her business card. "*The large one. We'll hold an interview there.*"

I wondered how the matter of a visa would work with a new team member flying in from America, ultimately choosing to believe that if the United States government gave its blessing, they would figure something out.

It's okay for me to believe that, right, Simon? You wouldn't let me down?

"*Man, this really was a productive visit!*" Simon declared cheerfully, standing up. He then added one comment, seemingly as an afterthought. "*By the way, Iori's team has gotten another four floors down, descending to the twenty-fifth. That Water Magic they got from you is really pulling its weight, Azusa. However, even she's started to struggle. It might not be too long before you get another enrollee.*"

Whoa, so that Water Magic orb went to Team I after all.

"*Well then,*" Simon said. "*I'm off. I've got to tell one VIP to change his New Year's plans, then I'm back to mowing down monsters on the eighteenth level.*"

"*There are lots of tight tunnels down there. Take care."*

Simon looked at me with a stern expression. "*Does that mean you two have been down there?*"

"*Ah, wh-wh-whyyy, no! It's just that we've heard rumors!*" I fumbled for an excuse.

"*Hmm...*" Simon seemed somehow unconvinced.

Accepting that it might mean giving away my flawless ruse, I decided there was at least one thing I had to tell him.

"*Hey, listen. About the mountain where the genomos spawn down there...*"

"*The mountain?*"

“*Right. Whatever you do, don’t go near its peak.*”

“*You mean that spot that’s marked as prohibited on the map? That blank space?*”

“*That’s right.*”

“*Why? Is there something there I should know about?*”

I moved closer to Simon and whispered into his ear.

“*The JSDF’s records were vague, but apparently two soldiers were killed instantly after setting foot near the peak. It looks like there’s something up there far stronger than your average boss*.”

“*Careful,*” Simon smirked. “*That’s just the kind of thing to pique my interest.*”

“*Is your interest worth more than your life?*”

The JSDF soldiers must have been relatively experienced explorers themselves, yet it wasn’t just that they couldn’t defeat the boss lurking there—they had never even registered the attack. Someone with Simon’s experience should have been able to glean the danger that implied.

“*Relax. Only teasing. Don’t worry, I have no intention of playing Dmitrij*.” Simon smirked.

“*Dmitrij*?”

“*You don’t know? He’s the world’s second-ranked explorer. Dmitrij Nelnikov. He was the first, until a certain phantom came along.*”

According to Simon, Dmitrij was known for stepping up to any challenge, defeating any monster that stood in his path. Among a certain circle of explorers, he was known as “The Seeker” due to his thrill-seeking ways. Those who had seen his fighting style described it as evoking a samurai, even though he was Russian rather than Japanese.

“*If he’d heard the story you just told, he’d be sure to go plunging in.*”

“*Er, that really wasn’t my intent*,” I said.

“*Ha ha, I know. I’m just saying, be careful who you rile up. Explorers can be a little touched in the head. In my case though, I’m grateful for the info. Thanks.* ”

With a smile and a thumbs up, Simon made for the door, then dashed off like the wind to where his teammates were.

“That guy acts as if going to the eighteenth floor of Yoyogi is like running an errand next door.”

“Top-ranked explorers are a different species,” Miyoshi mused.

“Speaking of. Miyoshi, you hear the part about Team I using Water Magic? How’s that for an advertising boost?”

“Looks like our final auction orb is decided!” Miyoshi grinned.

We did have six, after all, so I supposed parting with one Water Magic couldn’t hurt.

Our auction lineup had been decided, but Miyoshi was still scribbling down notes. She had a look of total concentration on her face.

“What are you working on?” I asked.

“I was thinking we should maybe try sending up a weather balloon.”

“‘Weather balloon’?”

“The reason we haven’t unveiled any of the storage-style orbs is because we were worried about organizations using them for no good, and all kinds of societal disruptions. We’d probably face all sorts of false accusations too.”

“Right.”

Miyoshi had about summed it up. It wasn’t just about scrutiny from public organizations. I couldn’t say I much liked the thought of being spirited away by some cartel and made to act as a drug mule either. Plus, every time some impossible-seeming crime were committed, we’d be number one on the suspects list.

“In the worst-case scenario, if just having access to the skills were grounds for suspicion, we could end up with a nightmare situation where people could point to any couple on the street and shout, ‘They’re planning to commit an illegal act. Why not arrest them?’”

“Okay, Jian Yong.”

Jian Yong was a Han Dynasty Chinese politician as well as a character in the classical Chinese novel *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*. Watching a man be arrested simply for having brewing tools in the midst of an alcohol prohibition, Jian Yong had pointed to a couple walking past and asked his employer, the warlord Liu Bei, why he did not arrest them for planning to commit indecent acts. After all, Jian Yong argued, they "possessed the tools to do so." Liu Bei laughed and released the man with the brewing tools, but I felt as though modern bureaucrats may not have found Jian Yong's playful logic so compelling.

"Anyway," Miyoshi continued, "setting aside our concerns, as far as putting a target on our backs for bad actors, Appraisal is in the same vein. And as far as inviting false accusations, we can't actually know what the public response will be until we try."

I see. Even if we were accused of smuggling, so long as there were no way for anyone but the skill owner to check the contents of Storage, it would be our word against theirs. Ultimately, trying to pin a crime on someone would involve tailing the accused and hoping to catch them in the act of either loading or taking something out of Storage. And even if knowledge of the orbs invited surveillance—

"It wouldn't be so different from now," Miyoshi pointed out. She threw a pointed glance in the direction of the apartment building behind us.

"I guess when you put it that way..."

Although I couldn't quite imagine the same kind of nefarious groups would be after Appraisal as with Storage, as long as use of the skill were the goal, at least we wouldn't have to worry about being suddenly killed. What's more, if they wanted to steal an orb, pre-use, they'd have to risk waiting with their intended recipient close by.

"More than attempts on us, my concern would be what underhanded means someone might stoop to for coercion," Miyoshi added.

Right. If things went wrong, it might not be us, but our family members who would be in danger. I could see myself opening up a note reading "If you want to see so and so alive again..."

"But still, we don't know what kind of detail police organizations might be

willing to spare us until we put out feelers.”

“Tell me you’re not actually considering...”

“I am. Unveiling Storage to the world to see what the initial response is.”

“Miyoshi, would you mind telling me why you’re willing to offer us up as a sacrifice?”

“Don’t say it like that! I’m just saying, we’ve been capitalizing on it for our own use, so we do bear a certain level of social responsibility!”

“So that’s your ‘weather balloon’? Floating the existence of Storage?”

“If we release that to the world, people will go crazy over the unveiling of the mythical ‘Item Box.’ We could gauge the reaction while you kept Vault to yourself.”

That way, even with Storage’s ability to double the shelf life of skill orbs being public knowledge, the three-day bidding periods on our auctions would remain a mystery.

“Aren't we going to catch a ton of flak from the JDA if we put it up without consulting them?”

“Maybe. But look, it’s not *quite* the same situation as with Otherworldly Language Comprehension. For starters, there are no international politics directly in play. We don’t have to prioritize certain nations.”

“Instead, the groups clamoring for this one will probably be dungeon strategy organizations, and, unfortunately, criminals, huh?”

Simply putting the orb up for auction would probably see great sums of cash bid by those with deep pockets and even deeper connections to the criminal underworld. Storage would make it open season on smuggling—of money, of drugs, and of anything else someone wanted transported without notice. With the new avenues open to them, a buyer could make back whatever they paid in a flash.

Of course the sellers of kitchen knives or metal bats wouldn’t normally be held responsible when their goods were used in a crime, but...this felt different somehow.

“How about we try bringing it up with someone outside the party and gauge what their reaction is?” Miyoshi suggested.

“Our most useful opinions would come from the JDA, Secret Agent Tanaka, and, after that, Simon, I guess?”

“Bringing it up with all three at once could put us in a bind. We don’t want pressure coming at us from all sides.”

“Yeah...”

“First, why don’t we try running it by our full-time supervisor?”

“I suppose so. Plus, once we discover those safe areas that translated inscription brought up, Storage skills are going to be essential for setting up stations to support exploration on lower floors. I guess we can’t dodge the issue forever.” I sighed.

So another impossibly difficult topic was going to be tossed to a certain member of the JDA. *Naruse, forgive us!*

“Hey, what kind of person do you think Simon’s going to send?” Miyoshi mused, changing the subject.

“You mean our new drill instructor? I can already imagine some creepily jacked old man stomping in through our door.”

“If Simon seemed excited for us to meet them, they can’t be too bad, right?”

Miyoshi, that grin on Simon’s face was definitely less “I can’t wait for you to meet them,” and more “I can’t wait to see what will happen?” right?

“If they’re backup for his team, at least we know they’re capable.” My shoulders slumped. “I guess all we can do is wait for contact.”

“Before that, we’ve got to think of a curriculum.”

Ah, that was right. We hadn’t decided on our curriculum for the boot camp yet.

“You know anything about putting together a curriculum for a boot camp?” I asked.

“About as much as you, probably.”

In other words, zilch. Talk about the blind leading the blind.

"If worse comes to worst, we could just have them run laps around the second floor all day," I suggested.

"What? The perimeter of the second floor is around 31.4 kilometers! I don't know about having anyone run laps all day around that. *Maybe* Simon's team could hack it."

"Okay, then one lap, full sprint. Intermediate explorers and above should at least be able to do that."

"Hmm..."

"And then, for someone who wants to improve DEX, we could prepare one thousand sewing needles and tell them they have to thread each one."

"They're just going to think it's a prank!"

"Maybe with ten needles, but a thousand? It's too ridiculous to *not* be true! Plus, after a little, their minds will be too blank to even make any complaints! Come on, it's classic training-montage stuff!"

"What're you, some kind of cult leader? That sounds like brainwashing. Plus, if anyone found out the training wasn't real, they'd be after our heads."

"Yeah, but imagine how funny it'd be if someone tried to copy our program. We can sweeten the deal by making up something about the secret being in the needle hole size or thread thickness."

"Kei..."

"Then, for AGI, we can have people jump side to side repeatedly, like stereotypical ninja training."

"Okay, okay," Miyoshi conceded, getting on board. "And then in between, we could have them strike yoga poses!"

"'You must absorb the power of the dungeon through your body!'" I laughed. "Or, wait. This is Japan. *Zen*. It needs to be zen, not yoga."

"Then how about this?" Miyoshi grinned. "In between sets, we have them chug some kind of horrible green vegetable slop?"

“Nice idea. You’d definitely think that would be something that’d have an effect.”

Going back and forth like that, half-joking, the curriculum for our Boot Camp of Horrors took form.

“Ah, by the way, Kei. I’m terribly sorry to cut short our productive conversation, but I really must be on my way.”

I almost burst out laughing. “What’s up with the business receptionist talk?”

“Well, if you must know, I’m practicing for our press conference! I have some prep to do for it this afternoon.”

“Prep? The venue is just going to be a JDA conference room.”

“Be that as it may, I don’t feel comfortable leaving everything in the hands of the JDA.”

Right. This whole situation started at the behest of Executive Director Mizuho of the JDA. If we leave everything up to them, there’s no telling what kind of trouble we might find ourselves in.

“Feels kind of weird having the less troublesome route be the one that involves doing the work ourselves though. Then...what? Are you planning to meet with that director guy?”

“Connections exist to be used. You’ve said things like that yourself.”

“I suppose...”

I didn’t think it was necessarily a good idea to be cozying up to anyone in the media, but I left that one up to Miyoshi.

“Don’t worry. I won’t give away any secrets. For the press conference, were we okay with the sixth?”

“Fine by me.”

“Roger!”

Until he called back several days later, I’d completely forgotten about the request I’d made to Secret Agent Tanaka.

Minato City

Takatsugu Himuro stared with dead-fish eyes at his vibrating cell phone. Even after its tenth repetition, it wouldn't stop.

"Damn it..." he muttered under his breath.

At last he picked up the phone. Even then, he held it for a good three seconds before finally accepting the call. There was no point in putting this off. If he did, *that* woman would only appear in front of him again. Remembering his nightmarish hospital encounter, he shuddered.

"Hello." The voice on the other end of the line spoke with a disarmingly cheerful disposition. "Doing well?"

"Damn it, leave me alone," Himuro pleaded.

"Leave you alone? And here I thought I'd bring you a little business!"

"Please, leave me alone..." Himuro repeated.

"Ah, well! If you don't want to hear it... I'd recommend at least hearing me out though. Is there somewhere we could meet?"

"P-Please..."

"Well then, how about your place?"

Himuro lifted his head up with a jolt and scanned the corners of his room. Nothing. He was safe.

"Well then?" the voice repeated.

Shoulders slumped in defeat, Himuro gave the name of a café near his studio.

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The meeting spot was to be a small, retro-styled café next to Himuro's workplace. Despite being New Year's Eve, the café was brimming with happy patrons, talking excitedly with another, enjoying each other's company and piping hot beverages. A row of antique cups lined the wall behind the counter, further contributing to the pleasant atmosphere.

Himuro walked in. An older gentleman, unmistakably the café's proprietor, called his name.

"Himuro! Been a long time."

"Yeah, well, I've been busy. You know how it is."

In more carefree times Himuro had once been something of a regular. However, the indoor smoking bans that had come just as surely as the revolutions of the Earth, as well as the sapping of his own free time, had brought his visits further and further apart.

"Still though, this is a sight. Didn't expect to see you here on a date."

A date?

A sinking feeling came over Himuro. He felt some kind of presence by his left arm, and whipped around to look.

Standing next to him, with a grin, was the monster who had submerged him into the lowest depths of terror during their brief encounter at the hospital.

"Hullo!" Miyoshi smiled.

"Wh-Why? Wh-Wha..." Himuro's tongue floundered around in his mouth, searching for words it couldn't form.

"Oh? The counter not to your liking? We have some booths open in back, for a little more privacy," the proprietor offered.

"That'd be perfect." Miyoshi tilted her head. "We'll take a booth seat please."

"Well then, take your pick."

Miyoshi nodded, pushing the frozen Himuro along.

Situated in their booth, Himuro, who had looked for all the world like a marine creature tossed out of the water, regained his composure, leaning forward and speaking without hesitation.

"So, this request of yours—what'd you want? You finally come to claim my soul?"

"Your soul? I wouldn't dream of it. Do you see me peeling hard-boiled eggs by rolling them around on the table?"

“Sure. If it’d get me away from you, I’d even perform a ritual to change my appearance.”

They were referencing the movie *Angel Heart*, in which a crooner named Johnny sells his soul to the devil in order to achieve fame and success, later performing a ritual to change his appearance in order to renege on his debt. The devil, having come back to claim him, peels and eats eggs in the manner Miyoshi had described.

“So you’re saying you’ve already achieved success?”

“Huh?”

Certainly, Johnny in the movie had achieved a level of fame from the deal, but if the price were his soul, Himuro would have to pass.

“Actually, I have a bit of work I’d like to ask you to do,” Miyoshi continued.

“Work?”

“Of course. You’re a director at a production company, right?” Miyoshi looked at Himuro as if it were strange he’d even asked.

“Ah, r-right.”

Miyoshi nodded, then provided him with the request to help with a press conference that was to be held on the sixth.

Working in Himuro’s industry, with his experience, handling a press conference would be an easy task. However— “Wait, hold on,” he responded. “The sixth?”

“That’s right. Something wrong?”

“But today’s New Year’s Eve.”

“That’s right.”

Himuro paused. “Let me get this straight...”

Ordinarily, you held a press conference because you wanted to make an announcement. If the party you wanted to inform was the media, you would think of a time and date convenient for reporters, and leave ample time to spread word.

The sixth this year was a Sunday. On top of that, with the New Year's holidays, there would only be one working day between now and the conference—Friday the fourth. Himuro could only assume she wasn't actually interested in holding the press conference at all.

"That's precisely right. I don't care if anyone comes."

"Then what's the press conference for?" Himuro stammered.

"Let's just call it an obligation," Miyoshi responded cryptically.

"Huh?" Himuro couldn't even muster a proper response.

According to this demon, the purpose of the press conference wasn't to make an announcement, but simply to provide an opportunity for the media to ask questions.

"Did someone put you up to this?" Himuro asked.

"The opportunity was placed into my lap."

"This about the auctions you guys run?"

"That's probably what the people who requested the conference are hoping. We'll be taking the opportunity to offer a little Q and A about our newly established company."

"Is that *company* involved in the orb auctions?"

"Of course not."

That was a demon for you. There was no use in trying to suss out its logic.

"Then what is the media going to be there for?"

"I don't know," Miyoshi admitted. "To show us the looks on their stupid faces?"

On that point, Himuro couldn't help but sympathize.

He knew the media could sometimes overdo it, to the point that there were even phrases like "media scrum" to describe overzealous flocks of reporters. Of course, as long as there was competition, he also understood why underdog outlets couldn't simply back down.

“So, what then? You’re worried about how the press conference will turn out if you leave all the prep to the punks who put you up to it, so you figured you might as well take control of the situation yourself. But you don’t have the know-how, so that’s where I come in?”

“You pretty much nailed it,” Miyoshi answered. “We don’t know the first thing about putting on a press conference. We don’t even know how to get in contact with news outlets.”

“Press releases?” Himuro scoffed. “If all you have to do is say you held the conference, you don’t even need to bother with that.”

“I wonder. If it looks like we intentionally didn’t follow through, we might just be asked to do it again. Better to leverage the opportunity while we can.”

“I see... So that’s my role.”

“How does the phrase go? ‘Even a chance brush of sleeves is the result of many lives.’” Miyoshi observed with sagelike profundity. “I feel like we met for a reason.”

“Yeah, well, let’s at least keep these sleeves *short*,” Himuro responded, bringing his now-lukewarm coffee to his lips.

He didn’t want to get involved if he could help it. However, he couldn’t simply cut and run. The demon across from him seemed to be able to follow him wherever he went. She would only seek out his services again.

However, maybe this could be his chance too.

His client certainly had value. At least Ishizuka seemed to think so.

“I guess this is what it feels like to sell your soul to the devil.” Himuro smiled.

“I’m sorry?”

“To recap, I follow standard procedures and spread word about the press conference to media outlets that seem like they might be interested, and whether they take notice or not, whether they show or not, I’ll have done my job?”

“Correct,” Miyoshi answered. “We’ll be square.”

In talking with Miyoshi, Himuro discovered that not only was the venue already decided, but an emcee had already been appointed. All that was left to do was to get in touch with outlets regarding the time and details.

“I’m not really sure what the standard rates are,” Miyoshi said, “but I’m hoping this will do.”

Judging from the thickness of the envelope Miyoshi extended, were its contents ten-thousand yen bills, Himuro would easily have been looking at one million yen.

“Well?” Miyoshi asked. “We have a deal?”

It’s a grinning devil that damns a human to hell. Come to think of it, Harry, the private investigator in *Angel Heart*, was also damned the moment he decided to take a check for five thousand dollars to continue his missing-person case. Reflecting on that fact with a self-deprecating smile, Himuro reached for the envelope.

Annotations:

Even a chance meeting: Referring to the Japanese idiom “Even the chance brush of sleeves is the result of many lives,” meaning that even a chance encounter is the result of fate. Himuro’s ironic response refers to keeping their interaction brief.

January 1, 2019 (Tuesday)

Yoyogi Dungeon, Street Level

“Oh! Tenko! Happy New Year!”

“Happy New Year! God damn, man, it’s freezing.”

While rubbing his hands together, Tenko, who had arrived at the dungeon entrance first, greeted Yoshida and a cameraman, who were approaching decked out in rudimentary dungeon gear.

“I didn’t expect you to beat us out here,” Yoshida remarked. “Raring to go?”

“Raring nothing, bro. I took the only train I could that’d get me here this early.”

“Ah, I see. My apologies.”

“Next time book a damn hotel.”

“We’ll certainly consider that. If the show gets picked up, that is.”

“How about some *consideration* for the talent? Ah well. Where’re we diving?”

“Before that, introductions! This is our cameraman, Jo.”

“Pleased to meet ya,” Jo said.

“Pleasure’s all mine. Lemme guess—short for ‘Joanne’?”

“Very funny. You can call me by my first name—Tamaki.”

“Tama*kin*?” Tenko responded, appending a final letter to change Jo’s name to Japanese slang for a certain two dangling male body parts.

“What is this guy, in first grade?” Jo smirked and took Tenko’s hand.

“Well then, shall we be off?” Yoshida took a few steps past the others, towards the dungeon entrance.

“Oh? You going first?” Tenko asked, puzzled.

“What’s wrong? It’s just the first floor of Yoyogi. It’s not like it’s dangerous.”

“It’s not that,” Tenko said. “Traditionally, though, a content creator would want to let cameras and lighting in first. Unless you don’t want any footage. But, uh, far be it from me to tell you how to run your production.”

Jo stifled a laugh. “All right. I suppose I can get a shot of our fearless leader coming in.”

With that, he descended to the first floor.

“Ready down here!” Jo shouted a minute later. “Give us a look that says ‘intrepid’!”

True to form for Yoyogi, even at the brink of dawn on New Year’s Day, some other explorers had still lined up by the entrance. They eyed Yoshida’s getup

with a mix of intrigue and embarrassment, but kept their distance so as not to disturb the shoot.

“You love to see it,” Tenko declared. “These Tokyoites respect the hustle.”

“‘Tokyoites’? Aren’t you from Kanagawa?” Encompassing Yokohama, Kanagawa Prefecture sat right next to Tokyo. There was practically no distinction.

“Well, yeah,” Tenko answered. “But I worked hard on this impeccable fake Kansai accent, so you could at least respect the grift.”

“Very well,” Yoshida acquiesced. “Let’s go.”

“Didn’t exactly picture myself underground the first thing on New Year’s Day. What’s that say about my prospects for the year?”

“They say the roadmap for the year is plotted from its first hours,” Yoshida commented.

“A map? Ah jeez, I didn’t bring one with me.”

Yoshida descended to the first floor. Sighing, Tenko took out a selfie-stick, and after snagging some footage for his own show, followed after Yoshida.

***

“So remind me again what we’re doing here first thing on New Year’s Day?” I gazed up at the sign on the front of the Yoyogi Dungeon entrance, kicking myself for my own inability to just chill.

“Following through on our threats to ourselves yesterday. We said if we didn’t have any plans, we might as well come up with a mission.”

After our conversation with Simon, we’d received word that the arrival of our drill instructor in Japan would take a few days. With nothing to do until the fourth, we’d found ourselves at Yoyogi.

I suppose we could just be loafing around too, but there’s that workaholism again.

“Still, sure enough, it’d be nice to have some kind of real goal, huh?”

“True. The times we came down here for Otherworldly Language

Comprehension and Mining, we had a pressing need spurring us on."

Thinking back on our past visits, we could tie up loose ends with missions like "Use Appraisal on an Exchange Alchemy Orb," or "Acquire Ultimate Flame Magic." There was even "Get a skill orb from one of the fourteenth-floor shamans," our original target for Otherworldly Language Comprehension. Alternatively, while people were busy focusing on the eighteenth floor for Mining, we could aim for one of the lower levels.

"Jeez," I grumbled, "looking back on it, we really have been working too hard."

"I guess. When you're just doing what you like, it doesn't really feel like working."

"Careful. You start breaking out phrases like 'giving 110%' or 'team synergy' and you'll sound like one of those exploitative companies."

"You know what's really exploitative? Barring employees from traveling overseas."

"Hey, that one's not on us."

"Right. *Our* flagrant violation of labor laws would be much more hazardous." Miyoshi smiled wryly.

"Fair enough."

With as many times as she'd almost died while in our party, Miyoshi had the right to tease.

While it hadn't really felt like work to me either, there was no denying it had been a tumultuous past three months.

"Ah, that's right! Kei!"

"What is it?"

"Why don't we go to the first floor?"

"The first floor? But we go there almost every day when we're free."

Ah, whoops! Here I was thinking we were workaholics, but I guess if we're only going 'when we're free,' that's not really *working, is it?*

“Not like this we don’t. Why don’t we go for the 373 challenge?”

“‘Three-seven-three chall—’ you mean the manor?!”

“Right! That’s the only experiment we can really do right now. Besides—”

“‘Besides’?”

“If, one of these days, Mitsurugi and Saito ever decide they don’t have time to run back and forth to the entrance, things might get out of hand.”

“Ah...”

Mitsurugi being a diligent worker, I couldn’t picture her ever slacking off on going back and forth to the entrance, and Saito was a pretty good companion, so I couldn’t imagine she’d stay behind to keep picking off slimes alone either.

However, I couldn’t be certain.

“Okay,” I said. “Plus we have to think about what’ll happen once we unveil how sodium benzene works against slimes. We should nip the possibility of the manor appearing on the first floor in the bud.”

“That’s the spirit!”

“We’ll have to try to arrange our defeated-monster count so that we can trigger the manor’s appearance after 11 p.m.”

Only a true masochist would want to test how many hours they could survive being chased around by eyeballs and skeletons.

“The only monster on the first floor is slimes, so we can just hunt them until there are only a few more required, then spend however much time we have left until 11 kicking back.”

“Ah, that’s true,” I agreed. “In that case, should we head in now?”

It was just after noon. If we spent an average of one minute per slime, we would be done in six hours.

“Why don’t we grab some lunch first? Seems like we should have some time left over either way,” Miyoshi suggested. “Also, since we haven’t established this—will you be doing the slime-hunting, or should I?”

“Let’s have you do it this time. You should be getting all the stat boosts you

can.”

“I guess I don’t get to do much monster-hunting in the day-to-day. Very well. I accept.”

“If we’re going to summon the manor, maybe we should let Naruse know, just in case?”

“I’ll leave her a message and say we’re visiting an old friend’s estate.”

“We’re just going to make more headaches for her, huh?”

I turned towards the direction of the JDA building, putting my hands together and offering an apologetic prayer.

Yoyogi Dungeon, First Floor

“*Haruuu*. Why do we have to be here right away on New Year’s Day?” Trailing behind Haruka Mitsurugi, Ryoko Saito puffed up her cheeks like an obstinate child.

“Because there’s hardly anyone here, and this was our only free time around the start of the new year?”

“We ought to be visiting home. You ever hear of that? *Home*?”

“Relax. No time with my schedule,” Haruka responded, pressing forward. “How about you? I don’t see you with family plans.”

“I *suppose* it was the same on my end,” Ryoko pouted.

Ryoko was grateful for her newfound popularity. However, as a result of an overeager manager hoping to ride out her newfound stardom, it wasn’t unusual for her to find her schedule filled at a moment’s notice. For some time going forward, any prospects of a vacation seemed dim.

“But still, the world’s next top model and the rising movie star stuck beating down slimes in a dungeon at the dawn of the new year—who ever heard such a sad tale?”

“Well, what are the ‘world’s next top model’ and ‘rising star’ supposed to be doing on New Year’s Day?”

“I don’t know! Recovering from a night of partying at some established celebrity actress’s estate! Or sipping cocktails abroad?”

“A trip abroad even though you don’t even have time to go home?”

“*Hmph*.”

“And anyway, even if you were invited to some celebrity’s party, wouldn’t you just find it overwhelming and think of an excuse to not go?”

Ryoko sighed. “I guess there aren’t many celebs like Miyoshi where you can just throw on a little makeup and go be yourself, huh?”

“Not in our industries...”

Although I’m not really sure Miyoshi counts as a “celeb.” More like a VIP-type, Haruka thought to herself.

After all, she and Yoshimura had been requested by the national government to refrain from international travel. That wasn’t exactly normal. Haruka *had* wondered what exactly their background was, but as far as she could tell from talking to them, they were simply two cordial, ordinary explorers. Although sometimes their behavior did seem odd.

“I wonder what she and Yoshimura are up to right now,” Haruka mused.

“Ah, we should have invited them!”

“On New Year’s Day? Come on, we don’t want to bother them.”

“A bother?! Me? Never.”

“Right, right. You’re practically family after all.”

“Why does that feel like a slight?”

“You’re just imagining things. Come on.”

“Fiiine...”

***

“What’s up, boy? Is someone there?” I asked Cavall—probably—who had stuck his head up from the darkness.

“It’s pretty rare for someone to be hanging around the first floor,” Miyoshi

observed.

“Mitsurugi and Saito maybe?”

“The Arthurs are familiar with them though. In that case they probably would have given them a greeting.”

“A surprise greeting in the middle of a dungeon?”

It didn’t take too much to imagine what someone’s reaction would be if a monster suddenly jumped out at them from the darkness in the middle of a dungeon floor—friendly hellhound or not.

“Hm. Plus, those two usually hang around close to the entrance. We’re already pretty far in.”

That’s true. If they’re still exiting and returning after defeating each slime, going this far in would just be a hindrance.

Miyoshi asked Cavall if it was someone we knew, to which he shook his head.

All right, so it’s not Mitsurugi and Saito. We should probably head even deeper.

Then again, I wondered if those two were really still sticking to their in-and-out slime regimen. It was as inconvenient as it was effective for accumulating experience. The important bit wasn’t going to the entrance, in particular, but rather resetting your first-defeat trigger by stepping outside the dungeon’s bounds. *Come to think of it, what exactly* counts *as being “outside” the dungeon’s bounds?*

“Hey, Miyoshi.”

“Hm?”

“That guy with the video camera the other day. You captured him using the Arthurs, right?”

“You mean Himuro?”

“Was that his name? Well, either way, the Arthurs put him somewhere, right? Where was that?”

“I dunno,” Miyoshi answered. “Arthur Space?”

I almost burst out laughing. "'Arthur Space'? What kind of name is that?"

"I don't know! They live in the shadows. You think they're actually traveling to a different physical spot? It has to be some kind of subspace!"

"I guess so, thinking about it rationally." *Not that* anything *about this is rational.*

"So then I'm going to call whatever subspace that is Arthur Space."

In other words, they aren't traveling directly between one location and another, but rather going into their own subspace—and an object held within that space can be transferred between locations when the Arthurs go through it to switch places. Probably. They're able to switch places between other locations and our office, after all.

If we could only hone in on how exactly that swapping process worked, teleportation wouldn't be out of the question. However, that was all besides the point.

"Do you think this 'Arthur Space' counts as outside the dungeon?"

If their subspace wasn't counted as a separate space in the traditional sense, but instead an extra layer of reality laid on top of this one, it would likely still be recognized as being within the dungeon. However, the possibility was there.

"Kei, you don't happen to be getting a whiff of cheese, do you?"

"At least call it a *strategy*." I gave a sly smile."If Arthur Space *is* recognized as being outside of the dungeon—"

"The efficiency of our slime-hunting is about to shoot waaay up."

"Bingo."

Miyoshi ran over to the next slime, then turned around. "Okay, you're on experience-checking duty!" she called.

I called up Making's display and checked Miyoshi's stats, giving her an "okay" sign with my pointer finger and thumb.

"All right, Cavall. Do your thing."

As soon as Miyoshi gave the command, she plummeted into a shadow on the

ground, reappearing the next second.

“Phew. I thought that would feel like having the ground dropped out from under you, but it all happened so quickly I hardly felt anything at all. Your vision just goes dark for an instant.”

“Huh.”

“Okay, here goes nothing!”

Miyoshi faced the slime in front of her, holding the spray bottle aloft, then delivered a quick spritz of Alien Drool onto its gelatinous hide. In an instant, the slime burst, and Miyoshi crushed its core.

“Anything?” she called.

Without even realizing it, I had curled my hand into a fist and done a small pump in the air. The instant she’d defeated the slime, her SP display on Making had gone up by .02. In other words, the Arthurs’ shadow pit had been treated as being outside of the dungeon!

“Perfect.”

“Yay! So no more going back and forth to the entrance?”

“Not for us. Man, this sure saves us some effort. Doesn’t seem like we’re going to have any trouble getting experience for a while.”

“It’s just a shame we have to use the Arthurs to do it. Plus, your field of view and any attacks you’ve launched get interrupted, so it isn’t going to be very practical for any of the hordes on the tenth or eighteenth floors.”

“True. But we don’t have to do it after every monster. Even getting an occasional reset when things are clear will help out.”

“Still, Kei...”

“What is it?”

“The shadow pit’s magic, right?”

“Huh? Why do you a—*ah!*”

If the shadow pit counts as magic, are we chewing through Cavall’s MP?

Without some kind of boost from a skill or item, the rate of MP recovery seemed to be around one point per INT stat point per hour.

If the shadow pit took one MP and we had Cavall use it once every ten seconds, it would consume 360 MP in one hour. Even assuming he overcame average human MP limits as a monster, I couldn't imagine he possessed more than 360 points. If we continued using the shadow pit, his abilities would eventually give out.

"Cavall!" Miyoshi called. Examining him with Appraisal, she asked various questions related to MP usage, the shadow pit, and his rate of recovery.

"So, what's the gist?" I inquired.

"He can't answer anything about specific numbers, but I got an impression of how long he'll be able to hold out if we have him keep using it like this."

"And?"

"He says he should be okay from about breakfast time to dinner."

Oh, right. The Arthurs have no concept of discrete units of time.

Since that could pose hurdles for timing contact with the outside world, we'd tried teaching them, but progress had stalled out around providing instructions like "when the timer chimes," or "when the short hand gets to this position."

"Uh, that leaves a pretty big window. It could be anywhere between ten and fourteen hours."

"Yeah. I guess we should keep them on a stricter feeding schedule. But anyway, we should be good for at least eight hours."

"That's longer than I was expecting."

Taking items in and of storage hardly seemed to use any MP, so I supposed the shadow pit might work the same way. When Miyoshi summoned her iron balls, it seemed to consume less than one point of MP per instance.

We learned more from Cavall, like that this low rate of consumption was apparently limited to situations in which shadow pit was used on the hellhounds' summoner or other party members. In cases of capturing other monsters or individuals outside the party, the MP drain would be more severe.

In addition, plunging large objects into the shadow pit or using it to carry items would increase MP drain further still, although he was unable to tell us by how much.

“If anything happens, we’ll be in a pinch if he runs out of magic, so let’s limit our use to four hours for now,” I suggested.

“We can keep an eye on his stats over the next hour to see how he’s holding up,” Miyoshi added.

Appraisal displayed monster stats the same way it did for people—relative to the user’s. However, we could get a general sense of the rate of Cavall’s MP consumption by seeing how quickly that difference changed.

“All right then, back to work,” I declared.

“Roger!”

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“Man, bro, this sucks.”

Tenko stood up and stretched his back in between killing slimes. Yoshida shot him a dirty look. Defeating slimes the rudimentary way was tough-going.

“It would appear you were right about physical attacks not having much effect,” Yoshida admitted.

“Bro, *now* you get it?” Tenko could only smirk at Yoshida’s hopeless comment.

Tenko didn’t consider himself a slouch when it came to exploring, but even with his skills, five minutes per slime was the fastest he could manage. Slimes’ attack patterns were simple, and there was almost no danger in the encounter, but cut or slice, hit or dice, physical attacks yielded almost no effect. Tenko’s hammer bounced back several times on each one. Every once in a while, he would manage to strike down right on its core on first attempt, defeating it in one blow—but it wasn’t something that could be relied on, having all the consistency of a video-game critical hit.

“Spraying them with the fire extinguisher didn’t work either,” Jo commented. “Mr. Yoshida, we’re never going to get the manor to show up at this rate. What

do you think we should do?”

The first floor might have been safe, but there was no way there was no way they would be able to meet the requirements to summon the manor within twenty-four hours at this rate. At a rate of five minutes per slime, their total number after twenty-four hours would only be 288.

“Any thoughts, Mr. Tenko?” Yoshida called. “Any new ideas that seem like they might work?”

“‘New ideas’? If someone could defeat slimes faster than this, they woulda done it ages ago.”

“Of course...” Yoshida slumped down in defeat.

“Hold on. Our current issue is that you can only strike a small area with the hammer, right?” Jo said. “So what if we put a metal sheet over them, and then —I don’t know—jumped on it? *Pow!*”

Setting down his camera, Jo pantomimed the jump.

“You’re too late on that,” Tenko replied. “Someone’s tried it.”

“Crap. Figures.”

“Long story short, see all these little grooves and indentations in the floor here? The slimes just push their cores into them to avoid being squished.”

“Then how about getting them to climb onto one sheet, and bringing down another from above?”

Tenko gave a weary smile and shook his head. That had been attempted as well. Apparently the gelatinous part of the slime acted as a cushion, shielding the core until the slime rolled and oozed its way out of the seam between sheets.

“Then we could try putting a box around the two sheets or something so they can’t slip out.”

“Like a tentsuki!” Yoshida shouted, bolting up.

Tentsuki were wooden devices used to make gelatinous seaweed noodles used in summer dishes. Consisting of a box attached to a paddle with a wire

grating at the front, the gelatinous seaweed jelly would be fed into the back of the box, then pushed through with a hammer until it strained through the front in thin strips.

“Of course,” Jo said. “As long as the holes in the grating are smaller than the width of the core, we can just strain out the exteriors!”

“Those slimes are stronger than they look,” Tenko cautioned. “It’s gonna take a lot of time and manpower to squeeze one of those little dudes through.”

“Then we’ll just build a large-scale one!” Yoshida cried. “In the meantime...”

Yoshida turned to Jo and instructed him to run out to Kappabashi and pick up the largest tentsuki-styled strainer he could.

“What? Now?”

“What’s the matter? It’s still early. We’ve got plenty of time.”

“I guess so, but...it’s New Year’s Day. Do you even think shops will be open?”

“There are sure to be some. Oh, and bring back some equipment batteries too!”

“You know I’m not your gofer, right?” Jo grumbled, accepting a handful of cash from Yoshida.

“Then what’re we supposed to do?” Tenko asked.

Tenko didn’t exactly see the tentsuki plan working, but figured he should at least be able to get some more amusing footage for his own channel. He decided to stick around.

“I suppose we can head up for a bit. We’ll wait at a café.”

“Now you’re talkin’!”

While the three of them headed for the exit, they heard what sounded like someone running, coming from somewhere to their left.

“Huh. So there were other explorers hanging around the first floor after all,” Yoshida mused.

“That figures,” Tenko said. “But I wonder what’s got ’em in such a rush.”

“Maybe something’s chasing them,” Jo suggested, switching on his camera.

“Now there’s a professional!” Tenko stated admiringly. “Can’t let good content go to waste!”

“Tenko! You don’t suppose a unique monster has reared its head, do you?” Yoshida asked.

“A unique monster on Yoyogi’s first floor? Never heard anything like that happening.”

“Well, that’s why they’re called unique!” Yoshida shouted.

Just then, a slender figure of indeterminate gender in a facemask turned the corner, nearly bumping into Yoshida’s group.

“Gah! There’s something comin’!” Tenko cried.

The figure turned a brief glance towards Tenko, then continued in the direction of the exit without saying a word. Yoshida’s party looked on in stunned silence. Soon after, another figure came barreling towards them.

“Gwaaaaah!”

Yoshida’s attention had been so focused on the first figure that the appearance of this second had elicited an involuntary scream. He jumped back towards the wall. This time, however, the silhouette of the approaching figure was unmistakably female.

“Nothingtoseehereneverminsorrythaaanks!” the figured called, running past.

“What the heck was that?” Yoshida spluttered. He continued to gaze after the two figures.

Tenko’s attention, meanwhile, had shifted to the direction from which they’d come.

“Hold on,” Tenko requested, heading down the path from which the figures had emerged.

“What’s up with him?” Yoshida asked.

“Beats me.” Jo’s face was pensive. It seemed like he knew more than he was

letting on.

“Do you know something about this?” Yoshida asked.

“It’s just that, er, wasn’t that Ryoko Saito?”

“Ryoko Saito?”

“You don’t know? She’s that actress who made headlines after being picked for a leading film role in an audition that was supposed to be rigged for someone else. At least according to the rumors.”

“Winning over the director’s heart in a rigged audition? I’m sorry; I don’t believe in fairytales.”

That was the stuff of a comic or fantasy drama, not the real world of quid pro quo studio politics. *Right?*

“That’s what had everyone so shocked.” Jo shrugged.

“But if that came out, whoever set up the rigged audition would lose a lot of goodwill.”

“That’s why it’s limited to rumors. No one’s going to come right out and say it.”

“Still, normally you wouldn’t even hear such rumors. This industry runs on relationships. Did someone have an axe to grind with the studio?”

“Not a chance. This is the big leagues. No one’s going to burn their bridges over one rigged audition. They’d never work again.”

“Then why?”

“Ah, that...”

According to Jo, Saito had gone off script in a promotional interview and revealed the existence of a certain “coach” behind a dungeon-based training regimen. That had set the eyes of producers and the media ablaze, and led to the rumor about the rigged-audition being spread—it served to prove that her training had been the real deal.

“Let me get this straight. She improved her *acting* by dungeon diving?”

“No one had even heard of her two months before the audition. She was a

total unknown, and apparently for good reason. Now you can see why she caused such an uproar."

"Then the person she was running after just now...was her coach?"

"Man, it'd be a huge scoop if it was! Anyone who's anyone is after that coach right now!" Jo gripped the camera's liquid crystal display, taking another look at the figure he had captured.

"Still though, I haven't heard anything about this on TV."

"That tracks. Right now the ones who are interested are producers, not general audiences."

"I see."

Suddenly, Jo's head shot up, as if another thought had just struck him. "Speaking of rumors, the person who requested this pilot was Ishizuka at Central TV, right?"

"That's right. Why?"

"There's another rumor going around production crew circles. Apparently a certain director went crazy while investigating Ryoko Saito and her staff."

"What's that got to do with us?"

"He was an old friend of Ishizuka's. Apparently he was investigating her at his request."

"I see. So you're saying something happened to this director during the investigation? He bungled it and couldn't take the stress?"

"I don't know," Jo answered. "But according to someone who saw him soon afterwards, he looked like he'd just seen a ghost, and wouldn't say a thing about what had happened."

"Is this your pitch for a horror film?" Yoshida smirked.

"Dunno," Jo said. "Maybe she's cursed."

"Oh, hush," Yoshida replied dismissively. "That's all just a make-believe story to scare away other snoops. Still, why was Ishizuka going after Saito in the first place? Was she involved in some kind of scandal?"

“She was just chosen as the lead actress for a movie Central Television is involved in. You really think another producer in the same studio would be trying to dig up a scandal?”

“Maybe someone wants to blackmail her into some off-set relations?”

“Maybe that’s what *you* would do...”

“That’s it, consider your pay docked ten percent for today!”

“Whoa, hey! Take a joke!”

“Production crew might know enough not to lay their hands on the goods, but you never know with these pampered executives.”

“Speaking from personal experience?”

“Of course not. But if it’s true that Ms. Saito’s piqued Ishizuka’s interests, maybe we can score some points by giving her a starring role.”

“Get real. She’s on her way towards becoming one of the hottest actresses in Japan. Plus, she’s in the middle of a film shoot. You’re not going to get her to drop everything to show up on some crummy pilot. Not to mention, if she got injured during filming, it’d be our heads.”

“Aren’t you the least bit curious as to what she was doing here?”

“Well...”

Just then, Tenko came running around the corner.

“Tenko. What got into you all of a sudden?” Yoshida called.

“I just had a feeling.”

“‘A feeling’?”

“I didn’t get it at first either, but just look back at where those two came from. There isn’t a single slime.”

“Not a single slime?”

“Damn straight. Not a single one down that path. It’s like—*poof*—they just vanished.”

Ordinarily, one couldn’t take two steps in Yoyogi Dungeon’s first floor without

bumping into a slime. If all of them along that route were gone, something was definitely off.

“Are you saying those two defeated them all?”

When a slime was defeated, it wouldn’t be long before another would appear in the same area—whether from respawns or relocation.

There was only one way an area could be completely clear of slimes—they had all been defeated before a single new one could spawn or move in. But if that were the case— “How the hell did they manage that?” Yoshida wondered.

“Don’t look at me,” Tenko huffed.

Only half-believing Tenko’s words, Yoshida stepped forward and peeked down the hall from which the two figures had appeared. There, near the back of the tunnel, wriggled a single, newly spawned slime.

Annotations

Kappabashi: The name of a marketplace district in Tokyo’s Taito City famous for cookware goods. Not to be mistaken for a politically or geographically distinct region or town. Has the equipment to meet essentially any culinary need. Holds the Kappabashi Kitchen Tools Festival every year on October ninth, which is really worth checking out!

Yoyogi Dungeon, Aboveground

Following their encounter with Yoshida, Ryoko and Haruka stopped to collect themselves at the dungeon's entrance.

"Haru, I think we'd better hold off on going back."

The two of them had never imagined that a commercial-grade-camera-toting TV crew would be wandering the first floor of Yoyogi on New Year's Day of all days.

"What the heck are they doing? Do you think they're after you, Ryoko?" Haruka tossed her friend a sidelong glance, recalling her recent slipup regarding her "coach."

"No way! They didn't come chasing after us. If they were after me, they would have run up mics ready."

"Here's hoping."

"Ugh, we went through all the trouble of coming here, and now we can't hunt slimes in peace. How about we go home?"

"And give up just like that? We won't be able to come tomorrow. I say we stick around just a little longer and try to get some more hunting in, even if we have to stay into the night."

"Seriously?!"

"If you're satisfied not meeting quota, suit yourself, but not me. I can't stand the feeling of a routine half done."

"Come on! There's no quota! We just defeat as many slimes as we can!"

"Well, it's like an exercise routine. You wouldn't just get up and leave when you'd only just started your workout."

"But that...that's different!" Ryoko tried to protest, but Haruka was strong-minded. Once she got an idea about something, there was no changing it. Ryoko let out a sigh. "Okay, well, I *guess* I can keep you company."

"Thanks, Ryo!"

“But it’s already a bit past noon. Should we grab lunch somewhere? If we eat at Yoyogi Café, those guys from earlier might spot us, so how about somewhere offsite?”

“You read my mind.”

“Great! In that case, our ‘coach’ told me about a great little soba place that’s only open during lunch.”

“What? When did you two talk about that?!” Haruka asked with a hint of jealousy.

“Since he’s been going along with you for training, he’s been gathering info on good restaurants in the area to go to during lunch. *Apparently*.” Ryoko puffed up her cheeks.

“Ah! Can’t say I don’t appreciate it! Anyway, I’m curious about that soba place, but this being New Year’s Day, we’ll probably have to settle for a chain. Nothing else will be open.”

“Shoot, that’s right! The Gusto on the other side of the park closed, but there’s a Denny’s on the opposite corner. Their summer menu’s peach-flavored shaved ice is to die for.”

“They do have pretty good desserts sometimes.”

“Yup!” Ryoko responded. Soon she would be so famous that even the simple pleasure of a trip to Denny’s would be lost to her. Reflecting on that fact with a mixture of happiness and sadness, she called out, “All right! Let’s get changed and head out!”

“I’ll treat you, as a present for keeping me company,” Haruka said on their way to the changing rooms.

“Don’t get so high and mighty over paying for a little Denny’s!” Ryoko laughed.

“I am not!”

Bantering back and forth, sailing on a sea of high spirits, the two disappeared behind the changing room doors.

Yoyogi Dungeon, First Floor

“I don’t know whether to be impressed, or appalled.”

I watched Miyoshi dip into the shadow pit again, this time in full-on relaxation mode, leaning back in a chair, engaged in running a handful of other tests now that she’d proved Arthur Space’s use in hunting.

Still reclining, Miyoshi fired her spray bottle at a slime, then dipped into the shadow pit while Cavall searched for the next one, bringing Miyoshi back up right in front of it.

From a distance, it looked like Miyoshi was repeatedly defeating slimes and teleporting in her chair. I could hardly contain my laughter.

“With Mitsurugi’s monklike dedication to running back and forth to the entrance, I don’t think we’d ever *really* have to worry about her defeating too many slimes, but if this technique ever catches on, three hundred in a day is going to be a low count!” Miyoshi shouted.

“‘Monklike’? But if anything, maybe we should let her in on the routine?”

“Maybe. But then maybe we should think about summoning more Arthurs.”

Our current four hellhounds were divided between protecting the two of us and guard duty at the office, with the fourth remaining on standby should anything happen. In a pinch, we wouldn’t have any to spare.

With Miyoshi’s INT stat, increasing their numbers would be possible, but we didn’t know for sure that increasing their numbers wouldn’t divide their strength, weakening each individual accordingly. At the very least, it seemed like it would require testing. However, that was easier said than done.

“Although, this method does have its downsides,” Miyoshi commented.

According to Miyoshi, your view of your surroundings was cut off every time you were dropped into the shadow pit, and when it returned, you were in a completely different spot from before. The effect could be disorienting.

“Plus, according to Cavall, it chews through MP,” she added.

The least mentally exhausting for Miyoshi, and apparently least draining on

the Arthurs' MP, was the method of dropping her into the shadow pit for a split second, then returning her to the same spot. After that, it was simply a matter of finding and walking up to the next slime, same as we'd been doing before, only with the benefit of the experience-point reset. The world around you would go dark for a moment after defeating each slime, but it was no different, in terms of sensation, from a long blink.

""I've even started to get over that sinking feeling," Miyoshi explained.

Apparently at this point, it felt more like being enveloped by darkness from the sides.

If Arthur Space were a separate plane from ours, I supposed it could be considered a form of movement—and in reality it might have been. Like the entrances to the dungeons themselves, even if the connection seemed seamless, the shadow pit may have acted as a link to a different area. Although as far as how to manipulate that link, only the Arthurs themselves knew.

"Still..."

While watching Miyoshi's shadow-pit-assisted slime-hunting, I kept an eye on her SP intake using Making.

After only one hundred slimes, her SP had risen by two points. If she continued defeating three hundred every day for half a month, the experience intake would be equivalent to one Ngai. In one month, she would be approaching the level of SP I'd estimated the world's top-ranked explorers might have. All without leaving Yoyogi's first floor.

"In two months you could be in the single digits," I said.

"It won't be long before the WDARL is dominated by anonymous explorers from Area 12!" Miyoshi crowed, seeming pleased.

Unlike me, it wouldn't be a sudden jump out of nowhere to the top, but the speed of Miyoshi's ascent was sure to turn some heads. *Wait, come to think of it—*

"Miyoshi, how often is the WDARL updated?"

"I don't know. It doesn't seem like they're automatically updated every time

that weird tablet thing is, so I'd guess about once a week? Although it's possible it's as infrequent as once a month."

"If it's only once a month, the whole group of top explorers could suddenly be switched out."

"Aha! It's going to seem like a vast Area 12 conspiracy! Everyone's going to lose their minds." Miyoshi was delighted.

Whoa, whoa. They lost their minds enough when just one Area 12 anonymous jumped to the top of the rankings. We don't need to stir the pot any more. There's no telling what'll happen.

Someone would think Area 12 was mass-producing superhumans. A single outlier appearing at the top of the rankings was one thing, but a trend was another.

"We're not too far off from the day Yoyogi is the center of all the world's dungeon attention, huh?" Miyoshi commented.

"No joke. I don't suppose there's any way we can put our Arthur-accelerated regimen into the boot camp curriculum either..."

To do that, first we would need to reveal our method of expediting slime-hunting with benzethonium chloride, as well as the details on Darkness Magic (VI). In addition, we would need to cover up the existence of Making by pretending to have some kind of SP-measuring technology that even our upcoming devices wouldn't explain. After all, unless the trainee could visualize how this particular method of slime-hunting affected their growth, it wouldn't matter if it was ten times more efficient—convincing people of the efficacy of this particular method wouldn't just be difficult, but potentially impossible.

We could try to pull one over on people and attribute our knowledge of experience gain to Appraisal, but as soon as a second user appeared, the jig would be up.

"Don't worry. The purpose of boot camp is to draw out enrollees' latent potential," Miyoshi stated. "We could save this for something like employee development?"

"But we don't have any employees."

“In the future! Although I suppose we’re dealing with a few too many secrets to let anyone else in right now. Ah, how are we supposed to tell who in this world we can trust?!”

“Whoa, has the time come for Miyoshi to sympathize with the plight of human resource managers?”

“Not at all. But when you think about it, we’re pretty blessed with the company we keep.”

“For sure.”

From Naruse to Mitsurugi to Saito, we could rest assured that none of the people we’d trusted with our knowledge would use it for ill-gotten gains.

Of course, the person I was most grateful for was the one I was talking to at that moment. But I was too proud to say that.

“Still, we can’t keep all the secrets forever,” I pointed out. “The most important thing is going to be unveiling them, one at a time, at a rate the JDA and the rest of society can keep up with.”

“When did you start thinking so much about the good of society?” Miyoshi teased.

“What’s that supposed to mean?!” I shot back.

“Nothing. I just thought you might be the kind to chase success for the sake of it, leaving society to pick up the pieces.”

“Give me some credit. I’m not so disruption-obsessed that I lack enough common sense to refrain from completely pulling the rug out from under life as we know it.”

Well, I can’t say it was entirely altruistic. Of course I wanted to preserve our marketplace advantage too. While there may have been a certain conscientiousness to slow roll-outs, having a secure future was an important factor as well—at least it was to me.

“Hey, Miyoshi. Speaking of secrets, what about that chair?”

“You mean the Throne of Ngai?”

We had gathered the Throne of Ngai as a drop from the boss atop the eighteenth floor's Batian Peak. A solid gold chair, we'd left it collecting dust inside Vault, fearing the possible repercussions of trying to sit on or use it.

"Yeah. Worst-case scenario, we could just use it as a bit of spooky interior decoration," I mused.

With work for Heaven's Leaks having reached a conclusion for the time being, the first floor of our office had finished its role as Naruse's makeshift bedroom and returned to its former status. Now wouldn't be a bad time to consider a little sprucing up.

"You know that if we do that, Naruse's going to sit on it," Miyoshi pointed out.

"Hey, for all we know its effect might just be something like a massage chair." Its creepy flavor text was what had prevented either of us from trying it. "Since we're just killing time anyway, why don't we try putting a slime on it and see what happens?"

"Animal experimentation? A new low. All right. Just don't blame me if you accidentally create a Ngai slime!"

"Don't say things that seem like such obvious last words! We don't need the universe getting any ideas." I gave Miyoshi, who had crouched down to spray a slime, a light karate chop on the top of the head.

"Hmph!"

"Anyway, how are we going to move the slime?"

Slimes were ordinarily soft and squishy, but if you tried to attack or grab one, they would propel themselves forward by some invisible force, clinging to and enveloping their prey. Once they had you, they would almost never let go.

"We could use some kind of flat object and let it roll on top?"

"If the slime thinks it's an attack, it's just going to try to grab on. I saw it happen with Saito. If that happens, we'd have no choice but to defeat it."

If you tried pulling it, it would simply envelope your hands as well. I was thinking back to the situation I'd found Mitsurugi and Saito in when I'd first run

across them in Yoyogi. According to Mitsurugi, the surface of a slime offered almost no resistance, making it nearly impossible to grab hold of to pull off.

“Although in our case, it’s a simple matter of giving it a little Benzetho-Blast,” I added.

“A little what?” Miyoshi asked.

“Er, Benzetho-Blast. It’s the special-attack name I came up with for the benzethonium chloride spray.”

“You can be so cringe. Oh well. I guess it’s better than a ‘Benzethowhatever-beam,’” Miyoshi conceded. “Anyway, let’s give it a go!”

With that vote of confidence, Miyoshi approached the nearest slime.

“Now, what to use as a tray...”

Something like a plastic sled would have been perfect, but I didn’t expect to find one of those lying around.

“What about this?” I asked.

The object I’d pulled out was the titanium frying pan I had used as a shield when we’d first started exploring.

“Wow, that brings back some memories. That’s perfect!” Miyoshi responded. “Come put it over here.”

I set down the skillet at a spot just a little in front of the nearest slime, and let it wriggle forwards while Miyoshi approached it from behind. She prepared to nudge it with her—

“Wait, what the hell are you doing?” I asked.

“What? I didn’t have anything else on hand, and this fit the bill of ‘flat object’ too,” Miyoshi replied, flustered.

Well, a *tablet* by its literal definition *was* just a ‘flat surface.’ Gripping the approximately ten-inch device with both hands, Miyoshi attempted to gently nudge the slime onto the frying pan.

“There we go... Just a little m—whoa!”

After having been nudged a few centimeters, the slime suddenly turned and

attacked as if a trap had been sprung, glomming onto Miyoshi's device.

"Wah! My tablet!" she cried.

The technology in question now floated within the translucent interior of the slime. It wouldn't be long before it dissolved.

"Shoot." Pulling out a spray bottle, Miyoshi hit the slime with a little Benzetho-Blast and retrieved her tablet from its remains. "We don't have as much leeway as I thought." She dried off the soaked device with a towel.

"Change of plans," I suggested.

Walking over to the next slime, I plopped the frying pan down on top of it like a lid.

"Now what?" Miyoshi asked. "You just scoop it?"

"I guess so. I could just flip it around and scoop it up with one hand like you do with a goldfish at a summer festival. Here—goes!"

As I flipped the pan around with my wrist, the slime seemed caught off guard, and for a moment just sat and wriggled in the middle of the pan. It seemed like I should just about be able to run it to the throne, when—

"What?! Wha—I need a chair!"

"Ah, close! Your pronunciation was just a little off! I think you mean, 'I need a doc-chair!'"

I had forgotten to take the throne out of Vault. The slime began flowing out of the pan, and just when it had started to creep up the handle towards my arm, I tossed the whole thing on the ground, before using a Benzetho-Blast in order to retrieve my cookware.

"I was pretty sure there wouldn't be any slimes here," I recited.

"Well, I don't know what else you thought there would be," Miyoshi replied.

"Ah, come on. Don't pretend like you don't get it," I shot back.

With a defeated smile, I walked over to the next slime and posed a question to one of the Arthurs.

"There aren't any other people nearby, right?"

It nodded, indicating we should be safe. That was good. We couldn't afford to be seen with the throne. That would have raised some uncomfortable questions we weren't ready to answer.

"Looks like we were putting the cart before the horse—or, er, the slime before the throne," Miyoshi corrected herself.

"Hmm... I almost understand what you're getting at," I intoned.

"Okay. Enough with the *Screw Style* quotes."

I laughed, then took the Throne of Ngai out of Vault.

"Good thing it doesn't stand out or anything," I quipped, beholding the solid gold seat.

"No one could ever accuse his tastes of being understated."

"You can say that again."

Scooping up another slime, this time I flipped the frying pan around again in the air and slammed it straight down onto the throne, holding it over the slime like a lid.

"Careful, Kei! You're going to damage it!"

"Relax, it's not like it's a cultural artifact."

With that, I lifted the frying pan off the slime, and to my astonishment—

"Huh?"

The slime I'd plopped down on the seat was suddenly enveloped by a faint blue light.

"Miyoshi! Get back!"

Before we could assume battle positions, the slime was expelled from the chair, thrown forward off its seat by some unseen propulsion.

"Wha—?"

"And here I was ready to fight a Ngai slime," Miyoshi lamented.

To tell the truth, I was half-expecting it myself! After all that buildup, the result of our experiment felt a little anticlimactic.

Miyoshi prodded at the slime, which had landed with a resolute “plorp” on the ground.

“I guess the throne...didn’t like it?”

“So what’s the deal?” I asked. “Anything weird about the slime?”

“Not as far as I can tell with Appraisal.” After a moment, Miyoshi dropped into the shadow pit, reemerged, then sprayed the slime just like always.

“What?!” I couldn’t restrain my voice.

“What’s wrong?” Miyoshi looked up.

“That slime just now. I wasn’t keeping track of our experience points!”

“So what?”

“‘So what?' nothing! I put it on the throne. If that counted as an attack, it might have screwed up my monster count with Making.”

If I’d been checking our experience points, I’d know for sure, but as it stood there was every bit the possibility that it might have been registered as a cooperative kill.

“I feel like it should be fine,” Miyoshi said, “but...I guess I can’t be sure.”

“Guh! Now I have to line up my numbers all over again!”

If our next opponent was a boss-level monster, being one off in my count could cost us an opportunity to get a valuable orb. I wished Making would get a level-up that came with a defeated-monster counter.

“Look, Kei. Not to worry. The first floor is crawling with slimes, after all!”

“Hmph. At least we know sitting on the throne shouldn’t lead to anything attacking us, or a curse.”

“The flavor text said the throne would reject us if we didn’t prove ourselves to be of worthy strength, but I guess it was pretty literal, huh?”

“That teaches us to go reading too much into flavor text.”

“I guess. Well then...should I give it a try?”

“You?”

“Of course! You’re the one who took down Ngai, so I’d think you’d have already proved your worth. It’ll be more interesting with me.”

“But if I do it, I could adjust my stats one point at a time to try to identify the exact threshold at which the throne will let you sit on it.”

“Ah, that’s true! In that case, I’ll keep hunting slimes, and leave the investigative sitting to the pros!”

“Okay.”

Seems like we’ll be facing some rumors from among visitors to our office in the future, about a mysterious chair you can’t sit on.

“When you’re finished, don’t forget to get your monster count back in line. We’ll need to have you at ninety-nine when the manor shows up.”

“I got it, I got it,” I grumbled. “What’s our target this time?”

“If those creepy eyeballs show back up, we could aim for another Appraisal. You could use the next one if you want.”

“I’d also kind of like to check out Fear and Surveillance,” I added.

“Kei, please forget about orbs it doesn’t seem like we’ll be able to sell or use for right now,” Miyoshi pleaded.

“Any interest in what a gargoyle or barrow wight might drop?”

“A little. But barrow wights basically seem like upgraded skeletons, so their orbs might not be much different. As for gargoyles...hm...”

I paused for a moment. “Maybe something like ‘Eternal Youth’ or ‘Unsleeping’?”

“I think we can go without those,” Miyoshi concluded.

Yeah, those do seem a bit sketchy. There’s no way an orb with a name like “Eternal Youth” won’t just turn you to stone.

“Then...eyeballs it is. I’ll go for Appraisal.”

“Please do!”

Our conversation wrapped up, Miyoshi returned to her work of sending the

Arthurs in search of slimes, which she defeated in a steady rhythm.

In a separate location, I set about the monotonous task of getting my own monster count back in line, thanks to our mishap with the throne.

There wasn't anything posing a danger on the first floor, and we had the Arthurs there too, so we passed the next several hours rather carefree.

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Around 10 p.m., we decided to take a break, and took out our folding chairs and table, eating some of our leftover boxed meals from the last time we'd gone exploring.

The Arthurs each received one magic crystal as reward for their troubles, which they gobbled up hungrily. *I wonder what those things taste like...*

"For being inside of a dungeon, this does feel kind of elegant," Miyoshi commented.

"I don't really know if you can call anything about preboxed lunches 'elegant,' but I suppose that's a matter of opinion."

It depended on where you were eating, but you certainly wouldn't call the same meal consumed on a Yoyogi Park bench "elegant."

"Then why don't we try adding a little ambience?"

Miyoshi extracted a Gothic-styled candelabra from Storage.

"What the hell is that?"

"A candelabra." Miyoshi placed it on the table, pulled out a handful of candles, then proceeded to light them one by one.

"No, I mean, what are you doing bringing out a candelabra in the middle of a dungeon?"

"I thought it might lend a little atmosphere to help liven up our busywork."

"'Atmosphere,' huh?"

I had to admit, the sight of our dancing shadows cast by the flickering candlelight did bring out a certain ambience. However, rather than "elegant," it was...

“Seems like we’re doing some kind of weird cult ritual,” I scoffed.

“Even better!” Miyoshi laughed. “If anyone comes walking our way from that curving tunnel, they’ll see the flickering light and shadows on the dungeon wall, and figure something creepy’s going on!”

“Erm...”

“I’m going to go see what it looks like!”

“All right. Take care.”

Miyoshi bounced away from the table and skipped down the neighboring tunnel. I shoved the trash from our meal into Vault. Even if the slimes would dissolve it, something didn’t feel right about littering.

There had been discussions of bringing radioactive waste and other dangerous materials into dungeons for disposal, but so far such talks hadn’t moved beyond the hypothetical stage.

“If people had known about slimes dissolving things sooner, someone could have made bank by turning a privately owned dungeon into a specialized dump,” I mused out loud.

With their ability to break down and dispose of any and everything left in them, dungeons might even have been used as coordinated global garbage bins. Although there was no guaranteeing how the dungeons might have developed had they been used for that.

Removing my phone from my pocket, I took a quick glance at the time.

Vault and Storage were handy, but one problem was that the internal clocks of any electronic devices stored in them would wind up out of sync. Although that could be solved in the cases of PCs and smartphones by linking them up to an NTP server, dungeon interiors didn’t allow that connection.

In other words, we couldn’t put any devices we wanted to use to tell time into Storage or Vault.

“Maybe a watch wouldn’t hurt, just for dungeon exploration..."

“Kei! Kei! You have to see this! It's so spooky!” Miyoshi came running around the corner, looking extremely satisfied. Spotting me checking the time, she

added, “By the way, is it almost half past?”

“Just about," I answered. "What’s up?”

“Well...” Before Miyoshi could finish her thought, the head of one giant black dog poked up from the shadows near her feet. “Ah, Drudwyn! There you are!”

Miyoshi knelt down and patted Drudwyn on the head, offering him a magic crystal. She removed the knitted pouch she’d made the other day from its neck and extracted a micro SD card from inside it.

“What is that?”

“The other day when I got in touch with Naruse, I specified a time and asked her to help in a little experiment. True to form, our dedicated supervisor was right on schedule.”

“Seriously? It's New Year's Day. Do you the words 'work-life balance' mean anything to you?”

“Don’t worry. As soon as I mentioned it was for an experiment, Naruse was happy to help. Besides, you can’t be too shy to reach out in a pinch.”

“This isn’t a pinch though...”

Miyoshi inserted the memory card into her tablet and pressed play.

“Um, ah. Hello. Is this on? Um, this is Naruse. Can you see me? Ah, what am I saying? This is a recording. It’s not like you’d be able to respond!”

The recorded Naruse put a finger to her forehead, feigning cutesy embarrassment.

“She’s really overdoing it.”

“Definitely,” Miyoshi agreed.

“Anyway, I’m sending a message like you asked! Um, how are things going in the dungeon? Knowing you two, it’s probably fine! Anyway, don’t push yourselves if the manor shows up! Finally, some kind of performance. Um...” The recorded Naruse cocked her head.

“What’s she talking about?”

“I asked her to end with some kind of little act.”

“Seriously? Now that’s just exploitative.”

Naruse raised her head, having finally settled on something, then looked at the camera. “Well then, how about a little charm to keep the monsters at bay?” Naruse closed her eyes, then made a kissy-face.

The second she did, Drudwyn poked his head into the footage, licking Naruse on the cheek.

“W-Waaaah!” Naruse shouted, falling over gracelessly.

“Kei...we may want to store this for safekeeping. It might be a national treasure.”

“She’s definitely going to kill you if that ever gets uploaded.”

Regaining her composure, Narasue gave Drudwyn a pat, then shut the camera off. Afterwards, she would have attached the SD card to Drudwyn and sent him our way.

“Now we’ll store the card with this national treasure on it, and send one of our own.”

Miyoshi produced a camera loaded with a new card from Storage, set it up on a tripod, and pointed it my direction, but I instantly turned it around on her.

“Why don’t we try going with you instead? A kind of dungeon tea-party princess concept, with you surrounded by the Arthurs at the table.”

After all, Miyoshi was already the face of the party. I preferred to remain behind the scenes.

“‘Tea party’? What am I, five?” Miyoshi said, exasperated. Still, she sat herself down at the table, crossed her legs daintily, and called two of the Arthurs to frame her on either side in the narrow corner of the dungeon corridor, delicately lifting her empty cup.

“Where are the other two Arthurs?” I asked.

“One is at the office, and one switched places with Drudwyn, so he’s with Naruse.”

“Oh, right.” The Arthurs’ movement did require them to switch places, rather

than directly going to and from.

We recorded a short message from Princess Miyoshi letting Naruse know we were okay, then played it back before sending it off.

“Hm. It actually looks more like you’re being attacked.”

“That’s not my fault! The space is too small for the Arthurs to fit, so we all had to cram in. Ugh, this doesn’t look elegant at all.” Still, Miyoshi laughed. “So much for my stint as a princess.”

Ah well, we couldn’t be too fussy. The important thing was confirming whether we could send a message out.

We took out the SD card and put it in Drudwyn’s pouch, then had him switch places with Aethlem. So long as the reply reached Naruse, the experiment would be a success.

“That took a little longer than expected, but it puts us about right on time. What d’you say? Time to summon the manor?”

“Kei, if the Wandering Manor spawns in a place like this, where do you think it’ll show up?”

Of course. Unlike the tenth floor, which looked like it was outdoors, the first floor of Yoyogi was entirely enclosed. In addition, the first floor was made up primarily of cramped corridors and small rooms.

In other words, the manor would have no place to fit.

“Erm, well...we won’t know until we try.”

“I guess the experiments aren’t quite done for today.”

And so we took off in search of our final five slimes.

***

“What the heck?”

Ryoko approached Haruka, who was eyeing her surroundings suspiciously, and asked “What’s wrong?”

“It’s like there aren’t any slimes around all of a sudden,” Haruka answered.

“How can that be?” Ryoko tried scanning her surroundings, too, but not a single slime, which were ordinarily wriggling about in great numbers, could be seen. “Haru, do you think we defeated them all?”

“No way. Besides, they usually come back before long.”

Haruka checked the surrounding hallways, but there were no slimes there either.

“It is almost midnight. Maybe they all went and gathered somewhere?” she mumbled.

“What, like in a Grimms’ fairytale?” Ryoko teased.

“Ack, you heard that?”

“Ha ha ha,” Ryoko laughed. “Loud and clear!”

Still, the fact that they couldn’t find even a single slime was certainly odd.

“Let’s try searching deeper in,” Haruka suggested.

For a moment, Ryoko felt a strange sense of trepidation at Haruka’s plan, but, concluding that there was no danger as long as they stuck to the first floor, she nodded and followed.

“Maybe we’ll find their secret meeting place,” Ryoko added.

Haruka groaned.

Annotations:

I need a doc-chair!**:** A reference to Yoshiharu Tsuge’s 1968 manga *Screw Style*, or *Nejishiki*, a seminal surrealist one-shot which ran in avant-garde manga magazine *Garo*. The original line is “I need a doc!”

“I was pretty sure there wouldn’t be any jellyfish here,” is another famous bit of dialogue. The jellyfish in question never appears in the comic, but many years later, toy company Magaidou produced a vinyl figure that somewhat resembles an RPG slime.

NTP Server**:** Network Time Protocol server. A server accessed by all machines on a network in order to sync time information between them.

Yoyogi Dungeon, First Floor

Wandering Manor

“There it is...”

As expected, as soon as Miyoshi had defeated her 373rd slime, the manor had materialized.

The space in front of the path before us opened up as if it had been carved out by the intrusion of an entirely new plane of reality. Around the manor, walls of rock which should have culminated in a ceiling instead stretched up into an open sky without end. It was as though a chunk of the first floor had been extracted, replaced wholesale with the Wandering Manor’s realm.

“I feel like that weirdly makes sense,” Miyoshi commented.

“I can’t imagine how else it would have shown up.”

On floors with a visible day and night, the time inside the dungeon seemed to keep in sync with the outside world, but the twilight haze surrounding the manor space didn’t resemble the near-midnight Shibuya time at all.

The creaking of its swaying iron gate, the gateposts with their etchings of Belphegor’s prime—all of it was just as we remembered. Although, unable to read Hebrew, we couldn’t guarantee whether the inscriptions on the gateposts were the same.

However, beyond the gate, something about the manor had changed.

The eyeballs which had been perched along the roof in such great numbers last time were nowhere to be seen. The rooftop gargoyles weren’t facing in our direction either. And although a few black birds sat on the desiccated branches of a withered tree in the distance, no giant raven—the Muninn of Norse mythology, so we’d learned—awaited us. In their stead—

“K-Kei, gh-ghosts are the one thing I *don’t* do.” Stammering, Miyoshi cowered behind me.

A pale blue humanoid figure was creeping around the yard directly in front of

our eyes. No, it wasn't alone—a number of other pale blue figures seemed to be aimlessly milling about the premises.

"What's going on here?"

"Exactly what it looks like," Miyoshi answered. "According to Appraisal, they're capital G 'Ghosts.'"

If you used Appraisal on a monster, it would show you their name, stats, and status. Exactly the same as it worked on the Arthurs.

"You mean like the kind that sing 'I'm 'Enry'?"

"If it were *Sam*, I wouldn't have a problem."

"Only because you can't actually see him."

"Damn right."

As an excuse for our cavalier reactions, the blue figures didn't actually seem to be looking at us. Rather, each one appeared to be going about its own script.

"Maybe they're moving according to memories of their previous life?" Miyoshi conjectured.

"Maybe. If they do attack, though, I don't think we can hold out much hope that our iron balls will work."

"I guess the only thing that would save us would be something like holy water. Not like we have any on hand."

"How about filtered water?"

From a certain point of view, such water was also *purified*.

"That's not how it works! You have to put some kind of holy...something in it! Or, I think anyway!"

"Some kind of 'holy something'?"

"You know," Miyoshi said, "like...faith!"

It was going to be a lot to ask for two ordinary modern Japanese people like us to understand the workings of anything about "faith." About the most presence religion had in our lives—outside of births, deaths, weddings, and

funerals—was through kitschy holidays like Christmas and Halloween.

In the first place, what was "faith"? If we had to dissolve it into holy water, it was going to be important to know. Like, its scientific constitution? *Come to think of it, there's that saying, "Ashes to ashes, dust to dust..." Maybe churches claim the faith is in dust particles to get out of spring cleaning...*

"Kei, you aren't thinking about anything that's going to start a holy war, are you? I'm talking about *belief*!"

"Ack, how'd you know?!"

"It was written all over your face—that look of concentration you get when you're trying to think of something funny. Or, that's what I'd like to say, but the truth is, I can hear your thoughts all the way over here. *Telepathy*, remember?"

Ah, shoot! I let my thoughts leak out again! I'd have to be careful to keep that reined in in the future. *Still, if faith is no go, the only other candidate I can think of for "holy water" is...*

"Drop it."

"Whaaat?!" I wasn't degenerate enough to speak the name of my second holy water candidate—inspired by a truly tasteless bit of energy drink branding back in 2015—out loud. However, telepathy had given me away regardless. "Dang. And I only let my guard down for a second. If telepathy spreads, it's going to be the end of all cordial human relations."

"Just imagine it in an immature middle-school class. It'll be the end of the education system as we know it."

"Education system nothing. It'll be the end of society." I didn't think *I* was particularly immature, so that was the only conclusion I could come to.

"At least with a limit of twenty meters and eight people, we don't have to worry about any three-million-man revolutions."

"That's nice and all, but what about child and grandchild parties? If they work out, they're going to make hive-mind coordination possible."

As I posed that question, one of the pale blue figures cut across my vision directly in front of me, wandering towards a withered flower bed on the other

side of the gate. There were absolutely no details on its face, but still I had the sense that it was some kind of gardener.

"I-I don't know," Miyoshi said, shuddering at the arrival of the spirit. "We haven't tried it."

The pale blue figures regarded us—or rather, didn't—as if we were ordinary garden decorations. Or—no, not that—it was if we didn't exist at all. They didn't even register our presence.

"Anyway," I responded, "if an infinite number of child and grandchild parties are possible, stirring up a three-million-man revolution actually isn't out of the question."

"Where are you planning on gathering three million people in a twenty-meter radius?" The ghost in front of us had drifted away, allowing Miyoshi to regain her usual confidence. "Plus, it's basically just a group chat. As far as political uses, all it would do is allow for another avenue of one-sided broadcasting. It shouldn't be too different from a campaign speech or television ad..."

"Let's hope so."

The current time was 11:21 p.m.

If the tablet is in the same place as last time, ten minutes should be plenty to grab it and get out. I'll pass on being chased around by eyeballs for half an hour.

"Kei, should we take a look around?"

"We could, but my monster count is already up to ninety-nine. If we have to take anything down, we'll sacrifice our chance for a boss orb. There's also that ineffective-iron-ball problem."

"If it doesn't look like my magic and the Arthurs can hack it, we can always beat a retreat."

But still, if we retreat from the mansion after summoning it, will making it reappear be as simple as defeating another 373 slimes? No guarantees, but there's a chance. Either way, better to retreat if necessary than push it and risk our lives.

"Okay," I said. "We can take a look around, but try to avoid doing anything

that seems like it might provoke the manor.”

“Righto!” Miyoshi responded.

Avoiding the front entrance, we tried walking around towards the back.

Not a single spirit paid us any heed.

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The area surrounding the manor was about as big as your average school. That was the impression I got.

Rounding the side of the building, we tried taking a peek in through the dust-covered windows. However, they were so high off the ground and grimy, it was hard to make anything out.

Inside, it looked like more ghosts were milling about, walking the corridors in routines that recalled those of housing staff—but it was hard to tell.

“Yyyaaahh!”

To my side, I heard Miyoshi squeal. Frantically turning around, I saw what had caused her reaction. One of the blue figures had stuck its “face” right up to the window. Its arms were busied in a circular motion that recalled window-cleaning, repeating the same action ad nauseam. However, not a speck of dust fell.

“How Sisyphean...” Miyoshi commented.

That spirit had probably been there for who knew how long trying to wipe the window clean. However, the passing years had only brought with them more dust, and not a speck of relief. In particular, the filth on the outside was awful.

Overcome by a surprising sense of righteous indignation, I extracted a towel from Vault and began wiping the window myself, in sync with the spirit’s actions.

When I was finished—while there was still dust left on the inside—you wouldn’t even have known that it was the same window.

The spirit’s movements stopped, and for a second I felt as though it—looked? —me in the eyes.

After a moment like that, the two of us staring at one another, the spirit turned and walked out of the room.

"*Kei, aren't you the one who said not to do anything to provoke the manor?*" Miyoshi hissed.

"Sorry."

"Well, I can't say I don't understand the sentiment. It was like watching someone toil at the bottom of the corporate ladder in one of those toxic companies."

I was beginning to understand where my righteous indignation had come from.

Continuing on from the windows, behind the mansion we found the remnants of what looked to have once been a meticulously maintained garden—if indeed the manor had ever existed outside the dungeons. Several trees, bent and gnarled, stretched up from the ground near the back.

"Looks like the aftermath of a nuclear holocaust," Miyoshi observed.

"If you think about it, it would actually feel creepier finding something here like Royal Victoria Park."

"Right. You'd have to wonder who was maintaining it."

"It doesn't seem like that gardener ghost from earlier would be up to the task."

We kept close to the outer walls of the manor as we walked, and by the time we were about to round the corner to the opposite side, the time was just around quarter to midnight.

That was when we found it—a back door, a small opening on the back side of the manor up a short flight of stairs.

"It's probably the kitchen door," Miyoshi assessed. "If it's set up like your typical old-fashioned mansion, that is. The area at the front would be a drawing room or a parlor."

The drawing room and parlor were both used for guests, but the distinction was that the drawing room was used for entertaining them postarrival, while

the parlor was where they would wait. *So this back entrance goes to the kitchen, huh?*

Unlike the front entrance, which we'd used last time, the back door didn't automatically open on approach.

I didn't sense that anything was lying in wait to ambush us behind it. However, I couldn't be sure. After all, Life Detection wasn't registering the ghosts.

"Let's just see if it opens," Miyoshi suggested.

We split up, flanking either side of the door. I gripped the handle.

"Feels kinda like we're American special forces or something, huh?" Miyoshi commented excitedly.

"Huh, yeah. We're dealing with a literal House of Horrors too."

The training facility used by the U.S. special operations team Delta Force was sometimes referred to as the "House of Horrors."

"Although in training, I don't suppose you have to worry about getting killed for real," she pointed out.

I summoned a reasonable amount of strength and pulled. The door rattled, but didn't open.

Miyoshi looked at me like I was a confused child.

"Kei. It's a western-style mansion. Most western-style doors open inward."

"Oh."

Japanese front doors tended to open outward, so I'd instinctively pulled.

Regaining my composure, this time I pushed lightly on the door. It opened, letting out a faint creak.

Inside was a rather small, dark room. In front of us and to the left were closed doors, and to the right a doorless entryway yawning into the dark abyss. There was nothing else of note in the room.

"The right probably leads to a larder or pantry," Miyoshi commented. A larder was a room used to store food. A pantry was too, but it could also indicate a

storage space for dishes and cooking utensils. “They used to store wine in rooms like that too,” she added thirstily.

“Miyoshi, not the time. No detours.”

“I know, I know, you never let me have any fun,” Miyoshi grumbled, but the sweat on her face betrayed just how nervous she was.

“The left is probably the kitchen. Which way should we go?” she asked.

“There’s plenty I’d like to check out, but we’ve only got about fifteen minutes. For now, let’s head straight to the main hall.”

“Roger dodger.”

Creeping along so as to not make any noise, we headed towards the door immediately in front of us.

“Jeez, we’re basically home invaders.”

Last time we’d gone in through the front, and as soon as we’d entered the foyer, Miyoshi had broken a statue. We really were up to no good.

“Kei, heading into other people’s houses and rifling through drawers and barrels is a JRPG staple. We’re just going along with the bit.”

“Think we’ll find any mini medals?”

Reaching towards the door in front of us, I heard what sounded like something rolling around by my feet.

Bending over to inspect whatever it was, I noticed something like a strange set of Buddhist prayer beads.

“Miyoshi, take a look. What is this? Prayer beads?”

“I think it’s a rosary.”

“A Christian rosary? Aren’t they supposed to have crosses at the end?”

“Take a look. There should be five beads at the bottom jutting off from the main loop—two larger beads with three smaller ones in between.”

“Huh...”

“Plus, the main loop should have five sets of ten small beads with bigger ones

in between.”

“You’re right.”

I couldn’t say for sure without counting, but it looked like it fit Miyoshi’s description.

“Then it’s a classic rosary design.”

“In that case...where’s the cross?”

“Usually, the crucifix would go at the end of that dangling bit with the five beads, but...”

There was nothing there.

It looked as though this particular rosary simply ended with the final bead. There were no signs that anything had been torn off.

“Hold on, Kei, look. Doesn’t the design of the centerpiece sort of look like the Earth?”

According to Miyoshi, the centerpiece was the slightly larger bead connecting the main loop to the extra five. In contrast to the other beads on the rosary, composed of some sort of black substance, it had a slightly bluish tint.

“Are you sure you’re not thinking too hard?”

“Maybe.”

At any rate, it looked like the object in question was definitely a rosary.

“Maybe there’s an Earth-religion enthusiast among those blue spirit guys,” I joked.

Stuffing the rosary into my pocket, I stood up. Then, just as we’d done with the back entrance, I carefully opened the door in front of us.

Before us stretched a long hallway that looked like it extended all the way through the building, reaching from the front entryway to the array of windows in back.

Every now and then, ghosts would come and go across the hall from the rooms to its sides. However, just as before, they seemed to ignore us. It was almost as if we were invisible to them.

“If we trigger an attack, those things are *de-fin-ite-ly* going to rush at us all at once,” Miyoshi predicted.

“Let’s just hope they give us a head start.”

We had about ten minutes until the manor’s time limit. At last, we reached the front hall. It was practically a library, each wall lined with books. The four statues, which had been destroyed during our last visit, were all back in their places, and the door to the front entryway was closed.

“Now then, let’s see how our friends the barrow wights are do—”

I hadn’t even finished speaking when Miyoshi moved to one of the bookshelves and started poking around.

“Hey! What the hell are you doing?!” I cried.

“Seeing if I can put a whole bookshelf into Storage. Doesn’t look like it though. Seems like they’re part of the mansion itself.”

Miyoshi tried taking a book off the shelf, but apparently that couldn’t be put into Storage either.

Does that mean the books are considered part of the manor too? Or do the books themselves not want to— No, that’s way too scary. Let’s drop it.

Disappointed, Miyoshi tried opening the book to take a picture. However—

“Kei. What is this? I can’t open the book.”

“Careful. That’s pretty typical with spellbooks. You try to open one without permission and your hands burst into flames or whatever.”

“Yikes!”

Miyoshi hastily returned the book to the shelf, settling for taking a picture of its spine.

“Doesn’t seem like the barrow wights are going to show up tonight, huh?” I asked.

Is that because the front door wasn’t opened? In that case, how do we get the pedestal with the inscription to appear?

“Miyoshi, keep an eye on the statues. If they start to move at all, get ready to

go on the offensive.”

“Right!”

After issuing my order to Miyoshi, I started walking to the middle of the room. When I was about at its central point, a magic sigil began spreading out beneath my feet.

Frantic, I jumped back towards the wall.

“Miyoshi! Get ready!” I called. However, in an instant, the circle stopped, and what rose from its center wasn’t a cluster of enemies, but a pedestal bearing a pagelike inscription from the *The Book of Wanderers*, same as before.

“I guess those guardian guys are on vacation?” I breathed a sigh of relief.

“Maybe coming in from the back skipped the trigger?”

Whatever the reason, I was glad to have made it through without any unnecessary fighting.

“I wonder what it says this time,” Miyoshi remarked as she peered over my shoulder.

“It’s probably some new earthshaking piece of informa—what the hell?!”

Having gotten a look at the inscription’s contents, I couldn’t help but yell.

In front of me, underneath the usual, unreadable otherworldly inscription, was something unmistakably written in the Latin alphabet.

“Kei...”

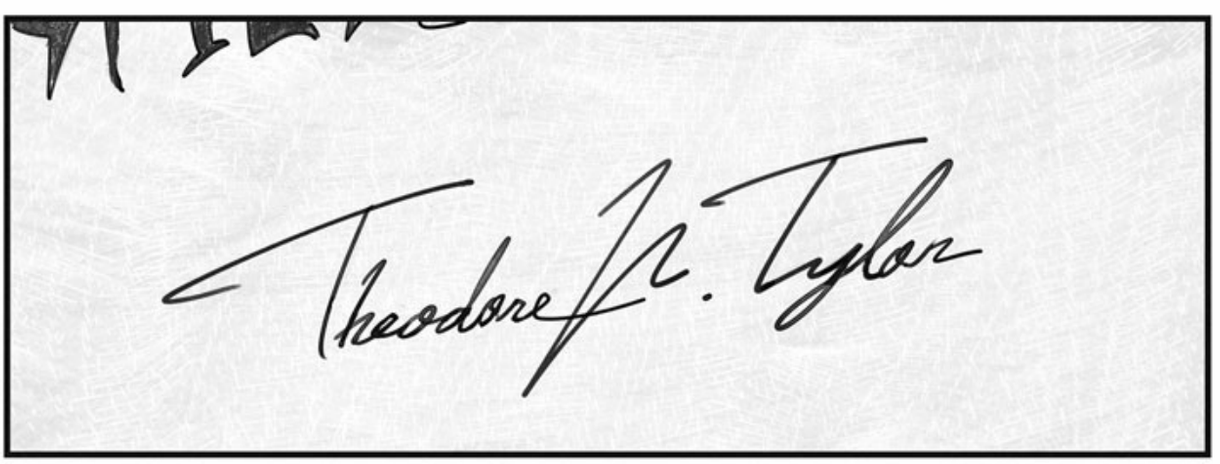
“Y-Yeah...”

There, in cursive script, was something that looked like a human signature.

Theodore N. Tylor.






Theodore R. Tyler

Annotations

***I'm 'Enry*:** In the 1990 film *Ghost*, protagonist Sam, the titular ghost, incessantly sings a British drinking song with the lyrics "I'm Henry the Eighth, I am," to bully a medium played by Whoopi Goldberg into helping. His horrendously thick, fake accent renders the lyrics "I'm 'Enry."

***Tasteless bit of energy drink branding*:** The infamous Ojosama Seisui, or "Maiden's Holy Water," a defunct Japanese energy drink. Ostensibly aimed at women, its advertisements within Tokyo Metro lines depicting an illustration of a naked woman, in combination with its name and...evocative...yellow color, turned heads for all the wrong reasons. Or perhaps the right ones, if the goal was just leaving an impact.

***Three-Million-Man Revolution*:** The plan of the Individual Eleven, antagonists from *Ghost in the Shell: S.A.C. 2nd Gig*, a TV anime in Masamune Shiro's *Ghost in the Shell* franchise.

Royal Victoria Park: A public park in Bath, England. To the park's northern end lies the Royal Crescent, an enormous collection of connected townhouses forming a crescent shape. In comparison to its size, the entire building boasts a scant thirty units. Seven years of construction for a mere thirty houses in the back half of the 1800s served as a stark reminder that they were intended solely for the upper crust. Now, the large central townhouse has been converted into a hotel, allowing anyone to stay there so long as they can put up the cash.

“Theodore N. Tylor...?”

“Kei, do you think that’s...?”

“Probably...”

Dr. Theodore Nanase Tylor.

That was the name of the professor said to have lost his life three years prior in Nevada, in what had been reported as the world’s deadliest dungeon genesis incident.

“It has to be some sort of joke, right?” Miyoshi said.

“You see any hidden cameras in here? Anyway, maybe we’ll have a better idea of what this is all about once we know what the rest of the text says.”

After taking some pictures of the surrounding area and checking the time, I stowed the inscription in Vault.

Just then, we heard a shrill screech from the hallway.

“Kei! Look!”

One of the pale blue figures, which had until that point been ignoring us, was standing in the corridor, facing directly our way.

It opened its mouth wide—if indeed it could be said to have a mouth—and let forth a piercing scream. Its face, which had been completely featureless until then, now contained two wide, bloodshot eyes.

“Wh-Wha...” Miyoshi sputtered.

Suddenly, the creature’s eyes popped out of its head and began crawling along the ground.

“*That’s* where those eyeball creeps were?!”

I fired off a water lance, quickly selected Appraisal from the list of orb choices that popped up in front of me, and ran with Miyoshi towards the front door.

“Kei! It’s locked!”

After watching me give one good pull to confirm the door wouldn’t budge, Miyoshi started firing off iron balls into the crowd of eyeballs which were now

barrelling towards us.

While I was glad we'd been able to avoid an encounter with the guardians by coming in the back entrance, the front door being locked was an unexpected result.

I now noticed that even though we'd taken the inscription, the church bells hadn't started to chime. *What's up with that?* I wondered.

I faced the front door and tried launching an iron ball at it as hard as I could. It didn't leave a scratch. It was the same as the result when you tried attacking one of the dungeon's walls.

A din of screeches erupted from the hallway.

The ghosts which had already ejected their eyeballs were flying around whooshing this way and that above our heads. Aethlem launched himself at them, but whenever he touched one, he was stunned for a moment, falling and quivering in shock. Conversely, the ghosts could pass right through him.

"Kei! Watch out! It looks like touching those things saps your vitality!"

You mean these guys use Drain?!

"Kei, we've got to get out of here! To the hallway!"

"Right!"

As we ran into the hall, passing under the swarm of ghosts, we saw another horde of spirits shuffling towards us from the kitchen.

They spotted us, let out that same piercing screech, then ejected their eyeballs and started flying overhead.

Sandwiched between hordes on both ends, we had no choice but to run up the stairs to the second floor.

"Kei! It's just a few more minutes until midnight. If it comes to it, let's break a window and jump."

"Let's do that even if it doesn't!" I hurtled an iron ball with full strength at the window just in front of where we had come up. The impact made a loud thud, but the iron ball tumbled to the ground without leaving so much as a crack in

the glass.

“Seriously?!”

Miyoshi ran over to the window and tried to force it open, but it refused to budge.

“K-Kei...”

“Don’t worry. If we have to, we can just take down all th—”

“There’s no time!”

Oh, right.

“They’re coming!”

A screech echoed from the parlor side of the second floor. It seemed like those guys from earlier were following us up.

Just when we were out of places to run and I was thinking about rushing headlong into the crowd of ghosts, I noticed an arrow drawn on the dusty floorboards at my feet.

“Careful! It could be a trap!”

“Who has time to worry about traps?! We’re going!”

“Right!”

We followed the arrows drawn one after another on the floor, sprinting the whole way.

What was strange was that we never ran into a crowd of ghosts while following the arrows. We went up and downstairs several times, and the final arrow took us to a deadend room at the end of a hall.

“We went down, then down, then up, then up, then up, then down, then up, then down, then down. This should be the first floor!” Miyoshi exclaimed. We could sense there was still a crowd on our tail.

“Hold on. We went down, then down, and wound up on the first floor? Doesn’t this building only have two floors?!”

“Gah!”

Miyoshi let out a noise that didn't quite form into words, but surely we had just gone into a concealed attic space at some point. *Right? That's the only logical explanation! Let's just leave it at that!*

At any rate, we ran for the room in front of us.

"Kei, if those doors don't open, this is a dead end!"

"Please don't say things like that right now! This isn't exactly my pick for a good day to die!"

"Me either! I still have too much left to do!"

Without looking, we tossed a barrage of water lances behind us, grabbed the handles of the double doors, and, preparing ourselves for the worst, pushed with all our might.

The doors, which we'd feared might not open, gave without even a hint of resistance, and we stumbled inside. Barely maintaining our footing, we looked up and saw what was before us: a single pale blue spirit.

Shocked, we leaped back. Miyoshi quickly slammed shut and bolted the doors. A second later, we heard a cacophony of banging, growing louder with each passing moment.

They were sturdy-looking doors, but it didn't seem like they'd hold out long.

I nervously eyed the spirit in front of us, which pointed with an outstretched finger towards a window on the opposite side of the room.

"Kei, that window...!"

"Yeah..."

A single streak of bright light shone through the window the spirit was pointing towards. There was no mistaking it—it was the very window I'd wiped down earlier.

Miyoshi rushed over to the window and tried lifting it. Sure enough—

"It opened!"

I took a look at the silhouette and gave her—I was pretty sure the ghost was a "her"—a few words of gratitude.

“Thank you. We owe you.”

“Kei! Hurry up!” Miyoshi called, body already leaning halfway out the window.

I nodded, then took one step towards the spirit. Wanting to provide some token of appreciation, I took the rosary I’d been holding and draped it around her neck.

It didn’t pass through her body and clatter to the floor like I was half expecting it would, but stayed firmly in place.

The bells began to chime.

The edges of objects and walls in the room began to warp, undulations getting fiercer each second.

“Okay!” I shouted. “Take care!”

I didn’t know if the spirit heard me, but with that, I ducked out the window and leaped down.

Behind me, I could hear the room’s doors start to splinter. Glancing back, I saw what looked like the single spirit who had pointed us towards the window standing in front of it like a guard.

Kei, I just thought I’d mention this...

What?

That was the nice thing about telepathy—you could use it to have a conversation even while running for your life.

Normally you don’t wear rosaries around your neck.



Now you tell me?!

For a moment, Miyoshi's revelation stopped me in my tracks, but the sense of impending doom spurred me on.

But it looks exactly like a necklace! Why didn't you say something earlier?!

I thought I'd let you have your little moment.

Grr...

"Y-Yoshimura?!"

The voice that had called out to me was so unexpected that all I could muster in response was a dumfounded "H-Huh?!"

***

"Haru, pinch me. Are we dreaming?"

"Don't worry. I see it too."

While hunting for the vanished slimes, Ryoko Saito and Haruka Mitsurugi had stumbled across what seemed like a wide-open clearing in the middle of Yoyogi's first floor.

They'd never heard about any place like this. In addition, in the middle of the clearing stood what looked like a two-story mansion. It was only natural to wonder if they had drifted off.

"Are we having the same dream?"

"If we are, we better hope no creeper in a red-and-green striped sweater and a glove with blades for fingers shows up."

Ryoko cocked her head, not recognizing Haruka's reference.

"Never mind. Anyway, what do we do about spooksville?"

The pair had equipped themselves with plenty of information when first starting dungeon-diving, but had quickly learned their training routine from Yoshimura and given up on keeping track of news. As a result, they hadn't seen the latest JDA uploads and had no idea what the house in front of them was.

"Isn't it obvious? We investigate!"

“You seriously want to go in *there*? There’s no way it’s safe.”

“Maybe. But we’re quick runners. We can just take off if worse comes to worst.”

“If you say so...”

Curiosity killed the cat. That was how the saying went. However, to Japanese young adults raised on a diet of video games and anime, an otherworldly mansion appearing in the middle of a dungeon *would* call out to be explored. A leopard can’t change its spots—that was how another phrase went.

The pair approached the front gate with caution, then took a quick peek beyond.

“Haru! There’s something there!” Ryoko hissed. “Something’s moving around!”

Having spotted a collection of pale blue shades in the garden, Ryoko ducked back down.

Haruka eyed the blue spirits through the gate bars. They didn’t particularly seem to have any malicious intent. After a moment, the spirits dropped their repetitive actions and began congregating towards the opposite side of the house.

“I wonder what’s going on...” Haruka mumbled.

“Huh?”

Ryoko peeked through the gate again. There were no spirits to be seen.

“Where did they all go?”

“Around to the back of the building. It looked like something must have happened.”

“Smells like even more of a mystery!”

“Ryoko, maybe it’s time to beat it!”

“I-I know. I know, but also, don’t you want to see what’s going on?”

Ryoko stood up, slipped through the gate, and took a few halting steps forwards.

“Ah, hey! Argh, Ryoko! Hmph! This is exactly what they mean by the phrase ‘look before you leap.’”

As Haruka caught up with Ryoko, what sounded like a bell tower started chiming. The two flinched reflexively.

“Wh-What is that?!”

“See? I told you we shouldn’t be here! It’s probably their burglar alarm!”

“H-Hey, Haru, what the heck is happening?!”

In front of them, the edges of the building started warping, and soon the edges of the objects around them began warping too.

“What the hell?!”

“Everything’s getting all weird!”

The ground beneath their feet started swaying, and just as Haruka and Ryoko were about to beat a hasty retreat, they saw a human figure come dashing out from around the mansion’s corner.

“Wait a second, is that...”

“Y-Yoshimura?!”

***

“Hey, Yoshida. That’s almost the last of our battery. We should think about heading up topside.”

Commercial cameras would often wind up lasting less than half their nominal battery lives over continuous use. As a seasoned professional, Jo knew that all too well. Plus it wasn’t just filming—using features like zoom ate away at battery charge too. By his estimation, they were only minutes away from a premature end to their shoot.

“Bro, plus, I’m fried,” Tenko added, wiping the sweat off his brow.

For about the last thirty minutes, they hadn’t found a single slime. Wandering around in vain, the group had been left scratching their heads.

Jo checked the remaining battery time while an exhausted Tenko slumped down, holding the tentsuki aloft.

“We’re gonna need a bigger grate anyway.” The tentsuki idea hadn’t been bad, he reflected. Forcing slimes into a strainer and using it to separate their exteriors from their cores seemed like it *would* be effective. There was just one problem: “Those suckers are just too damn hard.”

Slimes’ exteriors had proven even firmer than they’d expected. Trying to push one through the weak grating had resulted in the grating itself popping off. Perhaps a sturdier metal would hold out, but forcing the slime through would still require sufficient strength.

“And that’s after going through the trouble of getting ’em in to begin with,” he added.

Even attaching a funnel to the top of the tentsuki, it had proved a laborious task.

Without a better method, they had to deal with the slime sticking to the tentsuki or their hands like a slug, taking plenty of time and energy to peel off. Even if the tentsuki reduced the time spent on combat, it could be easily overshadowed by the time spent on setup.

“Well, at least we’ve got a plan. Let’s call that a success for today,” a beleaguered Yoshida said, standing up.

Just then, what sounded like church bells echoed through the cavern.

“What the heck? Bro, there a wedding down here?”

The JDA footage of the manor hadn’t included any sound. However, Yoshida recalled a rumor about explorers on a certain floor hearing bells—a rumor that had circulated right around the time the manor footage went up.

“Don’t tell me...”

The rumor in question stated that the bells had been heard on the tenth floor. And, according to public information, the 373 monsters used to trigger the manor had been...

“The undead...”

Connecting the dots between the tenth floor and its undead denizens, the bells, and the manor’s last appearance, Yoshida took off in the direction of the

sound.

“Mr. Yoshida?” Jo called.

“No time to explain! Just pick up your camera and come on!” Yoshida plowed forwards, not even bothering to look back.

“Bro, what?!” Tenko jolted up. He was supposed to be on guard duty. He couldn’t very well do that with the subject of his protection running off. He sprinted after Yoshida, leaving Jo behind.

With the sound of the bells echoing through the tunnels, it was difficult to pinpoint the direction it was coming from. However, with a little luck, following whichever way the bells seemed to be getting louder, Yoshida quickly arrived at the border of where the first floor transitioned into manor space.

“Oh, my...” Yoshida trailed off.

Before him stood the very object he had been pining for.

Pinching himself to make sure he wasn’t dreaming—he felt the moment called for such clichés—Yoshida shouted to Jo, who had run up behind him, to point towards the manor and shoot. Jo readied his camera, but the battery was about to give out.

“Ladies and gentlemen! We’re going i—”

“Mr. Yoshida! Someone’s there!” Through the camera lens, Jo spotted what looked like two figures approaching. He zoomed in as far as he could.

“What? Who?”

It was probably whoever had summoned the manor, Jo figured. But what kind of *maniacs* would do that?

“Whoaaa!” Letting out a yelp of surprise, Jo lifted his face from the viewfinder.

“What is it?”

“There’s something else coming!”

“Yoshida, bro, time to move!” Tenko shouted.

Just then two—no, four—explorers came running out of the gate.

“Dammit, Jo, what’s going on?!” Yoshida bellowed.

“Gimme a minute! I’m checking!” Jo looked through the viewfinder again and lined it up with the figures. As soon as he’d fixed it on the explorer at the front of the pack, the screen went dark. “Dammit, the battery’s out!”

“With the scoop of the century right in front of us?! Damn it, why didn’t we bring more spares?!” Yoshida screamed in desperation, but Jo could only shake his head.

“Yoshida, Jo, bros, we gotta beat it!”

“But the manor’s right th—” Yoshida, who had taken out his own smartphone, found his response cut short by the sight of what Tenko had been trying to alert him to—a horde of spirits and eyeballs following after the four who had just left.

“Oh no, no, no, no!” Yoshida screamed, but whether that was because a section of the horde had broken off and started coming their way, or because there was no way to get good footage, Tenko wasn’t sure.

“Damn it. This way!” Tenko said, taking charge.

Frozen in place, Yoshida kept his smartphone trained in the direction of the monsters, pressing “record” on his camera app. A moment later, Tenko had grabbed his hand and was pulling him back.

“Give it a break, bro! The content can wait another day!”

At this rate they’d never outrun the monsters. In the face of dawning hopelessness, Tenko twisted around and drew his trusty Gurkha machete, facing the horde. “Run for it!” he shouted to Yoshida and Jo, sinking into a fighting pose.

Yoshida and Jo slumped down to the ground, glued to the spot. Their eyes tinged with fear, Yoshida continued holding his smartphone camera aloft, pointing at the rush of eyeballs heading towards them.

“*Tch*. So that’s how it is, huh?” Tenko muttered. He was seriously considering running out on them when he realized the horde was too close at hand.

Eyeball after individual eyeball reflected in Tenko’s own. What had been an

indistinct aggregate now took shape as a surge of discrete enemies. Giving up his plans of escape, Tenko sunk into his stance and prepared for the ocular onslaught. Just as the horde was upon him, he swung his machete and—

“Eh?”

The blade sliced through the open air.

As if a circuit breaker had tripped, causing a television to blink out in the middle of a late-night monster flick, the eyeballs that had been just before him had vanished like a bad dream. The caverns of the first floor extended in front of them once again.

The sound of the church bells had ceased. A familiar darkness stretched ahead.

***

“Y-Yoshimura?!”

“H-Huh?!”

As soon as I’d rounded the side of the mansion, I’d run across just about the last two people I’d have expected to find.

“What are you two doing here?!”

“Never mind *that*! What are *you*—what is *this*...?!”

I didn’t have time to answer Saito’s half-formed queries. No sooner had I rounded the bend than a horde of eyeballs came barrelling after me.

“Wah! What the hell are those things?!”

“Never mind that now! Just run!”

“Wh-Whaaat?!”

Trying to process the incomprehensible sight before them, Saito and Mitsurugi seemed glued in place. With their AGI stats, they should have been fine, but that didn’t mean anything if they couldn’t muster up the will to get moving.

Gritting my teeth, I processed my next step.

“Kei! I’ll fend them off. You pick those two up and run!”

“Thanks, Miyoshi!” I replied.

Lobbing a volley of magic attacks and iron balls into the crowd of eyeballs and swarming ghosts as they rounded the corner and leaving the rest up to Miyoshi, I grabbed Saito and Mitsurugi as I passed, tucking them under my arms like luggage and further picking up speed.

“Waaah!” Mitsurugi screamed.

“C-Coach! Watch where you’re putting your hands!”

“Sorry! Urgent measures! Forgive me! Miyoshi, you’d better move too!”

“On it! Where’re we headed?!” she shouted, catching up.

“We’ll worry about that once we get through the gate.”

We sprinted to the outside of the gate, the mansion’s bells still echoing through the caverns. Behind us, as if pulled along by some tether, the crowd of eyeballs followed suit.

“Damn! So those guys can leave the manor grounds too!”

“Well, that’s one question answered!” Miyoshi yelled.

“So happy to be enlightened!” I responded ironically.

I focused solely on running, aiming for the tunnels ahead. Then, out of the corner of my eye to my left, I spotted what looked like another group of explorers gathered near the manor’s edge.

“Was that...people?”

“What is it, Kei?”

“I thought I saw a group by the edge of the mansion back there.”

“Assuming it wasn’t just your imagination, we don’t have time to deal with that right now!”

Miyoshi was right. I couldn’t afford to jump back into the horde of eyeballs, not when I was already carrying Mitsurugi and Saito. I would just have to hope that whoever it was would be able to fend for themselves.

The eyeballs slammed one by one into the walls surrounding the tunnel, but still more followed in after us.

“Kei, this is even worse than the colonial worms!”

“Less talking, more running!” I shot back.

“We should try to find another tunnel and thin out their numbers some more.”

“Good idea! But if we meet another deadend then *we’re* dead!”

“I’ll have the Arthurs scope it out!”

The crowd of eyeballs behind us was already more than the Arthurs could deal with. Better to send them on ahead as scou—

All of a sudden, the bells stopped ringing, as if a music track had been paused. The eyeballs, which had been threatening to flood the tunnels, had vanished like puffs of smoke in the wind. Turning around, what I saw in their place were a number of glinting crystals littering the ground—drops, I surmised, from our ocular foes.

“That’s the second time now, and I still can’t believe it’s real,” I commented.

“Thankfully, if whatever you saw back there really was people, they should be safe now too.”

“Here’s hoping.”

“Um, Yoshimura? You can put us down now.”

“Ah, oh, right! Sorry.” Apologetically, I set Saito and Mitsurugi back down on the ground.

Saito turned to face me. “Not bad, Yoshimura. You’re pretty strong for a twig!” she said with a hint of admiration.

“Y-Yeah? Must’ve been all the adrenaline!” I fumbled for a response.

“Still, what was all that about?” Mitsurugi asked, peering around the tunnel. She seemed unable to believe that it had been flooded with eyeballs just a moment prior.

“We’re not really sure ourselves, but I guess...something like the manor’s

residents?”

“Yuck! You mean that whole house was crawling with those things?” Saito squealed.

“See? I told you we shouldn’t have gone in,” Mitsurugi responded.

“What? No way! Come on. How could you see a house like that and not want to go have a look?”

I’d definitely agree with Saito...if this were a video game.

“I told you guys not to get into too much trouble,” I admonished.

“Bold words for someone who came running out from ground zero for it. We saw you running out from inside,” Saito quipped.

“Okay, I guess I really don’t have a leg to stand on. Anyway, how’re you two holding up?”

“Like, emotionally?”

“Sure.”

“Never better. I was just thinking now would be the perfect time to go up for a horror film!”

“Huh?”

“There’s no better acting school than personal experience!”

“I feel like I’m going to be seeing eyeballs in my dreams for weeks...” Mitsurgi shuddered.

“You mean they’ll be seeing *you*! Bwa ha ha!” Saito cackled.

The stones on this girl...

“Still, I don’t like the idea of monsters like that running around the first floor,” she continued.

“Consider them a set package with the manor. They shouldn’t be troubling you on the first floor anymore.”

“Really? What makes you so confident?”

“Just a hunch.”

“Well, good. For a minute, I was worried we were going to have to give up on our special training routine.”

That’s right. Speaking of special routines, I should probably let them in on what we found out about the Arthurs. I signaled Miyoshi, who was busy picking up gems, with telepathy to ask.

Hey, Miyoshi...

Go ahead. Although we can’t lend the Arthurs out full time. But here and there on request, sure.

Whoa. Did I let my thoughts slip again?

Nope. Nope. You just had it written all over your face.

Gotcha. Well, thanks.

“Um, Yoshimura?” Seeing me standing there with a blank stare, Mitsurugi called my name.

“Ah, sorry. Speaking of dungeon training, we’ve come up with a new method.”

“A new method?”

“Yep. A method where you won’t have to run back and forth to the entrance anymore.”

“Whoa!” Saito interjected. “What is it, what is it? You’ve gotta tell us! I’m still not sure why it’s necessary, but I’m sooo sick of running back and forth. Plus, it draws all kinds of attention to us!”

“It involves some, er, special *equipment*, so be sure to let us know next time you go diving.”

“Hmph. You wouldn’t be planning to use us as guinea pigs, would you?”

“Wouldn’t dream of it! It’s tried and tested!”

“Hmm...” Saito gave me a look of suspicion.

But it’s true! I swear!

“Hm, okay. Fine. We’ll call you.”

“Phew. Okay. Let me know.”

“Now then, where’s that staircase to the entrance?” Saito asked.

We’d spent so much time running around, we no longer had any idea where we were.

“I’ll have Cavall lead the way. Follow the doggo,” Miyoshi ordered.

Cavall popped out from the shadows behind Mitsurugi and Saito, about-facing and marching off towards where the exit must have been.

“Ah! How cute!” Mitsurugi squealed.

“Man, I never know what to expect next. Researchers really are a different breed,” Saito mused, following after Mitsurugi and Cavall.

“Kei, come take a look at this,” Miyoshi called, hunching over one of the crystals.

Miyoshi had picked up something different from the other crystals dropped by the eyeballs—some sort of item with a light, sky blue ornament attached.

Getting closer, it looked like a rosary.

“Is that...?”

It was—the same rosary I had draped around the spirit’s neck as a token of gratitude.

However, attached to the once-empty ending where the crucifix should have gone, there now glimmered a translucent, light blue teardrop-shaped gem.

“It’s pretty. Wonder if it’s aquamarine.” Miyoshi examined the stone.

“Who knows...” I mumbled.

But I had a suspicion as to what the gem was. Somehow, I felt it intuitively—the pale blue spirit who had saved us had left us a piece of her heart.

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Annotations

***A good day to die*:** From “Today is a Very Good Day to Die” in Nancy Wood’s

poetry collection, *Many Winters*, inspired by words and stories of Pueblo elders. The phrase, often associated with Native Americans, has been quoted here and there in media over the years. In short, refers to a day when all is at peace, when the elements are in harmony and troubles are at bay, and one would not mind departing this mortal plane.

Minato City, Akasaka

Upon exiting Yoyogi Dungeon, Yoshida had been so insistent on seeing how much of the Wandering Manor footage was usable that he'd demanded they visit Jo's studio right away. Tenko had been exhausted but, figuring that he'd already come this far, crowded into Jo's cramped editing room with the other two.

"Yoshida, I'm begging you," Jo pleaded. "It's New Year's Day."

"Not anymore it isn't. It's already rolled over to the second. But never mind that. How much of the manor did you get?"

Since the battery had died in the dungeon, they hadn't been able to check.

"I just want to *sleep*..." Jo grumbled, extracting the memory card and setting it into his equipment. "Looks like the battery gave out right when I tried to zoom in on our mystery group."

The footage, displayed on a thirty-inch PC monitor, cut out just as the blurry image of a person was starting to head their way.

"Damn, but bro's pretty strong though, right? Take a look. Those are *people* he's carrying." Tenko pointed to the figure, who appeared to be lugging a full-grown adult under each arm.

"Can you up the resolution?" Yoshida asked.

"I can try upscaling, taking data from surrounding frames. Though it'll only take us so far."

"Worth a shot."

Over the next few dozen seconds, the resolution of the image gradually

increased. After a moment, Jo's face lit up with the look of recognition.

"Hold on. Aren't these the two people we ran into earlier?" He gestured to the two people under the running figure's arms.

"You mean Ryoko Saito—presumed—and her 'coach'?"

"I dunno, bro. That's ordinary beginner gear," Tenko interjected. "You see it all the time in the dungeons. That could be anyone."

"I wouldn't be so sure," Jo asserted. "The gear might be basic, but the overall style? That's a pretty put-together explorer. Look at the hair and the other parts of her outfit. You know many dungeon-rats who get dolled up to dive? No, I wouldn't put being an actress lying low out of the question at all. Plus—"

Jo called up the people they had assumed to be Saito and her coach in the tunnels. The colors on their outfits and other details were dead wringers for the figures being carried.

"Damn, bro, that's some detective work," Tenko whistled. "You should be a forensic analyst."

"Hmph. It's nothing fancy," Jo grunted. "These days anyone can do that much as long as they have the right software."

Ultimately, there was no usable footage of the manor at all.

They had wound up with some blurry smartphone footage from when they were being attacked. It was low-quality, and dark, but that also lent it a certain sense of verisimilitude.

"Hm. Not bad," Jo concluded, "but we're still way short for a pilot."

After spending a whole day trying to figure out how to take down enough slimes to summon the manor, they hardly had any footage of proper dungeon exploration. What they did have was more suited to behind-the-scenes vignettes.

"What about Ryoko Saito?" Yoshida asked.

"Now hold on," Jo responded. "Say that was Saito. How exactly are you planning to poach her? We're under Central Television too, you know. You can't just go rescheduling its stars."

“Who said anything about poaching? I’m saying she might have gotten footage of the manor. You know any young women walking around without a cellphone camera these days?”

“Hm...”

“Besides, aren’t you curious about that third person?”

“I suppose...”

“There’s every possibility that those three are even the ones who summoned the manor. Look, they’re letting him carry them, so they’ve got to be close. In fact, we might have been wrong before, and that person in the middle might even be Saito’s ‘coach.’”

Jo stared at the screen for a moment.

“That does sound possible...”

“Our scoop tonight might have fallen off the cone, but there’s an even bigger sundae waiting for us.” Yoshida patted Jo on the shoulder.

Somehow, Jo felt brain freeze coming on.

“If only it weren’t for the holidays, we could get moving right away,” Yoshida grumbled.

The New Year’s holidays were the bane of the go-getter’s existence. Whatever their course of action, nothing would happen until the fourth. Having to bide their time while they sat on such a scoop was like poison to him.

“Hey, uh, Yoshida,” Tenko leaned in. “Bro, can we talk about how much of the footage from tonight I can use?”

“Ah, right. Can’t keep the subscribers waiting.”

Watching Yoshida and Tenko bicker, Jo yawned and leaned back in his chair, silently shaking his head.

January 2, 2019 (Wednesday)

Yoyogi-Hachiman, Office

After a morning of recuperation, I headed downstairs to the office sometime past noon.

“Morning, sleepyhead.”

We’d been barraged by questions from Mitsurugi and Saito after the manor incident. In the end, it’d been late, so we’d just hurried them off into a cab.

“Gimme a break. It was a rough night...” I responded groggily. “What about you?”

“I was sound asleep until just a minute ago. Unfortunately, no dreams about hawks, eggplants, or Mt. Fuji.”

According to Japanese folklore, seeing a hawk, Mt. Fuji, or an eggplant in your first dream of the year was a sign of good tidings to come.

Mt. Fuji seemed like a given, but it was only natural to wonder why an eggplant of all things was included. According to one theory, the three items represented different concepts of “height” in Ieyasu Tokugawa’s stomping grounds—height from the ground to the sky, height soaring above, and high prices. In other words, eggplants had been included simply because they’d been expensive.

“Did you try slipping a picture of the Seven Lucky Gods under your pillow?”

According to another superstition, putting a portrait of Japan’s Seven Lucky Gods—a collection of popular deities incorporated from Japanese folk religion, Taoism, and Buddhism—which bore a particular Japanese palindrome under one’s pillow on New Year’s Day was a sure way to bring about pleasant dreams. Although, if you had a nightmare instead, you could simply float the picture down the river in order to cleanse any ill portents.

“Don’t you have to send it down a river if you have a bad dream?”

“Yeah. Come to think of it, what’re you supposed to do if you don’t have a

dream at all?”

“Send it down the river, obviously.”

“Why?”

“C’mon, Kei. It’s no good to live without dreams.”

I couldn’t contain my laughter at her overly pompous wording.

“Okay, well, plus,” she added, “that would make the most sense for the story.”

“How so?”

“If you’re selling portraits of the seven gods and you want to sell more next year, obviously you want more to be washed downriver. Besides, there’s no way you’re going to remember your dreams after a ‘vast and ponderous slumber,’ anyway. What a crock.”

The meaning of the Japanese palindrome on the portrait translated roughly to “Awake all ye from vast and ponderous slumber—the sound of the gods’ rowing sinks earthly ills asunder,” referring to the pleasant sound of the seven gods’ treasure boat moving forward over the waves. However, you were unlikely to remember dreams after long and deep sleep—recall was better after light and shallow bouts. Miyoshi was right: It was setting you up for failure.

Although I’d seen some versions replace “vast” with“fast,” so maybe it was just telling you to hurry up and hit the hay.

“Spoken like a true Queen of the Merchants,” I said. “Anyway, what’re you watching?”

“Hakone.”

On TV, an announcer and a commentator enthusiastically reported on the last leg of the first half of the Tokyo-Hakone Round Trip College Ekiden race, a team marathon divided up over five legs each way in a two-day round-trip course between Tokyo and Hakone. Held every year on January 2 and 3, it was one of the most popular sporting events in Japan.

“And third-year student at Seiryo University Kakeru Narita sets an *astonishing* fifth-leg record of fifty-seven minutes, thirty-two seconds! I’ve never seen

anything like it, folks!”

“The record for the mountainous fifth leg following its reduction to 20.8 kilometers in 2016 stood at last year’s seventy-one minutes, forty-two seconds, set by Ryoma Aoki. I think I speak for all of us here when I say that a nearly fourteen-minute reduction is shocking.”

“This may not bear direct comparison, but taking the world record for the half-marathon, fifty-eight minutes, 23 seconds, set by Zersenay Tadese in 2010 in Lisbon, and clocking its time per kilometer—two minutes, 46.4 seconds—against the same from Narita’s record—two minutes, 46 seconds flat—they come out nearly the same, with Narita a little bit ahead.”

“So today’s performance was a world record, then?”

“I’m not quite ready to say that. For starters, today’s distance is about two-hundred meters shorter. But what’s incredible is that this time was set on the final leg of the Ekiden race.”

With excitement to match announcer’s, the studio commentator went on.

“The last leg of the course boasts a total elevation change of 864 meters, and as you know, most of it is uphill. I’m forced to say that achieving such a fast time on this leg of the course is nothing short of ‘miraculous.’ There’s no other word for it. The time was so fast that apparently the team on the ground had to double-check to make sure their clocks weren’t broken.”

“I hear our broadcast footage helped with that. I guess we can come in useful sometimes too!”

In response to the announcer, the studio commentator offered a perfunctory laugh.

“At any rate, one thing seems clear. Narita is going to be celebrated as a ‘God of the Mountain’ for a long time to come.”

Having come in partway through, I turned towards Miyoshi. “What’s going on?”

“We have a new God of the Mountain,” she replied.

“A what?”

The last leg of the Ekiden race wound through valleys and mountains, to the extent that it was basically an uphill climbing course. Those who completed this leg of the course with high or record-breaking times earned the title “God of the Mountain.”

“Huh.”

“No matter how you slice it, this time was really abnormal. Kei, that runner’s probably—”

“An explorer.”

“You got it.”

“I don’t suppose you can use Appraisal to read his stats through the TV?”

“Unfortunately, no can do.”

Shoot. That figured. If the skill picked up on the same energies as our status-measuring device, there was no way it would work on an image.

“But if it comes out that he’s an explorer, it’s going to turn the sports world on its head,” I pointed out.

“There won’t be any keeping the cat in the bag now. His record was so incredible, the media’s going to be hounding him.”

“Was it really that amazing?”

“Kei, he matched the half-marathon world record time on a course with an altitude change of 864 meters.”

Certainly rather than “incredible,” that’s in the realm of “freakish.” If you evened out the total altitude change over the course’s twenty kilometers, it would be the equivalent of more than a four percent gradient.

“Apparently Seiryo University has a pretty big diver scene,” Miyoshi added.

“We’re probably going to be seeing a lot more explorer-athletes now, huh?”

“They might want in on the boot camp too. We’ll have to keep our eyes on Seiryo U.” Miyoshi turned off the TV. With the fifth leg concluded, the first day of coverage had come to an end.

“You sound like a TV sportscaster.” I sank myself down into the couch.

“Ah, speaking of boot camp, we got word from Simon.”

“We did? What’s up?”

“It’s about our drill instructor. She’ll arrive in Japan on the third. We can use the JDA’s small conference room to hold our interview.”

“The third... Man, the JDA doesn’t let you catch a break.”

I guess there’s no such thing as New Year’s holidays when you’re dealing with explorers.

If anything, time off during the first few days of the new year might lead to an *increase* in the activity of hobbyist divers. That meant there was no way for the JDA as a whole to take time off.

“Naruse’s coming over today too, apparently.”

“Wasn’t she at home?”

“When I sent her the photos of yesterday’s inscription, she said she’d rush over right away.”

“Whatever’s written on it must be pretty important.”

“It might be. But more than that...”

I nodded. “The signature.”

“You have to admit, it is pretty weird.”

We’d retrieved an inscription from the dungeon that ended in a signature written in the Latin alphabet. It was weird at a *minimum.* If we’d found it anywhere else but the Wandering Manor itself, I’d have thought we were being pranked. However, the only one who could pull this kind of prank off would be some kind of dungeon god.

“Also,” Miyoshi added, “I turned that gemstone over to Yoyogi management yesterday for appraisal.”

“Gemstone?”

“The one from the rosary.”

“Ah, right. But what about appraisal? Can’t you just check it yourself?”

“About that...”

Miyoshi produced a piece of paper bearing the results from Appraisal.

Rosary of the Red Breast

Egg of the witness to the Passion.

The one with the power to see truths shall emerge.

“What the hell is this?”

Miyoshi shrugged.

“What’s all this ‘red’ about anyway? The gemstone was blue.”

“I thought that was weird too, so I looked it up. Apparently, ‘Red Breast’ can be another name for a robin.”

“Then the ‘witness to the Passion’ is...?”

According to one Christian legend, a robin had first received its red breast when attempting to remove the crown of thorns from Jesus’ head during his crucifixion, becoming stained with blood.

“So the ‘Passion’ in question is Jesus’ crucifixion?”

“I can’t say for certain, but it seems like that’s what it’s pointing to,” Miyoshi replied.

“Then what is ‘the one with the power to see truths’?”

“I don’t know. According to some stories, robins have the power to see off the spirits of the dead, but I couldn’t find any other old idioms or fables that seemed fitting by flipping through *Brewer’s*.”

Yeah, nothing comes to mind for me either.

“Anyway, the gemstone itself didn’t seem dangerous, so I thought I’d turn it in for analysis and see what information came back. Maybe something in the composition will help make sense of its flavor text.”

“I see.”

“Which, speaking of—an egg can be a symbol of birth, reincarnation, or

creation. It says ‘shall emerge’... You think something’s going to hatch out of the stone?”

“Miyoshi,” I said, “are we *sure* this thing isn’t dangerous?”

I hated to think of the panic it would cause if the gemstone suddenly cracked like an egg and some kind of creature popped out.

“Please don’t jinx us,” Miyoshi replied.

Well, you already handed it over for inspection, so it’s literally out of our hands now. Nothing left to do but to wish for the safety of whoever’s handling it in the lab.

“The year’s only just started,” I lamented. “Let’s hope society doesn’t collapse in the first month.” I clapped my hands together in my heart, in imitation of a Shinto prayer.

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Naruse stopped by a short time later.

“How’re you doing?” I asked. “Weren’t you visiting family? Are you sure you’re okay to slip away?”

“No worries,” she responded. “I had to be in town for something today anyway, so it’s no extra trouble.”

“Personal, I hope.”

“A bit of work over at Ichigaya.”

“Man, the JDA doesn’t let you guys catch a break, huh?”

“You said it, not me!” With a laugh, Naruse took out her materials.

“Now then, this is the inscription you discovered in the manor,” she began. “I tried translating it, but couldn’t decipher the back half. It’s written in an entirely different language. At first I thought it might be our usual Aramaic, but the characters don’t match up. I’ve never seen anything like this before.”

Sure enough, the first and second halves of the inscription appeared to be using entirely different symbols.

“So what’s the first half say?” I examined a photo of the inscription on her

tablet.

“The translation is included in that file, but it’s basically words of encouragement for explorers.”

“Encouragement?”

“Yep. It seems like the grimoire’s final page—something like an afterword.”

According to Naruse’s file, the item name was “*The Book of Wanderers* (fragment 127).”

“Then if we can assume this ‘fragment’ part means ‘page number’...”

“*The Book of Wanderers* would have 127 pages total. That’s how it appears, at least.”

“Looks like our publishing project just got a whole lot harder,” Miyoshi interjected, pouring herself a second cup of tea. “Incidentally, 127 is the thirteenth Ramanujan prime.”

“This again?”

“Anyway, until we know what the back half says,” Naruse continued, “we can’t just haphazardly upload it to the internet and crowdsource knowledge. I’d at least like to get a gist by running it through translation software, but without knowing what language this is, I can’t even type it in.”

Right. The page had borne a person’s signature after all. If the rest of its contents named any other specific locations or people, there was no telling what could happen.

“Guess we’re stuck then,” I lamented.

Ultimately the best we could do would be to hope the inscription’s contents weren’t too earth-shattering and try uploading the first line of the section in the unknown language, hoping someone could identify it.

“But the real problem,” Naruse said, pointing to the bottom of the image, “is this.”

She was indicating the signature adorning the bottom of the page.

“Forgive my asking,” she continued with an apologetic look, “but did you

really pick this up from the manor?”

I get why you’re asking. If anyone brought that inscription to me, bearing the signature of a researcher who was supposed to have died three years ago, I’d probably laugh in their face and ask what dime-store mystery they’d gotten that one from. We can’t just expect anyone to accept our claim at face value.

“Naruse, you have our word. Although I can still hardly believe it myself.”

Letting out an exhausted sigh, as though she wished it *had* been a joke, Naruse pulled out another stack of papers.

“I tried gathering everything I could on Dr. Tylor...” she began.

The material she’d produced amounted to a summary of his public career. His credentials and associations were an absolute cavalcade of three-letter acronyms.

Member of AIP, APS, KLI, AGU... It went on.

“American Institute of Physics and American Physical Society I recognize. ‘KLI’?”

“The first thing I thought of was the Korean Labor Institute, but that doesn’t seem very fitting.”

Right. What would a physicist be doing as a member of a foreign labor research institute?

His last known post had been as head of a particle physics research institute in Nevada.

“This is the one where that accident occurred, right?” I asked.

“Apparently his team were working on extradimensional detection experiments.”

“And his signature...?”

“Unfortunately, I couldn’t turn up any examples.”

Shoot. If we had just been able to find one, we’d have been able to compare it to the manor’s inscription. However, it was still the start of the year. After a few more days, we might be able to enlist more cooperation.

“How’d you get all this material while everyone’s still out of office?”

“It’s mostly what I could find online, but I also enlisted some help from Monica.”

Come again?

“Monica? As in Clark? Of the U.S. DSF? How exactly did you run this by her?”

“Er, I just mentioned we’d like to know more about Dr. Tylor, so did they have any profile information we could look at, or signatures...things like that. Why?”

If Naruse had corresponded with Monica via email, those messages would have been visible to higher-ups in Monica’s division of the Dungeon Strike Force. Naruse might have been able to play off a level of casual correspondence considering the two had bonded when Monica had come to Japan, but her asking about Dr. Tylor was sure to raise a few eyebrows.

“It’s just that Monica’s communications are probably being monitored. So if you asked her about Dr. Tylor, the rest of the DSF probably knows. Those kinds of questions coming from the JDA aren’t going to go unnoticed.”

“Oh no!” Naruse exclaimed. “Do you think I should’ve held off?”

“We can manage, as long as we can still cover our tracks by coming up with an excuse. For instance, saying we’re compiling a project on the dungeons’ history, or something.”

“Of course. In that case it would only be natural to be looking for info on The Ring.”

As long as the cat’s out of the bag anyway, I might as well check in with Simon. With the appropriate cover story, of course.

Just then, the doorbell buzzed.

“Who’s that?” I asked Miyoshi. “Were we expecting anyone?”

“Not as far as I know.” She got up and checked the intercom. “Ah! Kei, it’s Saito!”

Saito?! Ah, shoot! She’s probably here for an explanation for yesterday! Aw man, where do I even begin?

“Is Mitsurugi with her?”

“Unfortunately for you, she’s not.”

Miyoshi went to the doorway and let Saito in.

“Yoohoo, Coach!” Saito called. “How’ve you been?”

“You mean since last night?”

“Ooh, careful! If anyone else heard that, they might think there was some sort of *scandal*!”

Saito bounced into the room. Seeing Naruse on the couch, she gave a quick bow with her head. “Sorry, am I interrupting?”

“Not at all. But if this is about the new training method I mentioned, I’d rather run it by you and Mitsurugi together. Could it wait until later?”

“Unfortunately, Haru has work all day. It’s just me.”

“Huh? Rolling into work after last night? Hopefully she’s recovered...”

“Another out-of-context quote for the books! But don’t worry, she seemed fine this morning.”

“Glad to hear it. But man, doesn’t *anyone* take a break over the holidays?”

“The modeling world doesn’t stop for tired explorers, Yoshimura. Plus, you’re one to talk. What’ve you got going on over there?” She cast a glance towards the table, strewn with tablets and papers concerning the inscription and Dr. Tylor.

“Point taken. So anyway, what’s up?”

“Well, I *do* want an explanation for last night, and to hear about that new training method, but actually, I’m here because we’re just about out of that ‘drool’ stuff. I had the day off, so I figured I’d come pick up an order.”

“Is that all? Okay, take a seat over there and I’ll have some ready in a minute.”

“Thanks!” Eyeing Naruse, she settled into a chair opposite the couch. A tablet displaying the inscription from the manor was still on the table, though thankfully nothing legible and confidential was in view.

While preparing a bottle of benzethonium chloride spray, I heard Saito let out a surprised squeal. “Whoa! Now *that* brings back some memories!” She was holding Naruse’s tablet.

Memories? What’s she talking about? That tablet’s pretty new.

Turning around in confusion, I saw her pointing to the *photo* on the tablet, rather than the technology itself.

“‘An announcement to my fellow man.’ What is this? Some kind of new game?”

Dumbfounded at how Saito had easily rattled off the contents of the inscription, one question reverberated through the minds of everyone else in the room: *Whaaaaat?!*

“S-Saito...you can read that?!”

“What? You mean pIqaD? A little. I used to be a minor Trekkie.”

“Pi-cahd”? Wait, what? “Trekkie”?

“Hold on a minute. What language is this then?”

“Huh? It’s Klingon, isn’t it?”

“What?!” I felt like I had to pick pieces of my brain off the floor.

“But the other year, I remember hearing about Netflix offering *Discovery* with Klingon subs, and they didn’t look like this,” Miyoshi said.

“I’ve seen some sites on Google in Klingon, and they weren’t like that either,” I added.

“Those are just the Klingon language rendered in the Latin alphabet.”

So they’re transliterations?

“So this...Pi-qawd or whatever is the Klingon writing system?”

“Yep! Where’s this from?”

Uh, we can’t exactly answer “the dungeon.” Better think of an excuse. But wait, why would a dungeon inscription be written in Klingon*? Sure, they were an advanced race with the technology to conquer star systems, but—no, could that*

be it?

"That's, er, uh... Never mind. Do you know anyone who might be able to translate the whole thing?"

"There are supposed to be around twenty people on Earth who are able to speak fluent Klingon. At least I remember hearing the KLI president make an announcement like that at some point..."

"'KLI'?" I asked. Naruse and I exchanged glances.

"An academic body for Klingon. The Klingon Language Institute."

"I...see..."

So it wasn't "Korean Labor Institute" after all.

"According to a search, the creator of the Klingon language is Mark Okrand," Miyoshi reported. "He's still alive. Maybe we should try looking him up."

"If it's just for a short translation, I'm pretty sure Bing still has a Klingon language setting," Saito responded, although she wasn't confident.

Hastily pulling up the search engine, Miyoshi confirmed that the option still existed. "Huh. That's Microsoft for you," she said.

"Who the hell would ever use a language setting like this?" I asked. *Well, except for us now.*

Naruse, who'd been listening, suddenly stood up and walked to the back office.

These days, as long as you knew what you were looking for, a simple search would take care of the rest. There were any number of guides online to porting pIqaD over into the Latin alphabet.

We stayed in the living room talking while Naruse worked, covering Saito's history as a Trekkie, her thoughts on *Discovery* and the most recent series, *Picard*. After a bit, she called for a cab.

"Man, Saito, you really helped us out today," I said.

"Heh heh," she laughed smugly. "Glad to know I've risen in your esteem."

"Believe me, you already had nowhere left to rise."

“Ha ha! Look who finally learned how to talk to women! Good boy!”

Complimenting my reformation, Saito patted me on the head.

We loaded her up with half a dozen extra bottles of benzethonium chloride solution as a thank you, toting them out to the cab.

“You need anything else, just let us know,” I said, outside the car.

“Will do. Next time I’ll be sure to bring Haru along.”

“Right. Tell her I said hello too.”

Just before she climbed into the back seat, Saito turned around and gave me a Vulcan salute. “Live long and prosper!” she shouted. *Man, a Trekkie to the bone.*

I put my fist to my chest and barked out a reply. “Qapla’!”

Watching the taxi pull away, I reflected over the past hour’s events to myself.

“Klingon, huh...” I mumbled under my breath.

We’d retrieved an inscription written in *Klingon* from the dungeon, and bearing its human author’s signature to boot. *Could things get any weirder? I can hardly keep track of it all.*

“I’m the one who retrieved it, and even *I* feel like that inscription has to be a bad prank...” I complained to Miyoshi.

“But we got it from the Wandering Manor, and from atop a pedestal that rose from the ground no less. We might not like it, but we have to accept it’s the truth. We even have video footage. Although I guess the dungeon *itself* might be pranking us.”

“But why *Klingon*?”

Heading back inside we found Naruse, who had returned from the other room, packing up her things to leave.

“Guess it must be time for whatever that business she was talking about earlier is?”

“Seems like she has her hands full with plenty besides just our translations,” Miyoshi commented.

Overhearing our banter, Naruse flashed a weary grin.

“We’re so swamped by applications from young first-time explorers for our crash-course dungeon seminar that we’re expanding their size and frequency. I’ve been called in to do pick-ups. Like I have any time to spare.”

First-time explorer seminars?

“I wonder if it’s because of the food drops,” Miyoshi mused.

According to dungeon inscriptions, when the total number of D-Card-wielding explorers worldwide reached five hundred million, the dungeons would begin dropping food. Nations the world over, especially those facing resource shortages or overpopulation, were investing full resources in increasing their registered-explorer counts.

Man, if the drops don’t *happen after all that, there are going to be riots.*

“Nope. Apparently most of our new participants are young couples who want to use telepathy with each other.” Naruse giggled.

“Aw, man, what the hell?! I’m so jealous!”

“Telepathy sure is convenient,” Miyoshi added. “I sure would have loved to have had it when I was in middle and high school. That was just around the time when I first started wanting a smartphone after all.”

Miyoshi would have entered junior high school right around the time the iPhone first hit shelves in Japan. That would have been around when Docomo started offering their first line of Androids too.

Flip phones had already taken off, but they couldn’t win out against the smartphone’s awesome might. It really felt like they could do anything back then. Of course, that was still true now. However, feeling that the flip phone was better for actually making calls though, I’d held on to mine for a while.

“We’ve been getting lots of applications from middle and high school students too.”

According to WDA policies, while no one could prohibit you from possessing a D-Card if you’d happened to obtain one, unless you were lucky enough—if you could call it that—to stumble across a newly formed or unregistered dungeon,

getting one would be impossible for most minors. To enter any registered dungeon, you needed a WDA license, and to obtain that—while the WDA itself issued no formal age restrictions—each country's national dungeon association was free to set its own rules regarding a minimum age.

In Japan, the minimum age was eighteen. Those younger could apply for a license with their guardians' approval, which would clear the JDA of liability.

"Before long, we won't be dealing with class phone chats, but class telepathy groups," Miyoshi observed.

That would bring the testing problem right back to the fore. To make matters worse, inside a normal classroom, any seat would be within a radius of twenty meters from any other. During the middle of a test, unbeknownst to the teacher, an entire group chat could be occurring, allowing for swapping answers back and forth. What exactly was going to happen to education in Japan?

"Possession of D-Cards might have to be prohibited for middle and high school students moving forwards," I hypothesized.

Many high schools already prohibited motor vehicle licenses. D-Cards might face similar bans.

My own high school had unilaterally banned motorcycle licenses. In protest of the rule, a section of the student body had rebelled and applied for boating licenses.

The boating licenses for Second Class and PWC Class vehicles included things like jet skis that were practically motorcycles on water, so they shouldn't be any different, we'd argued. Plus, you could obtain the boating licenses at sixteen, making them possibilities for most of the student body. I couldn't imagine there were many schools around where boating licenses were banned.

Looking back on it, it would have been a simple matter for the school to respond by banning boating licenses too—but that hadn't stopped us from thinking our rebellion was on pretty solid ground.

"If anything, we might begin requiring approvals from schools in addition to parents and guardians in order to obtain a WDA license," Naruse responded.

So the JDA might wind up shifting responsibility to the schools? That would

sure would deter any schools from allowing D-Cards.

"That's the JDA!" Miyoshi crowed. "You always know when it's the right time to pass the buck."

"Consider it necessary liability protection," Naruse countered. "But still, I wonder about the training required to make sure people can use telepathy effectively..."

If a beginner tried to use telepathy and accidentally broadcast the wrong thought, all kinds of problems were likely to occur. *Yeah, that's definitely a concern.*

"If class telepathy really takes off, we might even see an increase in violence," I added.

"Violence? Don't you think that's a little much?" Naruse asked.

Would that it were, but rather than a conversational tool, telepathy was more like a broadcast. As long as you decided to send a thought out, anyone in range in your party would hear it, whether they wanted to or not. Rather than a group chat, it was more like a megaphone.

"If you formed a party with eight people and two members kept going back and forth about something unrelated, how long before the other six get fed up?"

With a chat, you could turn off broadcast notifications. If such a feature existed for telepathic communication, it was yet to be found.

"Plus unintended thoughts slipping out could lead to bullying or friction between friends. Maybe the JDA ought to hold a seminar on proper use."

"Perhaps... *If* we can find enough people."

"Eh, Miyoshi? How's that for a business plan?"

"You should really avoid sticking your nose into places it doesn't belong," she responded. "For starters, use of telepathy outside the dungeons isn't covered by our articles of incorporation."

Corporate entities outlined their basic purposes in their founding articles of incorporation. If you deviated too far in your business purposes from the

contents of the articles of incorporation, the articles would have to be redrafted before business could continue.

Although as far as I knew there weren't any actual examples of companies being fined for not doing so—probably.

Usually it would be a simple matter of amending your articles to say "and all manner of business in accordance with the goals above," but there was a high probability nondungeon-related telepathy training wouldn't even fall under the umbrella of "in accordance with the goals above."

"Everytime there's rapid change, it's people in charge of societal institutions who are left picking up the pieces," I sighed.

"Truer words never spoken," Naruse agreed, shooting an accusatory look towards me and Miyoshi as if to say, *No thanks to present company*.

"Still, before jumping to school problems, maybe we should think about telepathy's use in the home. Won't it have an influence on child development?" I suggested.

"Influence?" Naruse asked.

"I mean, well, yeah. Verbal communication might totally disappear. Children might miss their opportunities to pick up and practice new words. Sure, getting new vocab beamed directly into their Wernicke's area is a thing, but it's no substitute for practicing real speech. Worst-case scenario, it might even have an impact on the development of the Broca's area and the pars opercularis."

Children wouldn't even need to speak to survive. It took practice and repetition to attune the vocal cords to language, and they could be missing out on that.

"Slow down there, Dr. Brain. How exactly are you suggesting infants get D-Cards in the first place?" Miyoshi cut in.

"Ah, right."

If they had to wait until they were old enough to obtain D-Cards, they'd have to grow up using speech for most of their childhoods like always, so there shouldn't be a problem.

“Yoshimura,” Naruse said. “Regarding the relationship between telepathy and verbal speech—it’s possible that our brains don’t process them the same way.”

“Huh? What’d you mean?”

“A certain incident made waves over social media recently. To put a long story short, apparently telepathy allows for mutual understanding regardless of the users’ spoken languages.”

“What?!”

“It’s true. Or, at least if that story is to be believed. Telepathy may not be a strict replacement for verbal exchange, but another process entirely.”

Ordinarily, humans relied on language in order to express and process complex thoughts. That’s why I’d assumed up until now that if you were to broadcast telepathy in a language the receiver couldn’t understand, your thoughts wouldn’t get through. However, that appeared to not be the case.

“So the thought just gets translated directly into the receiver’s inner speech?”

“It’s going to be like a time before Babel...” Miyoshi suggested ominously.

Whether that would be a curse or a blessing remained to be seen.

Many politicians struggled to speak other languages, for example. If heads of state could make use of telepathy, barriers to international communication might lower. On the other hand, if any unwanted thoughts leaked out...

“The JDA might want to redouble its efforts in regard to investigating telepathy. I really think you ought to consider opening that training course too. It’s only a matter of time before it starts causing international incidents.”

Naruse gave a reluctant sigh. “I’ll try bringing it up.”

With that and a glance at her watch, Naruse hurried off to the JDA.

“Inner speech translation...” *Today really has brought about some unbelievable developments.*

“What’re you thinking about, Kei?” Miyoshi asked.

“Nothing. I just—I was wondering... Maybe telepathy is a tool designed to enable whatever is behind the dungeons to communicate with us.”

The fact that the D-Cards and other information provided by the dungeons displayed in the user's native language might have worked on a similar phenomenon.

"Kei."

"What?"

"Before worrying about theories, maybe you should start worrying about the name for the stats-measuring device. We can't apply for the trademark until we have one."

"Ah, shoot... No choice but to get to that today too."

"No choice indeed."

Pulling out a stack of documents and reference books, we settled in and got to work.

Annotations

***Half-marathon world record*:** As of January 2019. At the time of publishing, the world record stands at fifty-seven minutes, thirty-two seconds, set by Kibiwott Kandie of Kenya at the Valencia Half Marathon in Spain on December 6, 2020. The controversy surrounding his shoes could be said to somewhat resemble the controversy surrounding what influences dungeon stats might have on a race.

***Brewer's*:** Ebenezer Cobham Brewer's *Brewer's Dictionary of Phrase and Fable*. Subject to numerous revisions since its 1870 release in England. Stands as one of the foremost English reference books on phrases and idioms drawing from myth and antiquity.

***Qapla'!*:** A Klingon phrase meaning "Success unto you!" but which came to be used as a standard exchange for partings. As with most Klingon words, the harsh pronunciation leads to it sounding like a threat.

***Wernicke's area*:** The part of the brain used for processing speech. Broca's area is used for speech production, while the pars opercularis within it is tasked with control of the vocal cords.

***Inner speech*:** The phenomenon of sorting out thoughts via an internal voice and language. Not every thought is processed through internal speech, but also through visualizations, imagined sounds, music, and abstract conceptualization—but the ability to process inner language helps manage all of the above.

***A time before Babel*:** A reference to the Tower of Babel in the Book of Genesis. A story told around Genesis 11:9. Before the advent of different languages, humans congregated in a single city and used their common tongue to cooperate to build a tower to the heavens. God came down and scattered the humans, dividing their language in the process. Henceforth, the town became known as Babel. With direct access to each other's inner speech, it would be like returning to an era before Babel.

"Babel" is said to have various meanings including "din and confusion" and "gate of God." Whether the town took its name because it was the start of an exodus away from the common city—the gateway to the rest of the Earth—or because of the cacophony accompanying the split into multiple languages is unclear.

As for why God was angry, there are multiple interpretations. Some say it's because he told humans to go forth and multiply, and instead they'd congregated in one spot. Others say it's because of the humans' avarice, building their own tower to heaven and thinking they no longer needed God. The intended takeaway may have been lost to time.

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Message Board [Party Talk!93]

235: No Name Anon Party Member

Hey! Someone found a new party command!

236: No Name Anon Party Member

No way! JDA source? Proof?

237: No Name Anon Party Member

Proof is I made it up. Jk it's going around. The fourth command after "admit," "dismiss" and "n%" is "find." Apparently you activate it the same way as n%, and a little number pops up next to the target

character showing their distance and coordinates in relation to you.

238: No Name Anon Party Member

character lol

239: No Name Anon Party Member

Damn, it’s pretty impressive that someone found that

240: Non Name Anon Party Member

I saw that! It was in the 4chan thread “Trying every phrase in the OED with a D-Card”!

241: No Name Anon Party Member

OED?

242: No Name Anon Party Member

Oxford English Dictionary. Entries have all these details about the word’s origins, history, and use changes. It’s the most thorough English dictionary. It has 20 volumes with more than 600k words.

243: No Name Anon Party Member

Wtf that’s insane lol

244: No Name Anon Party Member

According to the thread OP, the idea was that most of the dungeon commands seemed to use English words, so they were going through the OED one entry at a time seeing if anything else would work. But basically every entry was marked with “invalid,” and after a while they tried switching to “EwNIL” with a “v.” here and there.

245: No Name Anon Party Member

EwNIL?

246: No Name Anon Party Member

“(The)effect was nil.” Nothing.

247: No Name Anon Party Member

But what about “v.”? Doesn’t that mean some were valid?

248: No Name Anon Party Member

Lol it meant “void.” The OP was just trying to bait people.

249: No Name Anon Party Member

kappa

250: No Name Anon Party Member

Anyway, apparently the OP got sick of it and gave up halfway through, and the work was picked up by a bunch of enthusiasts who split it into 26 child threads to check each letter of the alphabet. Some people would start from the front, others from the back, some people would take middle spots like “an-” words, and some people were assigned to double check. It was honestly really impressive.

251: No Name Anon Party Member

Uh-oh, “was.” what happened

252: No Name Anon Party Member

Part way through, someone brought up switching to the ODE instead of the OED and the whole thing erupted into chaos.

253: No Name Anon Party Member

Roflmao that sounds like 4chan

254: No Name Anon Party Member

stupid bonk stick (--)/WHAP

255: No Name Anon Party Member

Judging from the name, I’m guessing the ODE is the “Oxford Dictionary of English”?

256: No Name Anon Party Member

You got it. Unlike the OED, the ODE focuses on modern English. It’s the largest single-volume English dictionary, with around 350k words.

257: No Name Anon Party Member

Still pretty meaty. Judging from the description, wouldn’t the ODE be more useful because it would have more modern vocab?

258: No Name Anon Party Member

But the dungeon inscriptions are mostly written in an old style.

259: No Name Anon Party Member

>257 >258 You guys are basically recreating the 4chan argument.

260: No Name Anon Party Member

I guess it doesn’t hurt to check both...

261: No Name Anon Party Member

Those kinds of stupid arguments are how things always go online. It’s fine as long as the project doesn’t fall apart...

262: No Name Anon Party Member

Lmao what are you talking about? There are 600,000 words. Of course they’re not going to make it to the end. Plus, there are contextual commands.

263: No Name Anon Party Member

Contextual commands?

264: No Name Anon Party Member

Duh. To let someone into your party, you have to touch D-Cards together while thinking “admit.” After that, most commands get activated while touching a name on your D-Card. There might be other actions that are necessary in order to get commands to work. Are they going to try every possible action with each word?

265: No Name Anon Party Member

Oh shit yeah, it’s almost like working with a smartphone. You might have to double tap, or swipe, or whatever.

266: No Name Anon Party Member

I guess 4chan’s the place to be for this kind of stuff rather than Reddit, huh?

267: No Name Anon Party Member

Reddit usually gets summaries of the results. There’s a sub for it, but most serious contributors have migrated to 4chan to help out.

268: No Name Anon Party Member

Seems like a good opportunity to track how information spreads online. Internet research groups are going to be watching all this like a hawk.

269: No Name Anon Party Member

Right, since all of this would leave you with a traceable origin for any new discoveries that hit the mainstream.

270: No Name Anon Party Member

Now the original thread from back before the alphabet and OED/ODE schisms is discussing how to look into contextual commands.

271: No Name Anon Party Member

OED, ODE, how do you keep track of all this?

272: No Name Anon Party Member

If you're Japanese, you can use the mnemonic "O/ld Ed/o" to remember that the older one is the O/ED. Just remember the old capital city!

273: No Name Anon Party Member

Thanks! And the new one?

274: No Name Anon Party Member

Uh..."ode" can mean a type of lyrical poem...?

275: No Name Anon Party Member

Ode is the name of the new restaurant Chef Io from CHIC in Hacchibori opened up in Hiro! If anyone is interested in stylish and unusual food, check it out!

276: No Name Anon Party Member

Lmao what, are you taking commissions?

277: No Name Anon Party Member

Normies gtfo!

278: No Name Anon Party Member

There are only two, so the Old Edo mnemonic should be good enough. You can just remember that the newer one is whichever one O/ld Ed/o doesn't fit.

279: No Name Anon Party Member

Uh-oh. 4chan's split again.

280: No Name Anon Party Member

Lmaoooooo *insert popcorn gif here*

281: No Name Anon Party Member

What is it I can’t read English spill the tea tell me plzzz

282: No Name Anon Party Member

They were rechecking known functions, like trying to figure out what exactly the information displayed by “find” meant, and something came up with telepathy.

283: No Name Anon Party Member

Anything good?

284: No Name Anon Party Member

Apparently it automatically translates other languages!!!!!!!!

285: No Name Anon Party Member

Wtf holy shit no waaaaaaay.

286: No Name Anon Party Member

An American dude and a French person tried it, and apparently understood each other perfectly despite not speaking each other’s languages at all!

287: No Name Anon Party Member

Wtf how.

288: No Name Anon Party Member

Damn monolingual Japanese society, not giving us a chance to notice!

289: No Name Anon Party Member

Don’t worry. Apparently it took them a long time to notice too. They were in a party together for a while before they finally caught on.

290: No Name Anon Party Member

How did that work? They never tried talking to each other?

291: No Name Anon Party Member

They were relying on telepathy the whole time, so it never came up. They didn’t realize there was a language barrier until they tried calling each other.

292: No Name Anon Party Member

Kek

293: No Name Anon Party Member

Anyway, the hosts want to find out how telepathy will work with child parties, so they're coming up with a whole list of experiments to run though, and they'll be posting the results.

294: No Name Anon Party Member

Hosts?

295: No Name Anon Party Member

Ah right. There's going to be a big IRL meetup to try going through the list.

296: No Name Anon Party Member

Awesome. That makes sense. You can't test telepathy with child parties unless you have a big group.

297: No Name Anon Party Member

I want to join!!!

298: No Name Anon Party Member

Unfortunately, it's going to be in New York.

299: No Name Anon Party Member

Figures. Ah well, the great melting pot. Should provide plenty of opportunities to try telepathy with different languages. Plus there's BPTD there, so there are lots of active explorers.

300: No Name Anon Party Member

BPTD?

301: No Name Anon Party Member

Blocked punt touchdown?

302: No Name Anon Party Member

An NFL fan has entered the chat!

(<-Has absolutely no idea how that game works.)

303: No Name Anon Party Member

Breezy Point Tip Dungeon. It's along the west edge of Long Island, that little peninsula jutting off of Brooklyn. A dungeon formed along the coastline, and apparently it's massive-depth. Being formed in the middle of an urban area is kind of like Yoyogi, but apparently dealing with access sucks.

304: No Name Anon Party Member

How so?

305: No Name Anon Party Member

There's a lot of mixing between public and private land, or parts that people can't pass through. I don't really get it, but apparently it's tough. The beach is part of a national park though, so if you just continue along it, eventually you can get in.

306: No Name Anon Party Member

Huh...

307: No Name Anon Party Member

Whoa. I just checked out the area on Street View and it's lined with American flags. If you pulled something like that in Japan, you'd be accused of being part of some kind of ultra right-wing movement for sure.

308: No Name Anon Party Member

So, when is this meetup happening?

309: No Name Anon Party Member

They're still working out the details and will post an announcement soon. I'm hoping some new discoveries come out of this! Don't worry; I'll repost any news from the English boards here.

310: No Name Anon Party Member

For the sake of this monolingual poster, I'm begging you!

January 3, 2019 (Thursday)

Yoyogi-Hachiman, Office

"A name... A name..."

We'd been racking our brains since yesterday, but nothing had come to mind.

"Sometimes when good ideas aren't coming, it's best to stand up and step away." I tossed the copy of Katherine Briggs's *Encyclopedia of Fairies* I'd been holding back onto the pile and yawned. "Maybe we're just not cut out for this

stuff."

"Speak for yourself. *Some* of us are gifted at marketing." Miyoshi peered up from the copy of Ad de Vries's *The Dictionary of Symbols and Images* she'd been flipping through, tossing her mechanical pencil to the side and cracking her neck.

"So, what are your bright ideas?"

We were struggling to come up with a name for our stats-measuring device. To tell the truth, I didn't have much faith that the genius who'd come up with *D-Powers* would be our saving grace.

"If you must know," she said, "I was thinking maybe we give up on the complicated names and just go with something simple. For example, the budget version could be the SMD-EASY."

We'd been trying to pull a name from folklore that would easily communicate the device's capabilities across languages, but in practice that had proven difficult. Pulling a name from the legends of Peru or the Congo would have resulted in branding incomprehensible in Japan, for example, and vice versa.

We'd gone through Pliny and Borges, Briggs and Vries, and turned up names that had seemed *almost* right. *Almost*.

"As a model ID? I don't know. 'Stats-Measuring Device' is a little plain."

"Tsk, tsk, tsk. Oh, Kei. So naive. 'SMD' doesn't stand for 'Stat-Measuring Device.' It stands for 'Stats Me, Daddy!'"

A moment of stunned silence followed.

"Okay. At least we've learned not to trust any more names you come up with."

"What?! It's *spicy*! Okay, okay. I'm joking. But still, the acronym isn't bad."

"It's not, but it is going to sound like we're peddling knockoff Sega Genesis systems."

In certain parts of the world, including Japan, the Sega Genesis had been sold as the Sega Mega Drive.

“It does kind of sound like it might lead to us hearing from Sonic’s lawyers,” she admitted.

“I’m surprised you picked up on that. That system came out around the time I was born. Is your familiarity with it thanks to your college friends?”

At Comiket, we’d met a number of Miyoshi’s old friends who ran in cosplay and self-publishing circles. I felt like we’d discussed retro video games a bit too.

“I may have spent a few of my college days running a blue hedgehog through some loops.”

“What a gamer. Then...I guess the high-spec version would be the SMD-PRO?”

“Very astute! You get it.”

Uh...what is there to get?

“Okay. Then if the model IDs are set, I guess all that’s left to figure out is what we’re actually doing with that acronym. Maybe we can characterize it. SMD... Smardie?”

“C’mon, Kei. You can do better than that.”

“Er... Go the hard science fiction route? Super Mathe-tactical Display?”

“Lame. I’ve got a suggestion, and this time I’m serious.”

“What?”

“Dr. Stats!”

“‘Dr. Stats’?” I repeated. “Where did you get that one from?”

Who are you, Peace Electronics*’ Kentaro?*

Miyoshi took out a piece of paper and wrote “SMD” at the top. With a few additional letters and bits of punctuation, it had been corrected to: *S(tats), M.D.*

“The stats doctor! Listen, if they could get away with names in *Wizardry* like Trebor and Werdna, we can get away turning ‘SMD’ into Dr. Stats.”

Wizardry? Man, those college friends really put her through the winger.

“But still, to think after a whole night of brainstorming, this is the best we could come up with...” I sighed.

“Well, sometimes the best choice is right under your nose. There’s an anecdote about a business entrepreneur who hired out an artist for her logo, only to realize that the best option was a mock-up her grade-school daughter had drawn for her at the start.”

“I’m going to need an *antidote* from your *anecdotes*.”

“Dr. Stats” might have seemed cute, but I was kind of worried about retailers and consumers getting the connection to “SMD.”

“Ah, well,” I conceded. “It’s better than nothing.”

At least it wasn’t a *complete* embarrassment, like “D-Powers.”

“With that settled, it’s about time we started getting ready for our drill instructor interview.”

Packing up our things to head to the JDA, I wondered what we were getting ourselves into.

Annotations

Pliny and Borges, Briggs and Vries**:** *The Natural History* by Gaius Plinius Secundus, also known as Pliny the Elder. *Book of Imaginary Beings* by Jorge Luis Borges with Margarita Guerrero. *A Dictionary of Fairies* by Katherine Briggs. *Dictionary of Symbols and Imagery* by Ad de Vries. All seminal reference books for matters of folklore and myth.

Until fairly recently, even English translations required a trip to the library—to say nothing of the untranslated originals—but thankfully Japanese publisher Yuzankaku has picked up the slack and come out with some new, deluxe, 27 cm copies. Except, they’re so heavy I can hardly move them! I’m begging for a digital release. Or at least lighter versions that are easier to lug around!

Peace Electronics’ *Kentaro*: A comedy manga by Tatsuki Noda about a wacky electronics shop whose protagonist is wont to give inventions nonsensical, personified names. Easy to pick up and put down. Recommended (especially for enthusiasts of trains and other machines). Long live the Kotamikago, the self-propelled kotatsu car!

***Werdna and Trebor*:** Characters from 1981 computer role-playing game *Wizardry* by Sir-Tech. The names were backwards-reading anagrams of the game's creators, Andrew Greenberg and Robert Woodhead. In the Apple II era, the disk would only save data after the end of each fight, so you could avoid catastrophe if you were quick enough in ejecting it after a party wipe. The way of the unscrupulous and immoral. (However, it's justified! No matter how many times I prayed to Kadorto, I would still wind up with a party full of ashes!)

JDA Headquarters, Ichigaya

Small Conference Room

Naruse led us to the small conference room, where the instructor Simon had arranged for us to meet was waiting. Stiff and symmetrical in posture, she was a good-looking woman at around what I guessed was a towering 185 cm. Seemed fitting. After all, one of the original meanings of “Mitchell” *was* “great in stature.”

“*Hello. Nice to meet you. My name is Azusa Miyoshi. Thanks for coming!*” Miyoshi introduced herself in English.

“*A pleasure to meet you. My name is Catherine Mitchell. You can call me Cathy.*”

“*Then you can call me Azusa!*” Miyoshi replied.

“*I’m afraid I can’t do that. I’m sorry, but as my superior, would you mind if I call you ma’am?*”

“*Eh? A-Ah, uh, that’s fine with me, but...*”

After a handshake and getting seated, Miyoshi launched into questions. Cathy answered them all with aplomb. We were dealing with a professional.

I looked over her resume. Education, work, experience, qualifications—all flawless. Even her attached DSF training records were impressive. The fact that she had looks was a bonus.

What is a freakishly perfect human like this doing as backup for Simon’s team?

Lost in thought, it took me a moment to realize that Miyoshi had been calling my name.

“Kei! Earth to Kei! My old mentor!”

Hearing that, Cathy took on a puzzled expression.

“Ah, wh-what?”

“I said, ‘What’d you think?’ She already seems pretty perfect in my book.”

“Ah, y-yeah. No complaints from me either.”

“Then...anything you’d like to ask?”

Ask? Not particularly. I suppose I should at least introduce myself. After all, I’ll be forming a party with her later...

“*Hello, Catherine.*”

“*And you are...?*”

“*My name is Keigo Yoshimura.*”

“*Are you my superior too?*”

Superior? Hm. Miyoshi was the only one listed as an officer in D-Powers’ corporate structure. Was I even an employee?

“Hey, Miyoshi. Um, am I a company employee?”

“Er, no. We’ve just established the framework, so our employees are still listed at zero.”



I've heard of a one-man army, but a one-man corporation...

"I guess you'd be a...part-time worker? Contract worker?"

"*I don't think so*," I said, turning back to Cathy. "*I'm an explorer with D-Powers, and I'll be forming a party with you during training.*"

"*Party? What is your rank?*"

"*G.*"

Cathy scrunched up her face.

"*What's wrong?*"

"*Looks like we'll need to drill a little respect for authority into this one,*" Cathy remarked to Miyoshi.

"Uh...?" I turned to Miyoshi. "Hey, Miyoshi, did she say something about respect for authority just now?"

"She did. Looks like you're going to have a little competition for party leader!" she giggled.

Now hold on. Don't act like you're above it all just because you get to be called ma'am!

"*Ma'am, I suggest we get moving to the dungeon right away. I'll have to start off by showing* this one *the proper order of things*."

Miyoshi glanced in my direction, stifling a laugh. "*He's all yours! Be my guest.*"

"*W-Wait! Give me one minute, please!*"

Sensing another one of Miyoshi's mean-spirited pranks coming up, I slipped into the hallway and placed a call to Simon. *You might be on the eighteenth floor right now, but please, at least have voicemail turned on!*

"*This is Simon.*"

Prayers answered!

"*Hello, Simon. This is Yoshimura.*"

"*A call from Yoshimura? To what do I owe the honor? Ah, don't tell me. She's challenged the pecking order, hasn't she?*"

A light chuckle emanated from the other end of the line.

"*Looks like you understand the situation*," I responded. "*Did you put her up to this?*"

"*What? No way, no way*," he protested. "*I told you she used to be a U.S. Marine Corps sergeant, right?*"

"*Yeah*."

"*Cathy's from a military family going way back. Ranks and protocols have been part of her world since she was a kid.*"

"*Huh...*"

"*So see, she's got a strong sense of how things should be structured. And she won't be comfortable unless she can establish a clear hierarchy.*"

"*Hierarchy? What'd she do as a student? Just walk around picking fights?*"

"*Grades.*"

"*I see...*"

I wasn't sure about establishing hierarchy, but if you were looking for a way to compare yourself to other people, grades would certainly do the trick.

In a military setting, ranks helped ensure people fulfilled their duties, but in a less vertical structure... *Yeah, this is going to be tough.*

"*Then, by chance, when she got to the DSF...*"

"*As you can imagine. None of us made it out unscathed.*"

So that's how she wound up as backup!

"*Wasn't there any other team she could join?*"

"*You know the definition of insanity, right?*"

Her talents were beyond reproach, and her academic background was steller, plus she had looks to boot. Her combination of talents and genetic gifts had apparently earned her the mocking nickname "Ms. Perfect," but you used it in front of her at your own risk.

"*Look, I'll give you one last piece of advice*," Simon added. "*Cathy's like a dog.*

You approach her with that standard Japanese politeness and she'll run roughshod over you. Catch my drift?"

Drift caught. Certainly, Simon had me pegged as the nonconfrontational type. *Oh well, no time like the present. Time for a change in approach.*

"*Hey, don't sweat it. You got it champ. She's a military pro. She's had plenty of experience pulling her punches.*"

Not that you'll need it, of course, was the final implication, and with that, he hung up.

Simon...!

I tucked my phone into my pocket and slunk back into the conference room.

"Sorry about that."

"Kei, what do you think?" Miyoshi giggled. "She's raring to go to the dungeon."

Oh man, I really do hate confrontation! But all right! Let's propose a friendly competition.

"*Hey, Catherine.*"

"*What?*"

"*How about a little competition? Say, janken?*"

"'*Janken'?*"

"Psst, Miyoshi. What do you call janken in English?"

"I'm pretty sure I've heard it called 'rock-paper-scissors' before..."

"What? The meaning's exactly the same. Even I could have guessed that." With a smug smile, I turned back to Cathy. "*All right. Rock-paper-scissors. We call it 'janken' in Japan.*"

Cathy shook her head. "*Luck may be an important factor in some competitions, but you can't expect me to take a game of nothing but luck as a measure of merit.*"

"*Ms. Mitchell,*" I admonished, "*janken is no game of pure luck*."

“*What was that?*”

Remembering Simon’s words, I decided to take something closer to what I imagined was the tenor of a commanding officer.

“*If you think I’m lying, try your luck. Why don’t you show me what you’ve got?*”

“*Very well. I won’t back down from this challenge. I accept!*”

“*Rock, paper, scissors, shoot!*” we shouted in unison.

When the smoke cleared, she’d chosen scissors, while my hand was curled into a fist.

“*See that?*” I grinned.

“*See what? As I said, it’s a game of pure luck. If we played two or three times, I’d be sure to win just as much.*”

“*Ho ho, care to find out?*”

“*Rock, paper, scissors, shoot!*”

She went with paper, I chose scissors.

“*Grr... Again!*”

“*Rock, paper, scissors, shoot!*”

After ten consecutive rounds, I’d come out on top every time.

An AGI stat of 200 was nothing to laugh at. Winning consecutive rounds of rock, paper, scissors was something I could do before breakfast.

Dumbfounded, Cathy stared in disbelief at the scissors I’d chosen in the final round.

“Kei, isn’t that a little unfair?” Miyoshi tilted her mouth to one side.

I hadn’t been moving my hands until I’d assessed what my opponent had chosen, so there was no way I could lose.

“It’s not like I’m cheating or anything,” I protested.

“Did you do something?!” Cathy lifted her head and suddenly demanded in Japanese, leaning in. With her height, it was a little intimidating.

Oh crap, Miyoshi had asked for someone who was "good at Japanese"! Was she secretly fluent this whole time?

"Y-You speak Japane—"

"My superior addressed me in English at the beginning of the meeting, so I responded in kind," she said, gesturing towards Miyoshi. "Now, what did you do?!"

"N-Nothing. There's no way to cheat at rock-paper-scissors!"

"My superior said—"

"She said I'm so *good* it's unfair!"

"Hmph. You don't have some kind of skill that lets you read your opponent's mind, do you?"

"In that case, all you'd have to do is think about something else, or think about a different play, and I'd lose."

"Then let's try it! I dare you to play me again!"

Man, what an unbelievable sore loser. Still, this might be interesting.

"*Rock, paper, scissors, shoot!*"

She chose paper, I went for scissors.

"Again!"

"*Rock, paper, scissors, shoot!*"

Another paper, another scissors.

We played over and over. I won every time.

Cathy was fuming. Tears welling up in her eyes, she clenched her fists, staring down at the floor. It was actually kind of cute.

"You finally understand now that it's not just a game of luck, *Cathy*?"

"Grr... *Sir, yes, sir!*" She clicked her heels together, standing at attention.

Whoa, whoa, no need to go that far...

At any rate, we had procured a terrifyingly talented—and furthermore, sure

to be popular with students—drill instructor for our team.

JDA Headquarters, Ichigaya

Lobby

"Ah, Naruse!" Miyoshi called out, after our interview had concluded.

"Yes? Is the interview already over then?"

"What? Ah, yeah, it went well. Hey, listen, there's something I'd like to talk to you about..."

"Talk to me about...?" Naruse reflexively tensed up.

So this is her "let's have a talk" reaction. I felt like we'd seen it a few times before.

"Um, about our next auction. We're thinking about putting up an item box."

Naruse blinked, dropping the collection of papers she'd been holding to the floor.

"Whaaaaaat?!"

All eyes in the lobby turned to focus on Naruse.

I bowed apologetically to the people around us, and began picking up the papers.

"Ah, we're just feeling things out at this point! You see..."

Seeing the turmoil she'd caused Naruse, Miyoshi adjusted her wording.

I passed back the documents to the immobilized Naruse, inserting them into her hands. Gradually, her functions returned, and she pulled us by the arms to a corner of the lobby.

"An item box? You mean *that* item box?" She was whispering just centimeters from our faces, a deepening crease visible in her brow.

"Er, yeah," I answered. "I think." I put my hands up in front of me, trying to

reclaim some space, turning my head to the side.

Naruse let out a long sigh, brows pointed upwards.

I feel you. Another unprecedented incident had just reared its head.

“Anyway, like with Otherworldly Language Comprehension, we figured it might be best to run it by our full-time supervisor before putting it up for auction...”

“Th-Thank you...I guess?” Her half-questioning response showed how conflicted she was.

“Anyway, we’re planning on running the auction pretty soon, so if you could let us know sometime tomorrow...”

“T-Tomorrow?! Got it. I’ll do my best...”

Tomorrow was the first business day of the new year. Naruse had her work cut out for her.

January 4, 2019 (Friday)

Gemological Institute of Japan, JDA Branch

“Good morning.”

Setting foot in the JDA branch of the Gemological Institute of Japan (GIJ) on the first workday of the new year, a petite young woman called out to research staff busying themselves with work, and received greetings in return.

“Ah, Rokujo. Happy New Year!”

Komugi Rokujo’s long hair was tied into a thick braid. She was known as the “GIJ’s Resident Mineral Maniac,” along with a handful of other slightly contemptuous nicknames. She possessed a diploma from the Gemological Association of Great Britain (FGA) and a Graduate Gemologist degree from the Gemological Institute of America (GIA)—a brilliant gemological appraiser by any measure.

“What is this? Some kind of rosary-styled necklace?”

The JDA had carried in an odd item for appraisal during the holidays.

“It was a request from the JDA. They wanted an appraisal—er, classification, really—right away. Apparently it came from a dungeon. We’re not allowed to take the gem off the rosary.”

“What? But then we can’t measure its carat weight!”

True to form, Komugi was sticking her nose into work that wasn’t even hers. A lesser enthusiast might have settled for a diminutive nickname like “Mineral Girl.” Komugi’s aspirations ran higher. “Mineral Maniac” suited her fine.

Everyone at the institute was obsessed with gems to a certain degree, but her fixation ran deeper, to the point where even her relatively enthusiastic coworkers found her hard to take in.

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The date was June 8, 1997—a day Komugi would not soon forget.

Her father, a diehard fossil fanatic, had taken her to the Tokyo International Mineral Fair, where a rare fossil of a *Therizinosaurus* embryo about to hatch out of its egg was on display. She somewhat got the impression her father had taken her simply as an excuse to go to see the exhibit, but that did nothing to diminish her excitement.

The fossil looked like a jumbled collection of broken bones shoved into an egg-shaped rock. Komugi was slightly disappointed; it lacked beauty.

Escaping the eye of her father, who was staring enraptured at the display, Komugi scanned the conference floor. A complete *Elasmosaurus* fossil unearthed in Morocco drew her eye and she ran over to see it, quickly becoming lost. Seized with fear over having been separated from her guardian, Komugi frantically searched for her father. That was when she saw it.

“Preeetty...”

Looking back on it, it had been a relatively unimpressive crystal formation with a rather pleasing shape. To young Komugi’s untrained eyes, however, it had looked like the sacred treasure of some far off, fantastical land.

She reached into her pocket and took out the five-hundred-yen coin she’d

been given as an allowance, but that was nowhere near enough with which to purchase the stone. She looked back and forth between the crystal and the coin in her hand, comparing them, until an older man with slightly tired eyes who'd been watching called out.

"You like that crystal, missy?" he asked.

"Cri-stall?"

"That sparkly rock there."

Looking at it, Komugi nodded.

"Then how about this 'un?" the man asked, pulling out another stone. "It's pretty small, but it wasn't bad to look at, so I kept it."

What he produced was a miniature crystalline structure, looking almost like a child of the one Komugi had been eyeing.

She fell in love with it instantly.

"Can I...buy?" Komugi held out her five-hundred-yen coin, uncurling her fingers and displaying it to the man. He nodded. It would be enough.

"This crystal's still a li'l one, so be careful you're not too rough with it now."

The man put the crystal in a small, lidded transparent case—a micromount—and handed it to Komugi.

Komugi took it with trepidation, holding it up to the light. The light sparkled through the crystal, diffusing into rainbow patterns. It seemed like a gateway inviting Komugi into a magical world.

"You like it?"

Komugi nodded, beaming. "Thank you!"

So it was that Komugi had first plunged herself into the murky swamp of what would become a lifelong obsession.

Her father ran up, worried, scolding her over how dangerous it was to go walking around alone, but she couldn't figure out what he was so frantic about.

The man she'd bought the crystal from ran a small mineral shop in Tokyo's Okachimachi, and Komugi would come visit from time to time.

Now the man was at the age where he could be called a grandfather. He and Komugi had remained friends.

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“It’s just a rush appraisal. They want to know the basic composition. They haven’t turned in a formal appraisal request, so rough measurements are fine. Unless we get it into the lab, we won’t be able to use any Raman or photoluminescence scopes anyway.”

Photoluminescence microscopes allowed for the analysis of crystals’ chemical composition and crystalline structure, while Raman microscopes allowed for various spectrographic testing. Their main use was in the production of semiconductors, but they could be used for gemological analysis too. Expensive and delicate, they were the kind of equipment the GIJ couldn’t afford to have at every location.

The equipment they had on hand for simple analysis at the JDA branch consisted of only microscopes, dichroscopes, a multiwavelength UV light, and a refractometer.

The microscopes were of the sort laypersons would be familiar with, and the dichroscopes were used to check for pleochroism—different colors of light observed simultaneously when passing through gemstones with double refraction. The multiwavelength UV lamp helped check for fluorescence when exposed to both short-wave and long-wave UV light, and the refractometer measured refractive index, exactly as its name implied.

“Plus, we don’t know how the gemstone is attached. I’m not confident we could get it back on again if we tried taking it off.”

Donning a pair of white gloves, Komugi picked up the gemstone and examined it under a magnifying glass, checking the spot where it was connected to the rest of the loop. It looked as though the previous bead was embedded into a divot at its top, but she couldn’t tell by what method the two pieces were secured.

She turned it around and stroked the face of the gem, tracing her finger along it. She let out a satisfied sigh. It was a briolette cut, the work of an experienced lapidarist.

“Excellent cut,” she commented. “Antique.”

When it came to refractive, tear-shaped cuts, there were pear and brilliant cuts too, but the briolette, with its many small facets, called to mind estate jewelry, providing a flavor different from that of the modern day.

“Regarding our analysis, at first we thought it might be aquamarine, but...” her coworker began.

“It wasn’t, of course,” Komugi answered, examining the stone once again under the magnifying glass. “The refraction index is wrong.”

“Right. Judging from the refraction alone, I was tempted to say corundum...”

“However, it’s double-refractive. It could be sapphire or kyanite.” Komugi paused. “Fluorescence?”

“A rather vivid blue.”

“Blue?” Komugi pulled her eye away from the magnifying glass to look up at her coworker.

The remaining possibility had been blue zircon, but that should have fluoresced yellow-orange.

“It would have saved us a lot of trouble if it had just shown up orange.” Her coworker sighed.

“Judging from the information we’ve collected up to now, in addition to this exquisite fire...” Komugi turned the gem in her hand. “Mightn’t it be benitoite?”

“Taking in all the factors, that would seem like the most likely conclusion.”





“I’ve never heard any stories about synthetic benitoite,” Komugi stated.

“Well, at least this doesn’t seem to be synthetic.” Her coworker shrugged his shoulders.

“This must weigh ten carats.” Komugi set the gemstone down on the case next to her. “Even the sample in the Smithsonian isn’t that big.”

Most gem-level samples of benitoite didn’t reach such a large scale. Even one carat—approximately 0.2 grams—was on the upper end. The largest known piece, a faceted cut on display at the Smithsonian, clocked in at 7.7 carats.

“I would love to get this back to the lab...” Komugi began.

“No, no!” her coworker barked. “It has to go back to the JDA soon. No buts.”

“But couldn’t we ask for an extension?”

“What did I just say, Komugi?”

It would be completely out of the question to take a private sample they’d received back to the main lab without asking, and extend their time with it on top of that. No one would ever entrust them with their gemstones again.

Komugi pursed her lips and looked longingly at the gem.

“This came from a dungeon, you said?”

“According to materials released the other day, Floors 21 through 79 are supposed to produce mineral resources. We might be seeing a lot more like this.”

“So, erm...what would one have to do to go there?”

“Ah? Ha ha, you’re such a kidder.” Her coworker laughed off the question.

Still, while Komugi could be a little touched, she wasn’t much of a kidder. But surely this time her question had to be a joke. Right?

However, Komugi was deadly serious.

Annotations

***Double-refraction*:** The phenomenon of light being split in two directions after

passing through an object. Some gemstones possess this property, with the resulting splits possessing different wavelengths and observable colors.

***Fluorescence*:** Put broadly, the property of emitting light when exposed to ultraviolet wavelengths. The color an object fluoresces will change depending on its material composition.

***Estate jewelry*:** A marketers' term for previously worn jewelry, often passed down as heirlooms.

***Faceted cut*:** A cut with polished surfaces forming a frame around one main face. Each polished surface is known as a facet. The brilliant and briolette cuts are both genres of faceted cuts.

JDA Headquarters, Ichigaya

Dungeon Management Section

"Ah, Miharu! You're in early today."

While thinking of how she was possibly going to explain the conversations she'd had over the last few days to Section Chief Saiga, Miharu Naruse stealthily opened the door to the Dungeon Management Section, only to be immediately hailed by one of her coworkers.

"I, er, just have a lot of work to get to," Miharu replied.

"On the first workday of the year? I guess being a supervisor to those D-Linquents really is a full-time job."

Miharu gave a weak smile.

Her sudden appointment to the position of full-time supervisor for D-Powers had made her the subject of no small amount of office gossip. The level of freedom and decision-making that came with the position, equivalent to that of a deputy section chief, had raised the eyebrows of some staff particularly nosy about personnel matters, but Miharu figured there was nothing to do but shrug it off.

While exchanging New Year's greetings and seeing her coworker off, a weary smile dawned on Miharu's face.

"Even internally, they're known as troublemakers, huh."

Well, they're not wrong, she thought, heading in the direction of Saiga's office, separated by a glass partition from the rest of the section's workspace.

Saiga was already at his desk poring over a stack of documents.

"Section Chief Saiga, happy new year, sir."

"Ah, Naruse. Happy new year. But what brings you in so early?" Saiga took a brief glance up at his subordinate, then returned to his paperwork.

"Er, a lot to report on," Naruse began. "Come to think of it, sir, I might ask the same thing of you."

"Nothing but tough meetings right away this morning," Saiga responded. "I thought I'd do a little preparation..."

"Would this be about the National Center Test?"

Saiga stopped his hand in the middle of turning a page and looked up. "Why?"

"With all due respect, that's not the question here, sir. The possibility of the stats-measuring device—did you leak it?"

"What?"

Naruse explained how D-Powers had been overwhelmed by requests to create the device just before the start of the new year.

"So that's it..."

"So what's it?"

"Soon as I got in, I found out we were drowning in enough emails to prevent the JDA from getting any other work done. And the bulk of them were directed towards our department."

"Inquiries?"

They had been sent through each country's respective dungeon association. The initial batch had come from testing administration centers, but emails from

private schools had soon followed.

“Take a look. ETS, IB, College Board, the French Ministry of National Education and Youth, England’s Ofqual—national testing administration organizations from every country. There are even requests here from the Russian and Chinese education ministries.”

Russia had introduced the Unified State Exam in 2009. China’s national college entrance exam, the gaokao, was taken by over ten million people each year.

Gaokao testing locations utilized metal detectors and infrared cameras to scan for items being carried in, radio signal interception drones hovering overhead, and even facial recognition scans. However, no matter how high-tech the preventative measures, they would be powerless in the face of the undetectable, direct mental signals party-based telepathy employed.

“That means...”

The JDA had shared information about a potential D-Card verifier with dungeon associations outside of Japan, but the education ministries and schools had likely received their information directly from Japanese academic institutions—the very ones that had flooded D-Powers’ own inbox. After all, the problem of telepathy had struck every academic body equally. It was only natural that information-sharing networks would be working overtime.

“All we can do is keep saying we’re looking into it and that we’ll let them know if anything comes up. But these requests just keep coming...”

“Most countries outside of Japan will be holding their tests in June. Some of the early ones in May,” Miharu pointed out.

Even without entering that into the equation, the gaokao alone would be held at four hundred thousand locations. Just providing one device to each location would require nearly half a million units.

At the current time, there was no way they could make such a request to D-Powers.

“This is starting to smell like a leak.” Saiga paused and stared into the distance, while Miharu offered up a silent prayer of thanks. “And here I was

hoping everything would go smoothly until the devices came out...”

“Surely every institution understands there’s no chance of arranging such a massive number of presale devices. The people in charge of each testing center are probably just hoping they can get moved up in the priority queue for the first batch.”

“But if every organization thought the same way...” Saiga mused, “that would explain our current email deluge.”

If only they could see what a drop in the bucket each request is, Saiga lamented, eying the number of unread inbox items.

“It only takes a second for each testing lead to send an email, but it takes eons to read and respond to them all. You should have heard Miyoshi complain. Anyway, if info on the devices has gotten out to test centers all over the world, this is going to be a major blow to the JDA’s image.”

Miharu was starting to get riled up. She had been through so much since the end of the year that she was constantly on edge. Seeing her superior trapped in the same boat, an old phrase about misery and company came to mind.

“Now hold on. *I’m* not the one who leaked this, if that’s still what you’re thinking. I passed around a report summing up our current issue and potential solutions to relevant organizations, but that’s all. The information should have stayed there.”

“Once again with due respect, sir, that sounds like a flimsy excuse. If the leaked information came from the JDA, it’s going to be our fault as far as the outside world and D-Powers are concerned. In addition, the emails that came to D-Powers used the address from Miyoshi’s commercial license. How do we explain how *that* got out?”

“They what?!” Saiga bellowed.

Now *that* was a breach of confidentiality he couldn’t overlook. Registered email addresses were supposed to be solely for the use of the corresponding dungeon association. They weren’t meant to be public facing.

He felt a cold sweat coming on.

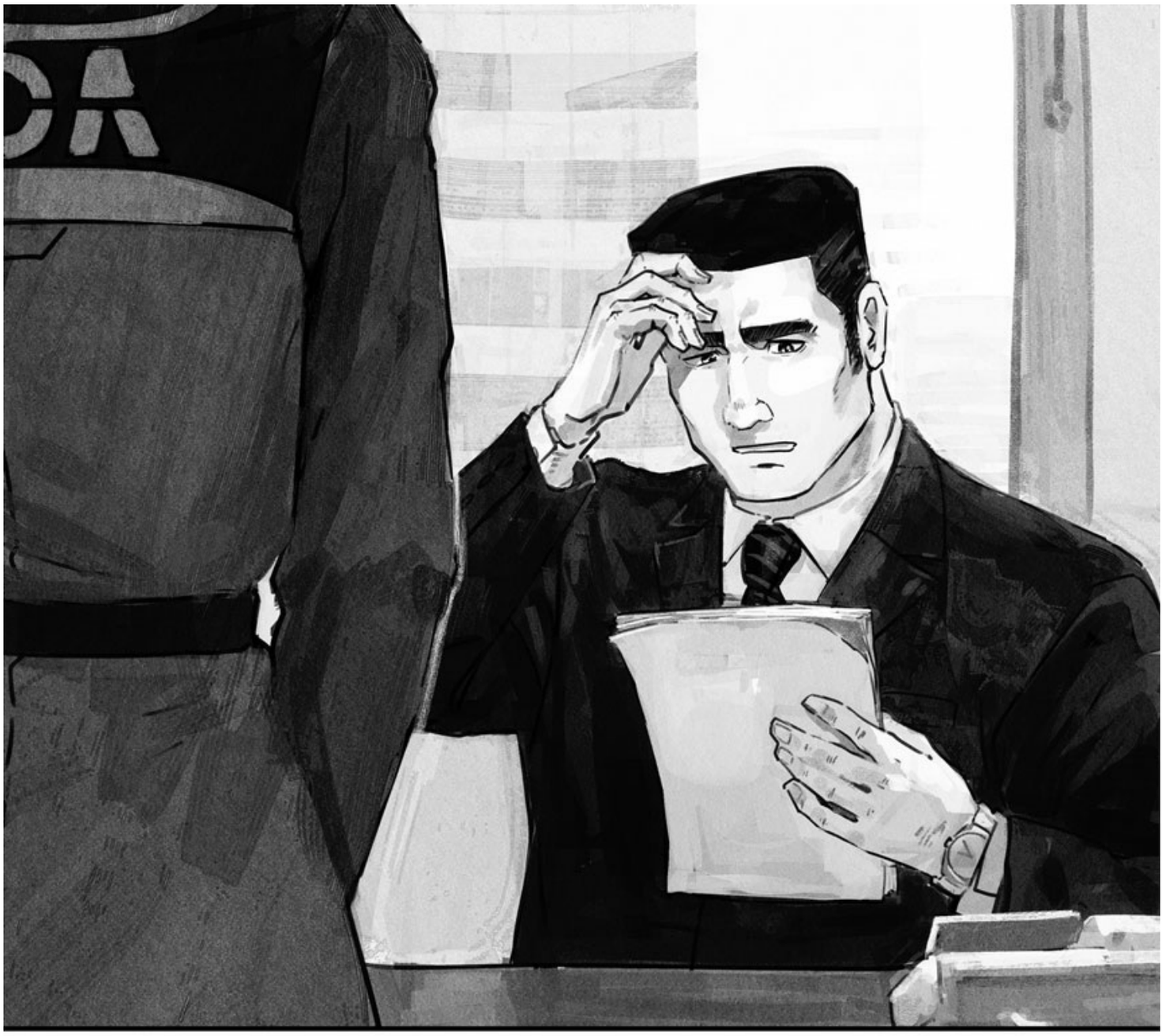
Society was built on trust. If the JDA had let a member's information slip, that lapse would surely erode public trust in it as an institution. In addition, Saiga simply didn't want to be on D-Powers' bad side.

"All right... We'll conduct a thorough investigation into whatever loose-lipped scoundrel is behind this. In the meantime, we should probably think of a few ways to make amends with D-Powers."

"Too bad we've already played our hand with the conference room. Should I see if they have any other requests?"

"Please do."

"By the way, there iiiis one more thing I'd like to bring up..."





“What?”

Saiga peered up towards his subordinate with an almost pleading look, as if he were anticipating a bandage being ripped off.

With all the casualness of making a remark on the weather, Miharu dropped one more bomb: “D-Powers hasn’t gotten a patent on the technology yet.”

“What?! Why not?!”

“Possibly they were simply intending for a later release and couldn’t deal with the expedited time frame. They wouldn’t say.”

That meant D-Powers would be sending their verification devices out into the wild without securing the intellectual property rights. What was more, they would be doing so with a hastily built prototype. It couldn’t contain any specially designed chips, and would have to be constructed with ordinary parts that anyone could order. Competitors would have a field day poaching the technology.

And as if *that* weren’t enough, the product was sure to make its way worldwide.

After all, dungeons existed the world over. So did the need to run tests. The number of organizations across the globe that would wind up with access to the technology would be innumerable.

“Argh, we’ve really stepped in it now,” Saiga lamented. “We’re making them bring an unpatented product to market? It’s going to be open season for unscrupulous opportunists!”

The JDA might as well have committed industrial espionage, causing the company they’d been forced to rely upon to eat an unfathomable potential loss. The situation was more untenable than he could possibly have imagined.

There were plenty of unscrupulous parties the world over who would think nothing of plying a testing-center head with money or women to get a look at the device, analyze it, and bring their own version to market. At the same time, what was the JDA supposed to do? Send someone to monitor every testing administrator at every college? The situation had slipped out of their hands.

Patent laws were first-come, first-served. Even on the one-in-a-million odds they could get a patent request jammed through before the devices were distributed, it wouldn't protect D-Powers from eating the loss of profit due to a market flooded with pirated versions before their own model could officially release. If the knockoffs beat D-Powers' product to market, education and testing centers strapped for time and cash would think nothing of picking them up, regardless of patent rights.

"Should we just force universities to tough it out for a year? I'm starting to feel like that might be for the best..." Just imagining the university directors' reactions, Saiga cradled his head.

Whatever their course of action, they had exactly one day before details on the device distribution were set to be delivered to academic institutions throughout Japan. How could they guarantee at this point that they were going to prevent further leaks?

"Setting that aside, they said they should have about two thousand units available."

"Terrific..."

"Assuming five seconds per check, only 720 people could be verified in an hour, so the plan was to have enough units so that they could finish everyone across all testing locations in sixty minutes."

There were around seven hundred testing centers for the National Center Test. The largest of those locations would see forty-five hundred testees. According to Miyoshi, two thousand units would allow them to cover each one.

"The problem," Miharu continued, "will be secondary exams."

Unlike the National Center Test, applicants for secondary exams—entrance exams unique to particular schools—could take more than one. They could expect their number of test-takers to at least double.

"According to Miyoshi, there are eight hundred accredited universities in Japan. It doesn't seem like they'll be able to meet that demand with their current production run. Even getting two units to each school may not allow for timely verification."

Kindai University, which boasted the largest applicant pool, would see one hundred forty thousand applications every year. If every applicant also took its secondary exam, D-Powers could never keep up with demand. To check every test taker in one hour, that single location would need 195 units. And that was *if* everything else went smoothly.

“Good point...”

“So, they were thinking, in order to minimize problems, they would have each university submit date requests, draft a rental schedule, and loan the current batch of units out to different universities on a rolling schedule.”

“I see. So rather than sales, essentially a rental service.”

“Although the ones providing the onsite service and transporting the devices between schools would have to be the JDA...”

A tired smile flashed across Saiga’s face.

There was precious little room for negotiation. If they tried to insist D-Powers provide the onsite service themselves, there was no doubt they’d be turned down. There were no competing providers for the JDA to leverage, and they were already going so far as to have D-Powers expose themselves to potential loss via device leaks. There wasn’t a single benefit for D-Powers in arranging for provision of service themselves.

“I feel a headache coming on...” Saiga groaned.

If every school’s secondary exams were held at different times, it would be one thing, but at least the national institutions would all be holding theirs on the same day—presently scheduled for the twenty-fifth of this month. If the JDA could contact each institution and have them alter their dates, they might be able to respond, but doing so may result in students who had already planned out their test dates becoming unable to attend their exams.

“I think we would be justified in prioritizing the dates of the former imperial universities and medical school exams, and asking the others to change their dates...” Miharu suggested.

“Hmm...” Saiga murmured.

It might have been justified, but how exactly was he going to present that case at the meeting? Other department heads all had their own inclinations and connections as well.

“All right. Let’s get moving. Call up the National Center for University Entrance Examinations and have them draft up a schedule of secondary exams to send over.”

“Erm, Section Chief Saiga, I’m not your personal secretary, remember?”

“You’re the equivalent of a deputy section chief, right? Time to learn that this is part of a deputy chief’s work.”

Sensing an unwinnable argument, Miharu took out a notepad and wrote down her instructions. Pressing the top of the pen into the bottom of her lip, she brought up yet one more concern.

“With that all out of the way, there is one *other* thing I’d like to ask. Miyoshi wanted to inquire if we would prefer the transaction between the JDA and D-Powers consist of a purchase or a rental. The price would be the same either way.”

“The same price for a rental or a sale? Then they’re basically just shunting responsibility to the JDA.”

It made sense, from D-Powers’ perspective, but it presented Saiga with a difficult choice.

“In addition...”

“‘In addition’...?”

Miharu explained the clause Miyoshi had asked her to add to the contract, absolving the JDA of any wrongdoings in the case of leaks so long as they “endeavored” to prevent them.

“What’s that? We only have to ‘endeavor’ to ensure there are no leaks? That’s it?”

“That’s all.”

Ordinarily, one would define specific financial penalties for inappropriate caution in logistics. But only “endeavor?” He couldn’t make sense of it.

“What the hell are they up to?” he asked.

“Judging from the wording, it seems like they may simply want to absolve the JDA of blame in a situation that seems likely to occur.”

“Since when did they become our legal advisors?”

Ordinarily, the party on one side of a transaction would try to take advantage of the other. But instead, they were trying to protect the JDA, at no benefit to themselves?

Saiga tried analyzing the situation this way and that, but he couldn’t make heads or tails of it.

It was conceivable their negotiation skills were just sloppy, but when it came to D-Powers, that somehow seemed the least likely possibility of all. If it were merely a matter of sloppiness, they wouldn’t have bothered asking for a new clause to begin with. The intentionality of their request set him ill at ease.

He didn’t know what they were planning, but the method of provision, supervision, and service model for up to two thousand devices had been left up entirely to the discretion of the JDA. There had to be some additional factor at work.

“The flexibility is appreciated, but that just means more headaches for us...”

“Chief, I did also receive a question about the next auction...” Miharu cut in apologetically.

“‘A question’?”

Something in Miharu’s wording set Saiga on edge. He knitted his brow.

“They’re thinking about putting up an item box.”

Saiga was frozen for a second. The next, he’d leaped out of his chair.

“AN ITEM—!” He cut himself short.

The section chief office was separated from the rest of the Dungeon Management Section by a glass partition. Though the divider offered a certain degree of sound-proofing, it would do nothing to prevent the rest of the office from hearing his sudden outburst.

Realizing he had drawn the eyes of the rest of the staff towards him, Saiga cleared his throat, still standing, waved their gazes away, and dropped back into his seat.

***

“Did you hear that?”

“I did! It’s rare to see the chief shout.”

“But what did he mean by ‘an item’?”

“You think he meant him and Naruse?”

“What?! No way! Is the chief single?”

“Last I heard, he at least lived on his own.”

“Well, then I guess it’s not our place to say anything. They’re both consenting adults after all.”

“Then, you really think—?!”

“Yup.”

“*Ahem*, ladies.”

Hearing Assistant Manager Sakai’s pronounced throat clearing, the staff scattered back to their work.

***

“A-An item box?” Saiga stammered, slack-jawed in his chair. He leaned forward, keeping his voice low.

“Yes.”

“So then, what do they want us to do?”

“That’s just it. They were wondering what our stance would be. If possible, they’d like an answer today.”

“Today?!” Before he realized it, Saiga had his hands back on his temples.

The upcoming meeting concerning the D-Card verifiers was going to be complicated as it was. Now the appearance of a legendary, long-hypothesized skill orb had been added to the mix.

“Please tell me this is their idea of a joke...”

“Given the source, sir, I don’t think that’s very likely.”

Situations with D-Powers often wound up *sounding* like a joke, but regrettably, that hadn’t proven true a single time.

Saiga folded his arms and sank into thought.

He understood why they’d reached out to the JDA in advance. If they put the item box orb up for public auction, they were sure to attract the scrutiny of criminal investigative organizations.

The largest use case, after all, was likely to be drug smuggling.

At present, drugs were smuggled into North America from South America through Mexico using a variety of means. However, the advent of an item box would allow for movements along legal channels without risk. With no extra precautions to worry about, smuggling yields were going to shoot up at an unbelievable rate.

Turkish police placed the annual yields for the PPK—the Kurdistan Workers’ Party, the guerrilla organization thought to control drug-running into Europe through the Balkans—in excess of five billion dollars. With a skill orb which was sure to pay for itself in due time, Saiga anticipated a vast amount of illicit funds moving behind the scenes.

Gold-smugglers aiming to bring product into Japan and profit off of Japan’s eight-percent consumption tax would be another candidate for bidders, but with their profit margin off of a haul of one hundred million yen amounting to a relatively measly eight million, it didn’t seem like they’d have the funds to compete.

Even trying to restrict bidders via background checks through corporate research services like Teikoku Databank or Tokyo Shoko Research wouldn’t solve this predicament. They had no means to investigate criminal enterprises, and even if they could, any final decisions on buyers would still rest with the JDA. There would be no punting the decision to anyone else.

“Damn.”

There simply wasn’t enough time. Although Saiga knew that how to proceed would be a difficult decision no matter how much time they had on their hands...

If the JDA tried to buy the orb ahead of auction, they would have to rely on excess capital for the year of forty-five billion yen, accumulated through the ten-percent administrative fees on D-Powers’ auctions. Forty-five billion yen wasn’t nothing, but it wouldn’t be enough to defeat criminal enterprises at auction—and if D-Powers knew its worth, that sum seemed too low to try to secure an advance sale.

Unfortunately, it didn’t seem like they would be able to count on any partners splitting costs this time either.

The orb would have ample uses in criminal or dungeon-diving ventures—almost too many to count—but there wasn’t the same urgency for its use in other matters. Of course having the skill would be convenient, but the conversation stopped there.

In the hands of the wrong party, it might threaten the foundations of society, but when it came to practical use for a typical organization, there were shockingly few applications that could justify such a high price. If that difference in relative values were reflected in the bids, an organization that was on the right side of the law would have no chance of competing with one which wasn’t.

Getting in touch only with the parties who would be angry to find out they hadn’t heard, Saiga prepped a single email concerning the item box and concentrated on the morning’s meeting.

“We’ll just see what Terasawa and Tanaka have to say about this...”

In accordance with procedures for communications involving sensitive information, Saiga encrypted the email, sent it, then navigated to the outbox to delete it from the folder.

Annotations

***Testing administration organizations from every country*:** ETS, or the

Educational Testing Service, is the world's largest nonprofit testing administration organization, creating tests such as the TOEIC, the TOEFL and the GRE. It currently operates in nine thousand regions across 189 countries. The College Board is the nonprofit organization responsible for America's SAT college entrance exams. The International Baccalaureate (IB) is a nonprofit from Geneva, providing international diploma programs. It has no connection to the French Baccalaureate, which is overseen by France's Ministry for National Education and Youth.

Ofqual, or the Office of Qualifications and Examinations Regulation, is England's non-ministerial governing organization responsible for the General Certificate of Education (GCE) Advanced Level test.

The Russian Ministry of Education oversees entrance exams similar to Japan's National Center exams, while the Chinese ministry oversees possibly the largest entrance exam in the world, the National College Entrance Examination, known colloquially as the "gaokao."

Ichigaya, Ministry of Defense

“That damn Saiga...” Major Terasawa’s eyes pored over the contents of the encrypted email in front of him, which looked for all the world like a poorly conceived bit of spam. However, the sender verified its authenticity.

“Item box going up tomorrow. What do you want us to do?”

Staring at the email, a single word flashed across Terasawa’s mind: “Making.” That was, assuming the name of the skill orb which had shown up on the JDA’s monitored skill orb list some months ago, rendered in the Japanese syllabary, hadn’t actually been “May King.”

If, as First Lieutenant Iori Kimitsu had suggested, it indicated a skill capable of manufacturing skill orbs, the question wasn’t why an item box had shown up now—it was why it had taken so long.

“Maybe they need to gather energy?” he wondered out loud.

The suggestion seemed both reasonable and absurd. Of course, it was based on a leap of logic to begin with.

The email had also been sent to Agent Tanaka’s address. However, Tanaka’s agency would never be able to drum up the funds to purchase the orb at auction. The item-box orb would fall into the category of “advantageous but unnecessary,” which in national budget speak meant “out.” There may be the argument that bidding on the orb would be an investment in keeping it out of criminal hands, but when it came to budget approvals, the government was rarely so proactive.

“Not like we’d be able to bid on it either,” Terasawa sighed.

Their one and only chance, if they ever had one, would be working out a direct purchase before the orb went to auction. However, given the market value, even hopes of that being remotely possible seemed slim.

If drug cartels started throwing their weight behind bids, the auction would reach astronomical levels—on par with or exceeding Otherworldly Language Comprehension. That would be no concern to criminal enterprises. They could

make every drop of their money back through smuggling, so there would be no reason not to come into the auction with the full weight of their resources.

“Maybe if we appeal to their sense of civic duty...”

However, he knew that would likely be a long road to nowhere as well. It would be like asking the makers of metal bats not to sell their products just because they *could* be used in beatings. Could he really convince D-Powers that any crimes committed with the orb they had sold would be their fault? Certainly, there was no legal ground for such a claim.

As for whether Terasawa himself wanted it, he did. It would be an unprecedented boon to their dungeon exploration efforts. However, without knowing its full capabilities, including the all-important matter of its storage capacity, it would be hard to get his superiors to cough up the funds.

Still, if they could store a tank or an armored truck, it could revolutionize their dungeon-conquering strategies. He flashed back to the plan he’d first considered using at Yokohama several years ago, but shook his head, before dismissing the thought.

“Now hold on,” he reminded himself. “Let’s not get carried away. We still don’t know what this thing is capable of.”

His own privileges wouldn’t allow him to make a call on bidding for the orb. However, even if he tried to solicit the assistance of someone with a higher rank, who exactly should that be?

“Argh, what a pain.”

The skill orb everyone had been dreaming of had finally appeared. Yet as was so often the case, dreams were quite distant from reality.

Nagatacho, Cabinet Office Building

On the top floor of a building across from the prime minister’s official residence, Secret Agent Tanaka cradled his head in his hands.

“What. The hell. Am I supposed to do. With *this*...?”

The source of his frustration was a particular email from one Section Chief

Saiga of the JDA, who was quickly coming to occupy the number one spot on Tanaka's personal most wanted list.

The skill orb slated for auction this time may not have directly touched on any existing international flashpoints, as Otherworldly Language had, but that didn't mean the state could safely ignore it. After all, the skill orb written in the email was sure to be the bane of national law enforcement agencies.

Tanaka let out a long sigh. The Cabinet Intelligence and Research Office and the National Police Agency were so intertwined that in the governmental district of Kasumigaseki, Tokyo, where the headquarters of both were housed, the former was often mistaken for a branch office of the latter. Getting ahead of this sale would be a matter of personal interest—if only for the sake of appearances and reputation.

However, no matter how much he troubled himself, all Tanaka could do would be to send a report up to his superior, Director of Cabinet Intelligence Murakita, and patiently await more orders. The report would be spartan; he didn't even have any concrete details on the skill.

"If a subordinate turned in this kind of skimpy report to me, I'd send it right back for revisions." He narrowed his eyes at the document on his screen.

Scrunching his brow, he sent the information off.

JDA Headquarters, Ichigaya

Conference Room

The meeting over the D-Card verifiers, which had stretched on since morning, showed no signs of ending. It had been decided that the participants would take a short break.

Saiga stretched, exhaustion visible on his face, and stepped out into the hall, where Miharu came running up.

"What's the word from the battlefront?" she asked.

"The meetings of the JDA do not walk, but dance," Saiga said in a weary voice.

“I wasn’t aware you were the Prince of Ligne, sir.” Miharu scrunched up her mouth.

“Do I look like I’ve got a lazy eye to you?”

The Prince of Ligne, Charles-Joseph, famous for his quote attacking the frivolous inefficiency of the Vienna Congress—“It does not walk, but dances”—had been immortalized in an official portrait which had, perhaps due to his exhaustion from sitting for it, given him what looked like one sagging eye. In uncharitable lighting, it even looked like it drifted in a different direction from the other.

“That bad, huh?” Miharu inquired.

“Worse. If it were only the National Center Test, we might have worked out a plan by now, but the secondary exams are really throwing a wrench in the works. It’s a bloodbath. The Sales Department keeps throwing curveballs.”

“Sales? The meeting was supposed to just be about D-Powers’ provision of the devices and a schedule for distribution, wasn’t it? Where does Sales get involved?”

“You tell me...”

Something had started to feel off to Saiga about the direction of the meeting. The sales departments had forced their way into the discussion, suggesting buying the devices from D-Powers in bulk, and—after the National Center Test—selling them off to universities and colleges from there. Accordingly, the JDA would also be responsible for determining priority sales access between universities. Why there was a need to subject themselves to these hurdles, when D-Powers had conveniently offered to absolve them of such responsibility via a rental model, was beyond Saiga.

To start with, there wouldn’t be enough available units to sustain a resale model in the first place. An inordinately small number of universities would get them.

“Maybe they’re planning to use the low unit count to justify an auction between universities?” Naruse speculated.

“They can do that if they want to risk forever tarnishing the JDA in the eyes of

the public. Talk about entrenching a rich-get-richer society."

"Perhaps just to lay groundwork for the future. We can expect more units to be produced eventually."

"But would we still be involved at that point? This time, we're handling distribution because we made a rush request to D-Powers, and they agreed to meet it at personal risk and loss. However, they're a corporation. They have every right to bring their product to market in the future without running it through the JDA."

"Then..." Naruse paused in thought. "Maybe just a bluff, to try to glean some favors when they back off."

"You think Sales would roll in there with a tough guy act just looking for accolades when they back down?"

"Possibly."

"Actually...that *does* sound like them. Still, I'm not sure where exactly a compromise point would be." Saiga tilted his head. "The best move for the JDA now is to agree to D-Powers' proposal and run a service contract, and as far as I'm concerned, there isn't anyone with their head screwed on straight who could look at the situation and disagree."

"The service model would allow the JDA to simply act as a liaison between applicant universities and the product provider. If there were any disputes, they would fall between the university and D-Powers. We would be shielded as a third party."

"Right. On the other hand, if we lease or purchase the devices and try to resell them to universities, it becomes a direct deal between the university and the JDA. Deciding which universities to prioritize becomes a lot more contentious."

"Hold on a minute, sir, do you think..."

"What?"

"Under the former model, management would fall under the Commercial Affairs section within the Dungeon Management Department."

"That's correct..."

“In other words, the project would be handled entirely by the Dungeon Management Department. However, in the case of a resale model...”

“Management would fall to the Second Sales Section or Sales Planning Section. Under the Sales Department.”

“Well?”

“They wouldn’t risk tanking the JDA’s reputation just to bring management of the project in-house. Their priorities would have to be completely out of line.”

“Perhaps they aren’t thinking about the JDA’s long-term reputation. Perhaps they’re thinking about their performance this past year.”

“Performance? The Sales Department’s performance hasn’t been any different from a typical year,” Saiga answered.

“It has been, though,” Miharu offered, “as a percentage of JDA profit.”

The bulk of the JDA’s profits this past fiscal year had come from departments and divisions unrelated to sales. To be more exact, they stemmed from the service fees on a series of particularly high-priced orb transactions Miharu had brokered.

“This may be imprudent, sir, but there’s one other difference this year. There are chairperson elections coming up.”

“Whoa!” Saiga bellowed, leaning in to shield Miharu from any nearby prying ears. “You can’t just go saying things like that!”

Saiga knew Miharu to be prone to wild speculation, but she usually kept herself reserved. He couldn’t help but smile a bit at the brazenness of her suggestion. Whether she’d simply grown more confident in her own assertions or her time with D-Powers had played a role in this change, Saiga couldn’t be sure.

Miharu brought a hand to her face, feigning covering her mouth. “Oh my! Did I say that? Well, either way, it looks like we can expect moves to cut the Dungeon Management Section off from any further sales-related matters this year. Although I’ll refrain from speculating on *why*.”

“You’re one to talk, as though you had nothing to do with this,” Saiga shot

back.

“Well it’s not like I asked for this!”

It was true that the Sales Department hadn’t been happy that Miharu’s orb transactions had been handled outside their supervision. However, it had been an unplanned turn of events.

Originally, the Sales Department would have been the one to mediate orb transactions. A section within it, the Sales Planning Section, maintained the orb sales database. Under normal circumstances, they would have handled D-Powers’ orbs too.

However, because D-Powers had directly requested Miharu, the handling of their transactions had deviated from standard protocol.

Originally, D-Powers had only appointed Miharu in the matter of orb storage, not sales, but given the party’s unusual nature, Saiga had leveraged his connections higher up and in HR to have her appointed as their full-time supervisor. To sales, it must have looked as though the Dungeon Management Section had uprooted an ever-replenishing money tree to transplant into their own yard.

“Those thankless poindexters,” Saiga grumbled. “Knowing D-Powers, if Sales tries to glom onto them, they’d minimize their interactions with the JDA within a month. The writing’s on the wall there. Why can’t those shortsighted fools see it? We can’t get money out of them if they no longer feel like doing business.”

Watching her boss’s sudden fervor with a slight smile of admiration, Miharu brought up the reason she’d come all this way to talk to him.

“Ah, by the way, regarding the secondary exam schedules, I got an answer which I saved to your personal folder.”

“Thanks, Naruse.”

“Hopefully the meeting comes together.”

“Hopefully indeed. And I *still* haven’t even brought up the skill orb.”

“What would be our ideal scenario there?”

“Being able to buy it cheap before it goes to auction, of course.”

“When you say ‘cheap’...”

“We might be flush with excess revenue at the moment, but it still only comes to forty-five billion. If we can leverage something with that...”

“With all due respect, sir, we may have to work on your definition of ‘cheap.’”

“Yeah, well, it’s nothing compared to the prices an item box orb would fetch at auction. Look, I’ve got nothing else here. I’m going to have to throw myself at your feet and have you get them to bite on our offer.”

“Throw yourself at... Look, there’s no reason for all that. Let’s say we did get them to sell. Who would use it?”

“Now *there’s* another tough problem...”

The JDA operated under government oversight, but for strict classification, it was still a for-profit organization. What would they do with an employee who had been physically entrusted with a purchase surpassing forty billion yen? It wasn’t as though the JDA could compel them to return the skill if they resigned.

“We could try drafting some kind of contract that specifies the recipient can’t quit without permission, but I’m not sure that’ll pass muster, you know, constitutionally.”

“I wonder.”

“Well, what about you? You want to use it?”

“I’m sorry?” Miharu said.

“I’m serious,” Saiga replied. “Why not? Even if you left the JDA, if it were you, I feel like D-Powers might deign to accommodate us with a new copy, through whatever their channels are.”

“What are you talking about, chief? They aren’t running a charity.”

“Yeah, but they aren’t heartless either. I know the kinds of people who will look out for a friend. Push comes to shove, having someone they’re fond of use the orb could provide us some security if we can leverage that emotional connection against them. Well, think it over. I don’t think it’s a bad plan.”

“Leverage their emotions... When did the JDA become supervillains?”

Playing on someone's emotions was one form of threat.

"Nothing supervillainous about being practical. Looks like my only miscalculation was expecting you to be any less attached." Saiga shrugged.

"Good luck with the rest of the meeting, sir, and do *try* to keep the foolish quips to a minimum."

"Right, right. Noted. Thanks."

As he was about to reenter the conference room, Saiga turned around and called out to Miharu one more time.

"What is it, sir?"

"I'm sorry, but stick around D-Powers for the rest of the day."

"Huh? Okay. I'll hole up at their offices."

"Good. I'm counting on you. I'll be in contact when this is all over."

"What?"

With that, Saiga turned and walked back to the battlefield.

JDA Headquarters, Ichigaya

Dungeon Management Section

In his office following the conclusion of a long and fruitless meeting, preparing to get started on a schedule for their work moving forward, Saiga thought back on the Sales Department, and their goal in derailing the talks.

"To think they would so brazenly try to poach the deal from us. To what end?"

The Sales Department had ultimately backed off from the resales, presenting the maneuver as a sign of compromise, landing on a finance-lease plan.

However, in that case, the one signing a contract with each university borrowing the verifiers would still be the JDA, rather than D-Powers. In addition, in this case, where a rental model would have suited their timing and

use case just fine, a finance lease didn't seem to pose any fewer risks than a purchase. However, with Sales apparently unwilling to relinquish their involvement, it was the best agreement they could reach, and they had decided to forgo any school prioritization, settling instead for a simple first-come, first-served application model.

"We still can't guarantee that every school can get them this way. And with the transaction being a lease and our being the provider, the JDA is responsible for any and all information leaks."

Since he'd warned them about the dangers of an information leak, any such matters should have turned the heads of Legal Affairs enough that hypothetical future incidents would look like a matter of wilful negligence. However, he couldn't be sure.

"Dammit, why'd they have to go and make things so difficult? We almost had a good thing here! Were they really just trying to earn points for the chairperson election, like Naruse said?"

At the JDA, beneath the organization chairperson, the highest-ranking official, sat a senior director, in charge of the Executive Office.

The senior director was also the de facto officiant of the board of directors, but the board of directors was more a communications vehicle for related institutions and corporate partners, rather than an entity with any real decision-making power over the organization's daily work.

The ones who oversaw most internal decisions on a practical level were two executive directors under the senior director.

One of the two was Executive Director Mizuho, who oversaw the Management, Sales and Legal Affairs Departments. The other was Executive Director Satoshi Makabe, who oversaw the Dungeon Management Department.

Unlike Mizuho, Makabe had come to the JDA from the private sector, allowing him more connections in the commercial world, and his work coordinating with other countries' dungeon associations kept him away from Japan on business for about six months out of the year.

Being questioned by the board of directors on his absences had once

prompted the infamous retort, “That’s what we have two directors for, innit? One in-country is enough. Besides, all I oversee is the Dungeon Management Department, and Tachibana’s talented enough for that on her own.”

The comment had caught him additional flak, but the board had to recognize his accomplishments, and work wasn’t being held up, so the members could only grin and bear it. It wasn’t an exaggeration to say that most agreements between the JDA and international dungeon associations had originally been brokered by Makabe.

The Tachibana he had spoken of was the director of the Dungeon Management Department, a stern, once-divorced matron by the first name of Michiyo, and Saiga’s direct superior.

Given her name, shared with Nara-era imperial court woman Tachibana no Michiyo, and repute, there was sometimes talk of who would become her next Fujiwara no Fuhito, the latter’s historical husband. She was a good-looking woman known to be in her forties. However, no one who had asked for the second digit of her age had ever come back alive.

Other than the Dungeon Management Department, the other departments at the JDA all fell under the purview of Mizuho.

With the retirement of the JDA’s current chairperson in September, the organization’s top position had been left open and was scheduled to be put to a vote. It was an open secret that the two executive directors would be throwing themselves into the running.

“I’d just like a break from all these horse races for a change...”

Glancing at the clock, Saiga noticed it was already the end of the official workday. He had known coming in this morning that he would be working overtime.

As expected, there was no reply from the Ministry of Defense yet.

“Those guys are going to owe me,” he grumbled.

Taking his phone out of his pocket, Saiga took a deep breath and steeled himself to dial a number he had seen all too many times recently.

Yoyogi-Hachiman, Office

“What?!” Having picked up her vibrating phone and heard whatever the announcement came from the other end of the line, Naruse let out a shout.

“What’s that about?” Miyoshi asked, looking on.

“Ah, it’s... Y-Yes, ah...”

Placing one hand on her hip and putting up an index finger like a detective who had just caught their culprit, Miyoshi threw a judgmental look at the stammering Naruse.

“Uh-oh. We’ve seen *that* look recently, haven’t we, Kei?”

“Indeed we have.”

“And that time was—drumroll please—right before she brought up those unreasonable demands regarding the D-Card verifiers!” Miyoshi thrust her finger forwards dramatically.

Naruse flinched, looking our way with an apprehensive expression while she remained on the phone. “Ah, sir, that’s...”

“This has got to be about the item box,” Miyoshi concluded.

“Probably.”

“So, what is our official—ah. O-Okay. I see...”

A grin on her face, Miyoshi moved closer, and plopped herself down on a seat right next to Naruse. Sweat pooled visibly on Naruse’s forehead, although she maintained a strained smile.

The truth was, I’d already talked it over with Miyoshi. We’d just been testing the waters by announcing the existence of the orb to the JDA—depending on their response, we didn’t necessarily need to actually put it up for sale. National agencies wouldn’t have the justification to interfere directly with our decision to auction it, nor would they have the funds to compete with criminal enterprises—that was because they wouldn’t have the same use-cases and benefits.

If they really wanted to, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs could give someone the orb and send them to a foreign country under the guise of diplomacy, smuggling in great quantities of weaponry and prompting an internal coup, but given Japan's international standing, I couldn't imagine any official in the country would be after the orb for that use. Instead the national policy seemed to be grinning and bearing situations in order to maintain fragile peace. I couldn't imagine anyone would be after the orb to stir up deliberate strife.

The national organization which seemed most likely to be able to get use out of the orb was the Ministry of Defense, but even they wouldn't be able to cough up the money without fully knowing the orb's abilities. Its price was likely to reach several times that of the other most expensive orb sales. Although I'd heard the ministry had put away enough funds to invest in a reasonable number of "porters"—a new type of vehicle meant for dungeon-crawling, currently under development by a number of different defense contractors—that didn't mean they would be persuaded to spend even more than that amount on an untested skill orb.

No, all the government would be able to do if the orb were put up for auction would be to sit by and twiddle their thumbs while other bidders—most likely criminal organizations—swooped in and made off with the prize.

Given all of that, we had secretly agreed in advance to sell to the JDA at a price of their naming, given a few certain conditions.

After all, it didn't seem like we'd be able to sleep at night if we knew we'd essentially just done international organized crime's dirty work.

"So, erm, the thing is," Naruse piped up, having completed her call. "If possible—I mean we'd really like—if it's okay to ask for it—we'd really prefer that you just...not put the orb up for auction?"

"Is that a request from the national government?" I asked. "Or from the JDA?"

"Err... It's a personal request from me?"

"Huh?!"

"O-Only joking! Please don't look at me like that. It just seemed like the right

moment to try out a line like that.”

“It’s not that. It’s just—it kind of took me off guard.”

Naruse let out a deep sigh, then continued. “At any rate, the JDA—or rather, the Dungeon Management Section—would like the opportunity to conduct an advance purchase of the orb. Unfortunately, our budget has a limit...”

“Okay, okay! *This* is where the Queen of the Merchants steps in!” Miyoshi cried, raising her hand. “So how much are we talking here?” She mimed fiddling with an abacus in the air, leaning in closer to Naruse.

“A-Around forty billion yen,” Naruse bleated back.

“What?! You’re paying out of the money you made off of our administrative fees?! That’s no fair!”

“Miyoshi, Miyoshi,” I said. “Let’s take things a little easy here.”

“Hmph.”

“W-We could try to accommodate your request if you had a-an amount that would...”

“Seriously?!”

“Forty-five billion,” Miyoshi responded. “Forty-five billion yen. That’s our line in the sand. I won’t budge.”

That would come out to around exactly the amount we had paid up to now in administrative fees.

“Aren’t you the one who decided to foist two thousand units full of cheap components on the JDA at one hundred thousand yen per pop?”

“That’s right! And they’ll be making that back from the schools, so that’s another two hundred million the JDA gets as the house D-Powers built. Increase our asking price to 45.2 billion!”

Trust it to the Queen of the Merchants; she wasn’t leaving any t’s uncrossed.

“Besides,” she added more calmly, “when this transaction is completed, we’ll be looking at administrative fees of 4.5 billion, so there isn’t much difference on the JDA’s side from their initial offer of 40 billion.”

“A-Ah. That is true...” Naruse agreed. “Although I’ll have to clear it with my section chief.”

“Not so fast. That’s our price, but we also have two conditions.”

“Conditions?”

“Oho ho! You’re lucky Kei’s not some kind of scoundrel, or this is where you’d be getting an indecent proposal.”

“A couple dozen billion yen for a date?” I said. “That’s almost a compliment.”

“An honor,” Naruse responded sarcastically. “So then, the actual conditions?”

“First, we’d like to know who the orb’s user is.”

“Disclosing the name of the user?”

“That’s right. We have some things we’d like to test, so we’d appreciate their help with that.”

“And the second?”

“I know this is a big ask, but we’d like to have them assist with our dungeon exploration sometimes.”

“Hrm...” Naruse murmured. “That’s...”

Naruse considered the conditions Miyoshi had put forward. To take them at face value, they would imply D-Powers hadn’t used the item box orb themselves. But was that possible? When they had sold Super Recovery, Miyoshi had made a comment along the lines of not being able to sell anything they hadn’t confirmed the effects of. Although Yoshimura had provided a hasty rationalization.

“We’d like to get first priority on having them help move equipment, be allowed to test out the skill’s capacity, things like that. Oh, but don’t worry. We know they’ll have JDA duties too. We wouldn’t ask for anything unreasonable.”

“Hmm...”

Unveiling the user to D-Powers was a big ask on its own, but Miyoshi’s second condition essentially eliminated any need to ruminate on the first. If the JDA accepted her request, D-Powers would learn the user’s identity simply by virtue

of having them help out.

“If you can accept our conditions, we’ll part with the orb for forty-five billion.”

Naruse thought for a moment, then replied with, “I’ll have a chat with my supervisor.” She pulled out her cellphone and retreated to the other room.

“Miyoshi, aren’t you pushing this too far?” I hissed. “I would have been fine with around ten billion.”

“Kei, there’s going to be no hiding the sale value this time if anyone checks the JDA’s public transaction records. If we make it too cheap, it could hurt us down the line.”

In other words, Miyoshi was thinking about the potential market value of future copies of Storage.

If the full extent of the orb’s abilities became known, it wouldn’t be long before dungeon-exploration organizations the world over were champing at the bit to have one. Storage could let them bring tanks or armored cars into dungeons, plus as many weapons as they wanted.

If any other requests for a direct sale came our way, Miyoshi wanted to establish a price base that would give us the ability to say no.

“We can say this one went cheaper because we hadn’t yet verified its abilities, so we can justify a certain level of price increase moving forward, but we still need to start out with a reasonably high base.”

“I gotcha.”

If we allowed for that excuse justifying a tenfold price increase, our new asking price for a direct sale could be set at anywhere between 100 billion and 450 billion. It didn’t hurt to have options.

While we were going back and forth, Naruse reentered the room. “We accept your price,” she announced briskly.

“What? Just like that?!”

I’d been surprised enough during that time with the D-Card verifiers, but this time the transaction reached nearly one hundred times that amount! Once again I was at a loss for how the approval for such astronomical sums could rest

solely with one section chief.

“Who the hell is that guy?” I asked, referring to Naruse’s boss.

“Maybe he’s secretly some kind of shadowy overlord of the JDA,” Miyoshi piped in.

Watching our conversation with a bemused smile, Naruse continued in a serious tone. “However, we have one condition of our own.”

“What is it?”

“Until it comes time to use it, we’d like you to store the orb for us, waiving your usual fee.”

So that’s how it is.

Storing the orb until use would mean the JDA could turn around and resell it if they wanted, but in that case, according to our storage service contract—waived fees or not—a third of the sales price would come back to us. Plus, either way, I couldn’t imagine the JDA had any intent to resell the orb to any unscrupulous organizations.

That’s when it hit me. This might be our opportunity to get even more use out of Miyoshi’s Storage.

“Hey, so this is still an orb sale, so we’ll finalize the transaction once you’ve seen the orb in person onsite, right?”

“That’s usually the procedure, yes.”

“Okay. Well, if this orb is left with us in the meantime, you understand that if someone doesn’t use it, it’s just going to go to waste, right?”

On the surface, our orb-storage service worked under the assumption that we were using the orbs ourselves, then finding a replacement to return to the requester at the specified time. We didn’t expect anyone to fully buy it, but that was the official narrative.

“That’s true...” Naruse said warily.

“In that case, assuming either Miyoshi or myself uses this copy, I’d like to ask you to keep the fact that we have the skill off the record. Can you do that? We

don’t want any extra trouble. We’ll go ahead with the sale if you can promise the JDA will prevent the word of our having the skill from ever getting out.”

“Kei...” Miyoshi said hesitantly.

Heh, heh, heh. Just wait, Miyoshi. If this worked, it would allow Miyoshi to use Storage openly without having to hide it from the JDA. We wouldn’t have to fuss anymore over elaborate subterfuge.

“Understood. I can’t make any official promises right now, but in the meantime I’ll ask that the conversation doesn’t go any further than myself and Section Chief Saiga. Then we can discuss ways in which your possession of the skill could be kept off the books.”

Good enough. After all, this wasn’t the kind of deal you could put into writing. That would kind of defeat the whole point of asking for secrecy. If we did put something into writing, it would at most be an off-record agreement between ourselves and the section chief in question. Although that didn’t seem like the kind of shady thing the JDA would do.

“Well then, if that’s okay with you, you can consider this a deal!” Miyoshi proclaimed. All smiles, the two of us took turns shaking Naruse’s hand.

And so Storage was stricken from our upcoming orb auction list.

January 5, 2019 (Saturday)

Yoyogi-Hachiman, Office

“Kei, it looks like our conditions from the other day were accepted. A contract just came through by email.”

That was Mr. Square-guy for you. An extra clause had been added, taking care of our secrecy request: “No knowledge acquired through this transaction shall be publicly disclosed without the explicit consent of both parties.”

“You have to admit, it was a pretty good idea, right?” I asked Miyoshi. “Now we can use Storage as much as we want, and the JDA will have to come up with the cover stories.”

“We’ll still have to be careful,” Miyoshi reminded me. “There are some things that couldn’t be explained no matter how hard the JDA tried.”

“I guess so. But anyway, I feel a lot better just having opened up about the existence of storage orbs to Naruse.”

“Definitely.”

“So, what do we do with the auction now?”

“For starters, push it back. I was thinking about holding it on the seventh. I don’t want to invite confusion by holding it the day before the press conference.”

“Sounds good.”

“Ah, speaking of, apparently the boot camp room’s almost ready.” Having finished the auction rescheduling, Miyoshi looked up from her computer. Another email regarding the room had just come in.

“Whoa, that was quick.”

For our boot camp home base, we had requested exclusive use of a first-floor rental space at the front of the Yoyogi Dungeon Gate Building. It had originally served as a large conference room.

Since you could access the room without going back out of the official dungeon check-in gate, it was perfect for a training program like ours, which would require frequent back and forth trips into the dungeon itself. Having to go back through check-in each time could get a little inconvenient.

Since the room had originally been intended for public use, it had taken a bit of doing to finagle exclusive access, but Miyoshi had managed to leverage it out of the JDA’s hands as a deal-sweetener for providing the D-Card verifiers—all at Naruse’s advice.

The work that had just been completed was the installation of various equipment we’d requested for our “ultimate super secret training course.”

“In that case, I guess I’ll get in touch with Cathy,” I said.

***

The reason I was calling Cathy was due to a request she had made the evening after her interview, just after we'd explained the basics of our boot camp regimen to her.

"*What? You want to try out the course yourself?*"

"*Of course! I'll be leading it, and unless I've been through the course, I can't be confident I'll do a good job.*"

Miyoshi looked at me. "Well, can't argue with that."

"I don't mind her running a trial, but when are we supposed to get everything for the above-ground portion brought in?"

"According to our rental agreement, they should be in the middle of assembling all the equipment right now, so...tomorrow, I'd guess?"

"Then we should have time for her to try it."

"A little pre-boot-camp day? Okay!"

"*Okay,*" I said to Cathy in English. "*It looks like that should be all right. We should be able to get you in for a dry run tomorrow, so read over all the material you can in the meantime. Also—*"

"*Isn't it okay if she just rests for now? Even drill instructors need breaks,*" Miyoshi said. "*By the way, Cathy, where are you staying?*"

"*The Park Hyatt. Why?*"

"*The Park Hyatt? Phew, spendy.*"

"*Lieutenant Gershwin set it up for me.*"

"Ah, that's right, Kei! Simon said his team was holed up there over the holidays. Looking for a quadruple suite, the Park Hyatt was about the only game in town, but if they're paying the normal rate, they'd be running up a nightly bill of around 170 thousand yen!"

What?! You could rent out a small apartment for a month at that price. They, or whoever was footing the bill, was insane. Probably.

"*Then are you staying in their suite too?*"

"*Nope. I have a Park Deluxe to myself. It was the option that gave me the*

most room."

"*I see.*"

I turned to Miyoshi. "By the way, what were we planning to do about Cathy's housing long term?"

"I'm looking for suitable apartments in the area, so let's just have her stay in the hotel for now. Are you okay covering her expenses?"

"That's fine, but if she just needs an apartment, I'm still renting my old place."

"Kei, your *old* place really is just that. It was built over fifty years ago."

"But a hotel room is so cramped. It can't feel great to have to live in one long term."

"Oh, Kei." Miyoshi gave me a look like you'd give a child who had just asked a silly question, or a sad puppy.

"Wh-What? What's that look for?"

"About how big is your old place, would you say?"

"My old place? Let me see... About thirty-two square meters?" I felt like we'd had this conversation before.

"The smallest room in the Park Hyatt is forty-five square meters."

"What?!"

"Cathy's in the Park Deluxe, which gives her fifty-five square meters."

"Wait, that isn't the suite size, that's one room?!"

"The Park Hyatt doesn't really have what you'd think of as an ordinary single room."

I guess that's what you'd expect from a luxury brand run by a foreign capital group. Single bedrooms were laid out around king-sized beds, at a size that would be generous even for two people, about the size of a two-bedroom apartment. Maybe even twice as large as some smaller ones. No wonder it was so expensive.

"*Cathy, what kind of neighborhood and how big were you thinking, for an*

apartment?" Miyoshi asked.

"*Ah, no particular requests. Any ordinary apartment will do.*"

Ordinary...to an American. I wasn't sure if her standards were quite the same as our cramped-apartment-dwelling Japanese ones.

"*Then we'll get something set up right away. You wait in the Hyatt until then. We'll take care of the room charge.*"

"*Understood. Thank you very much, ma'am.*"

And so, we paid for rush delivery on the equipment, and, in spite of it being over the New Year's holidays, preparations on the boot camp room had been completed by the fifth.

Ichigaya, Ministry of Defense

Up to now, the orb auctions had always begun the moment the date rolled over according to Greenwich Mean Time, or 9 a.m. in Japan.

Opening the D-Powers website right on time, Major Terasawa was surprised to find that the auction—which Saiga's email had assured him would be occurring—wasn't being hosted at all.

That meant one of two possibilities: either the information in the email had been false, or—

"Now just how the hell did he manage that?" Terasawa mused.

Ultimately, Terasawa hadn't been able to intervene in the auction. And as best he'd heard, Tanaka hadn't been able to either.

Unable to gather up the budget necessary to put in a bid, the two had been stuck simply watching the event play out.

However, in the face of insurmountable odds, the JDA's Dungeon Management Section chief appeared to have pulled a rabbit out of his hat. Terasawa wasn't sure how, but that didn't matter so much as the one large remaining problem—

"So just who has the item box now?"

Closing the site, Terasawa began drafting an email to all the related departments.

Yoyogi Dungeon, Boot Camp

Cathy rushed over to the Yoyogi Dungeon Building right after getting our call.

Feeling a bit like I was trying to wrangle a runaway train, I led her from the lobby to the boot camp room we'd borrowed on the first floor. The room was beyond the dungeon entry reception area, and was treated as part of the dungeon grounds, so Cathy was allowed to carry her exploration-use weapons inside.

"Let's go with Japanese today if that's okay with you," I said.

"Understood, sir."

Our first enrollees would be Team Simon, but after that, it seemed likely we'd mostly be taking on Japanese members, so it would be good to get in the practice.

Our boot camp curriculum began with a stats measurement.

Miyoshi walked Cathy through the operation of the SMD-PRO we'd had installed in the room.

"Okay, we're going to give it a whirl, so Kei, you go stand on the measurement platform."

"Got it."

I didn't overlook the twinkle in Cathy's eyes when she heard I was going to go first.

Heh, heh, heh. If she thinks she's going to blow some sort of secret, she's got another thing coming. Of course I'd adjusted my stats with Making, so I wouldn't give anything away.

"Okay, Cathy. Just like I explained," Miyoshi coaxed.

Cathy operated the device exactly as instructed. A moment later, the SMD-PRO had produced a miniature printout of my stats.

Name:

HP: 45.12

MP: 32.40

STR: 15

VIT: 15

INT: 14

AGI: 16

DEX: 15

LUC: 15

“It doesn’t show a name,” Cathy complained.

“That’s because it can’t get a name just off of a stat measurement. It doesn’t work like a D-Card,” Miyoshi answered with a smile, taking the printout and scribbling “Keigo Yoshimura” on top.

“Hm. Is this strong?” Cathy asked.

“The machine is set so that the average adult male comes out to around 10 in each stat. I guess you could say Kei’s above par.”

“Set”? More like, that’s just what the average is, but we can’t get into the nitty gritty without giving too much away.

“The average adult woman comes out around eight or nine STR, so even one point makes a difference, and really feels substantial around two.”

“So Yoshimura is pretty strong.”

“He’s at least in the ballpark of your typical explorer. All right, Cathy. You’re up.”

“Okay.”

Cathy got in position on the platform, while Miyoshi operated the machine.

“And we’re done!”

“But I didn’t feel anything,” Cathy said.

“Well of course not. It’s just a measurement. You wouldn’t expect sparkles to appear every time someone weighed you or recorded your height, would you?”

“I suppose so, but,” Cathy let out a sigh, “*it’s quite anticlimactic*.”

“Cathy,” I said, and busied myself teaching her the Japanese phrase for “anticlimactic.”

She repeated it audibly once—“hyoshi nuke”—then continued mumbling it under her breath.

What a perfectionist!

Her Japanese was mostly flawless, but every now and then her lack of vocabulary reared its head. It was only natural for someone who had grown up outside of Japan.

The SMD-PRO produced a printout for Cathy as well.

Name:

HP: 87.90

MP: 66.70

STR: 34

VIT: 36

INT: 35

AGI: 35

DEX: 36

LUC: 12

“Phew. That’s what you get when you hire someone who’s backup for Team Simon,” I observed. “With that kind of stat distribution, you could pick up anyone’s slack.”

“Although in the world of sports, they say it’s better to have specialized pinch hitters,” Miyoshi commented. She took Cathy’s printout and scrawled “Catherine Mitchell” at the top, in the Latin alphabet.

“Just what I thought,” Cathy sighed. “I’ve always been a—what’s the phrase? —*jack of all trades*.”

“Huh?”

"*Jack of all trades*. It's an English phrase that basically means you're okay at a lot of things, but not particularly exceptional at any one," Miyoshi explained.

"I don't know about 'not exceptional,'" I responded.

No matter how you look at it, Cathy's stats were top-tier stuff.

I spoke up again, trying to cheer her up. "Come on now, Cathy, you're not a *jack-of-whatever*. You're an *all-rounder*."

"Oooh-Rhonda?" Cathy blinked.

Ah, shoot. My pronunciation must have been off.

"I'm saying you can do anything! The top end of nonexplorers would only be around 20 in each stat, and that's Olympic level! By the time you hit the 40s, you're basically superhuman!"

"He means '*all-rounder*," Miyoshi clarified, apparently nailing the pronunciation.

"Oh! Um, thank you." Cathy blushed.

Whoa, lighter-skinned people really do get beet red when they're embarrassed!

"Uh, so then," I continued, "with that, we can get to work on your training regimen. Which stats do you want to focus on?"

Even though I'd gotten a look at her stats, they were so even across the board that I couldn't guess as to how she conducted herself in combat.

"I'd like to try using magic, but haven't been able to get an orb. Currently, I prefer guns, and short-sword-length survival knives for close quarters."

Her firearms of choice were apparently an M4 carbine and M27 Infantry Automatic Rifle. Fitting for what I imagined was your typical American marine.

"And for backup, I prefer this." Cathy pulled out what looked to be a twenty-five centimeter revolver, placing it onto the boot camp room table with a clang. The text "500 S&W Magnum" was engraved on its side.

"This is the four-inch barrel model. It uses 350-grain bullets and focuses on stopping power."

“Yowza. Kei and I would break our arms if we tried firing this.” Miyoshi gave the weapon a poke.

However, even this hand cannon would prove ineffective against the monsters lurking beyond the twenty-first floor.

“You’ll receive an orb as part of your employee benefits,” I explained, “but just to warn you, a lot of stronger monsters have some form of magic resistance.”

“An orb as—as...*employee benefits*?” Cathy tilted her head, reverting to English to verify she hadn’t misheard. It must have seemed too good to be true.

“That’s right. We can’t have employees taking on the cost of an orb on their own, after all. They’d be out of house and home.”

“Er, yes,” Cathy responded, “but that’s—I—that’s not what I—”

“Anyway,” I said, steamrolling past her confusion, “in other words, you want to focus on long-range combat firearms, and magic and short swords if enemies get close.”

“Um, yes, that’s right,” Cathy stammered.

“Dodging rather than taking hits?”

“Yes.”

We would be looking at an STR-AGI build. Since her magic would merely serve as an extra discretionary measure, and already had sufficient points behind it, we wouldn’t invest too heavily in INT.

“What kind of element do you want for your magic attacks?”

“E-Element?”

“Right. Like, Natalie on your team uses fire.”

“A-Ah.” Cathy began pondering.

The question, much like the offer of the orb in the first place, had caught her off guard. I couldn’t imagine what it would have been like to process this. No one would ever imagine they’d simply be offered an orb, let alone offered a choice between different options. We’d have to let her take her time.

“We can offer water, fire, or earth, so think it over.”

“O-Okay.”

In the face of our logic-defying conversation, the ordinarily confrontational Cathy had been left speechless.

“Well, we’ve got a basic build decided,” I declared, “so let’s form a party and go through a round of the dungeon portion of the course.”

The boot camp was divided into two parts: a dungeon section and an aboveground section, performed alternatingly.

The dungeon section would consist mainly of running, meditation, and other typical training tasks, performed within the dungeon’s floors. The aboveground section was where the really fun bits would come in—the parts that would cause enrollees to wonder what they were doing in the first place. It was all in the name of selling the illusion. They’d come to see things our way.

I couldn’t wait to see what everyone’s reactions would be.

***

After forming a party and heading to the dungeon’s second floor, we wandered over to an open area we’d selected as our starting point.

“Your first task for the dungeon course will be running.”

“One lap around the second floor is supposed to be around 31.4 kilometers, is that right?”

“That’s correct. Very accurate. Now, we’re not quite cut out for that distance, so we won’t be running alongside you,” I continued, giving a rather pathetic excuse. I turned towards Miyoshi. “However... Miyoshi, if you please.”

“Glessic!” Miyoshi called, and soon one black hellhound had emerged from the darkness of her shadow.

Cathy instinctively drew her revolver at the sight of Glessic and assumed a firing pose. I stepped forward and put one hand on top of the barrel, lowering it a few centimeters towards the ground.

“*Calm down. This is our pet dog*.” I switched to English, hoping it would be

faster to get through.

"*Your pet?!*" She was still in her shooting stance.

"That's right. He's a big boy, but a cutie! See?" Switching back to Japanese, I reached out and petted Glessic on the head.

Dammit, get lower and nuzzle up, you! Why are you always cuddling up to Miyoshi, but won't lower your head a centimeter for me?

"C-Cute? Th-That's a hellhound, isn't it?"

"Nah, take a look," I responded. "His eyes aren't red. See?" I pointed towards Glessic's eyes.

Hellhounds had red eyes. I wasn't sure exactly why, but for some reason the Arthurs' were more of a golden hue.

"Th-That's true..." At last Cathy lowered the gun and returned it to its holster. She took one cautious step forward towards Glessic.

"Look, he's even got a dog tag and everything," I continued. "He's registered with Shibuya."

It was true. For some unfathomable reason, Shibuya City Hall had agreed to accept the Arthurs' registration as dogs. It had been a real lesson in "Well, I guess you really *don't* know until you try." Miyoshi and I had left the building dumbfounded. If there was any downside, it was that we now had to deal with removing name tags and collars before they teleported or switched places, or else they'd get swapped around.

"Awww..." Cathy mumbled in spite of herself.

What had likely prompted her reaction was the design of the dog tag provided by Shibuya—and apparently most pet registration desks across the greater Tokyo area—cut in the shape of a small dog. The plain ones offered by Setagaya and Katsushika would have been less cumbersome, but at any rate, anything was better than the dog tags offered by the city hall in Suginami, which took took the shape of the city's lizardlike mascot Namisuke, with a hole punched through its forehead like it had just been shot by Golgo 13.

"It has a dog tag and everything, and proper vaccines and registration. It's a

dog.”

“O-Okay,” Cathy responded. “If you say so.”

Cathy extended one fearful hand towards Glessic. In return, he stuck out his tongue and licked it.

“Gweh! Was he just seeing how I taste?!”

“I mean, I haven’t heard about many *dogs* eating people recently, have you? He won’t bite! Probably.”

“‘Probably’?!”

“Kei, you’re not helping,” Miyoshi interjected, cutting in. “Cathy, go ahead and give him a pat.”

“A-A pat?”

Miyoshi pulled Cathy over to Glessic, where Cathy tried putting an arm on his back.

“He’s...soft,” Cathy murmured, rubbing him. “Fluffy!”

“See?” Miyoshi said cheerfully. “He’s just a big floofer after all!”

“He’s going to be your escort while you’re training,” I explained, “so if anything happens, you just rely on him.”

“M-My escort?”

Miyoshi tossed a glance towards Cathy. Glessic immediately jumped into Cathy’s shadow and disappeared.

“Wha?! Where’d he go?!” Cathy asked.

Glessic poked his head back out from Cathy’s shadow, giving a thunderous “woof!”

“Wah! How can he do that?” she asked.

“Uh, he’s a...ninja dog?” I answered lazily.

“Oh, I see! Ninjas!”

Phew, that did the trick. I guess the rumors are true. Foreign visitors will accept basically anything as long as you say ninjas are involved.

I wasn't really sure if she bought it, but at the very least she and Glessic finally seemed to be getting along.

"Anyway, he'll be right alongside you, so you don't have to worry about any monsters while you run. He'll also let you know if you accidentally go off course."

"Roger."

"For today let's give it one lap around and then we'll see you back up in the boot camp room for the aboveground course."

"Sir, yes, sir!"

"Then on your mark, get set—go!"

Cathy took off like a bullet as soon as I gave the command.

"You think she'll be able to run 31.4 kilometers just like that?" I asked Miyoshi.

"Her stats were all above thirty, so I expect she'll be back in a little over an hour."

"What? That's a world-record pace."

The fastest record split time for a single kilometer in a 30k was around three minutes, and the best time for the entire marathon was around an hour thirty.

There would be rough terrain and obstacles in the dungeon, so I didn't imagine she'd be able to keep up her starting pace the whole time, but we decided we should still be back in the conference room in about an hour just in case.

"So then, what do we do to kill time until then?" Miyoshi asked.

"Guess we could always visit the homestead," I suggested, referring to our wheat.

"Sounds good! We can just go check it out while we're waiting. We should still be back in time."

Annotations

***Namisuke*:** The vaguely saurian, quadrupedal mascot of Suginami City in Tokyo, modeled after a horizontal kanpyo—dried gourd—sushi roll. Apparently he's a fairy who lives on the mythical Suginamisaurus Isle. So goes the lore.

Yoyogi Dungeon, Second Floor

The other day when we'd visited, we still weren't seeing any signs of respawning with the wheat stalks we'd transplanted as seedlings.

The ones we'd planted from scratch had just sprouted, and we planned to monitor both groups a little longer while entertaining conversations about fertilizing some new seeds within the dungeon itself.

"Well now, let's see how our little wheaties are doing today!" Miyoshi cooed.

"Are you the kind of person who names all your plants?" I asked.

"I might be," Miyoshi answered. "Are you the kind of person who would just call a dog 'Dog' and a cat 'Cat'?"

"N-No..." I answered. "Probably not. Wait, what?!"

Approaching our destination, which sat on top of a gentle hill, all we could see from a distance was a single tree—no acrylic panels, no wheatfield.

"Do we have the wrong spot?" I asked.

"We shouldn't."

Leaving Cavall and Aethlem to clean up some nearby monsters, we ran to the top of the hill.

"Could slimes have done this?" I asked.

"It looks like our benzethonium chloride spray system lost out to the dungeon spawns."

The acrylic panels which should have held monsters at bay were nowhere to be found. And our wheat—

"Wait, Kei. Hold on."

"Miyoshi?"

Miyoshi had pulled out her tablet and was furiously poring over old pictures of our wheat saplings.

“What is it?”

“Look,” she shouted. “Over there!”

Miyoshi pointed to one neatly organized row of freshly germinated wheat sprouts.

“I guess they didn’t all get destroyed,” I commented.

The saplings we had transplanted into the dungeon appeared to have vanished, but some of the baby sprouts we’d planted as seeds seemed to still be intact. Judging from the count and past pictures, it seemed like we’d only lost around half.

“But still, looks like that’s it for the experiment. We’ll have to rethink our whole system for keeping slimes out. Either they respawned inside the walls, or dropped in from above off a tree, or, I don’t know, maybe so many of them just kept rushing the walls that the benzethonium ran out.”

Miyoshi didn’t respond to my conjectures. She stayed crouched over the last row of sprouts, flipping back and forth between pictures. Suddenly, she stood up and turned my way.

“Kei!”

“What is it?”

“I get it!”

“Get what?”

“Look,” she said, pointing to her tablet. “The walls and saplings might be gone, but you can still see the tilled ground. You can compare it to the pictures here to see exactly which ones are left.”

“Oooh!”

“These were the ones we lost,” she said, pointing to the rows in the pictures. “These ones in front stayed intact. And Kei, these are the ones we cut the other day!”

“The ones we cut? Are you sure?” I looked over the sprouts we were left with, but didn’t see any signs of cut leaves.

“That’s what I thought, and why I spent so much time checking. But...look!”

The picture on Miyoshi’s tablet indeed showed a row of sprouts in this same position, from which leaves had been cut.

“Whaaa? But that means...”

“They respawned!”

We leaned in towards one another, wide-eyed, and pinched the other’s cheeks.

“Hei, hif hurfs,” Miyoshi mumbled.

“Hif shfure doss,” I replied.

If we’d been surprised by our finding, we were all the more surprised to discover it wasn’t a dream.

“So what’s the difference between the wheat that respawned and the wheat that didn’t?”

If the remaining wheat had been recognized as being part of the dungeon, I could understand why it hadn’t been destroyed by slimes. Conversely, wheat that hadn’t been incorporated into the dungeon would have been fair game.

“It might have been the location or the seeds,” Miyoshi hypothesized.

The nonrespawning wheat—was a mouthful, so we decided to call it “NRW” for convenience—had been planted earlier than the respawning wheat—aka “RW.” Since we were running low on room, we hadn’t planted the RW test until the tree-root-removal test was done.

“Location I can get, but the seeds? Shouldn’t they have been from the same batch as the others?”

“Not quite. The RW seeds are the ones we left bagged and leaned up against the wall until we had more room.”

“Wait. So, in other words, the difference is that they got left in the dungeon for several days as seeds, before being planted?”

“Right.”

Looking around the area, I spotted a small pile of seeds lying where the vinyl walls would have been. The sack the seeds had been in was nowhere to be found. Thankfully none of the seeds had yet sprouted, so we could still use them for future tests.

I scooped up a few of them and planted them in the raised tilled rows where the NRW had been. Then I took a few of our remaining seeds out of Vault and planted them in the mounds alongside the RW sprouts.

“This test will show us whether or not it had something to do with the location,” I concluded. “Although I think we can be pretty certain—”

“It was the seeds.”

“Yeah.”

The RW seeds were bathing in D-Factors the entire time before they were planted, which might have caused their sprouts to be recognized as original to the dungeon as soon as they germinated. However, no matter how many D-Factors a plant took in *after* germinating, it wouldn’t cause a change in its status. That was my running theory, at least.

However, to be truly sure, we would have to wait for results with the second batch of seeds we had just planted.

“If that holds true, our next problem to tackle will be how long seeds have to be left in a dungeon before they’re considered part of it,” I commented.

“Yep. We should analyze some of those seeds that got left lying around too.”

“Analyze? How?”

“We still have that prototype stats-measuring device Nakajima built, right?”

“The needlessly high-spec one, from before the commercial variant?”

“Yep. We can try running that on the seeds and grab some raw data, then see if they read any differently from ordinary seeds.”

“Nice idea! If we assume the stats-measuring devices pick up on the same energies that D-Factors, *ahem*, factor into, we may be able to figure out where

the threshold is!”

“Indeed!”

“All right. We also have to worry about some of their properties dissipating over time back in the surface world, but we’ve got Vault for that.”

“I leave their safekeeping up to you, oh keeper of seeds.”

Vault sure was handy in times like this. Plus, however the time-stopping mechanism worked inside Vault, it didn’t appear to exert any negative influence on the objects within it. And so thinking nothing of it, I stored some of the leftover dungeon seeds inside Vault.

“Man, with this discovery, I almost want to try ranching next.”

“You mean with live animals?”

“Yeah! You know, seeing if we can get pigs or cows or chickens to respawn. It’d be an all-you-can-eat meat buffet!”

If we could start cloning some of the luxury beef brands like Kurobe Wagyu beef, the entire high-end culinary goods world was about to be upended! Maybe even agriculture as we knew it.

“Kei, unlike plants, if you killed an animal in the dungeon, you wouldn’t know where it would respawn.”

“Ah, that’s a good point.”

“I guess it could be a way of introducing wild game. Although there’s no guarantee their bodies wouldn’t just dissipate into black dust.”

“Shoot. I hadn’t thought of that either.” I pulled a bottle of chilled water out of Vault and handed it to Miyoshi. After all the excitement, we were parched.

“After we figure out exactly how respawning works, our next hurdle will be growth,” Miyoshi commented.

“Growth?”

“Remember, Kei? All of the plants in the dungeon we’ve tested return to their original form. They don’t change. They don’t get bigger.”

That’s true! Come to think of it, it wasn’t just plants. You didn’t see any

juvenile monsters in the dungeons either. Both monsters and plants appeared to be forever as they were, unchanging. *If this were fiction, you'd definitely have some little goblins or orclings running around*, I thought. *Goblings*? Not to get too gross, but there weren't any reports of humanoid monsters ever trying to get frisky with explorers either—thank goodness. Perhaps they just had no drive to reproduce.

But the problem was that dungeon plant life never grew. That was likely one of the reasons it had taken so long for us to notice its respawning properties in the first place.

"Ah, but if there *were* little Cavalls running around, they'd probably be even fluffier and soooo cute!" Miyoshi squealed. "I can just imagine their little yips!"

Ah, shoot, we're sure the Arthurs don't, like, have the drive to find a mate, right? We should probably figure that out before it's too late.

"Kei, you aren't thinking about anything *untoward* regarding the Arthurs, are you?"

"Ah, no!" I replied, flustered. "Jeez, did my telepathy slip out again?"

"Nope. You've actually gotten pretty good at that recently."

"Because you'd kill me if I didn't. Anyway, this respawning matter—is your conclusion that now that they've respawned, they probably won't grow anymore?"

"Probably. And if that's the case, they won't be of much use to anyone. What's the point of crops that stop growing before they reach harvesting age?" We stared at the little green sprouts poking out of their furrows.

"But the stalks we transplanted into the dungeon were growing," I pointed out. "The ones that didn't count as being part of the dungeon for respawns."

"Well of course," Miyoshi replied. "Otherwise, all you'd have to do if you wanted to achieve immortality would be to pack up your things and move into a dungeon full time."

"Now *there's* a line of thinking we really ought to keep to ourselves."

"You'd definitely see unprecedented land-price inflation for properties on the

upper floors!”

“Hey,” I said, starting to feel uneasy. “That’s definitely *not* the case, right?”

“If only the NRW hadn’t been destroyed, we could have observed their developments long-term in order to confirm the theory.” Miyoshi sighed.

In the meantime we were just grasping at straws, so we decided to drop the subject. All we could do for right now was await the results of our test with the newly planted seeds.

“So, to conclude,” I said, “living things belonging to the dungeon, including both plants and monsters, will respawn when they’re killed, but not grow.”

“That’s how it looks. I suppose there *might* be growing monsters, but it’s so hard to keep track of individuals... Plus, the dungeons have only been around for three years. Maybe it just takes them longer to develop than that.”

“With exact replacements appearing via respawns, it makes sense that reproduction and mating wouldn’t be necessary either,” I commented. “Hey, this just hit me, but do you think that respawned monsters retain memories?”

“I don’t think so. You’ve never heard stories about monsters bearing grudges against individual explorers, have you? Plus, it would mean groups would get smarter and harder to defeat over time. Why?”

“Nothing. I was just thinking, if humans *could* find a way to respawn, and retain memories from their former selves, that’d be just as damaging to society as discovering true immortality.”

“Another world-ending scenario to contemplate.” Miyoshi sighed. “But it’s true. If it happened whenever they left the dungeon, it would be the doppelgänger situation we talked about the other day, plus the added problem of no biometric authentication or password security in the world being able to put a stop to identify theft.”

“What are you going to do when the person ‘stealing’ your identity *is* you? I suppose the respawned person might even be convinced they were the original.”

“It’s like your worst-case sci-fi clone invasion. In this case we’d have to

assume that the dungeon-produced copies would never age too.”

“A world where you doubled yourself every time you stepped into a dungeon... The world could never sustain that many people, and even if you killed off a clone, a duplicate would pop right back up!”

“Maybe dungeon food drops or immortal doppelgängers would take care of food shortages at that point, but land would still be a problem. Not to mention dealing with what the hell would even count as ‘personal’ property.”

“Ha. Ha. Ha. Scary, but it doesn’t hurt to think about. Okay, back to the topic at hand. We have respawning wheat, but let’s work under the hypothesis it won’t grow.”

“Roger.”

“The central issue is—we brought it in from the outside, but the dungeon still incorporated it as its own.”

“And thinking about it, since they were planted as seeds, they *were* growing, up to a point.”

“The dungeon might have first recognized them as part of itself when they finally sprouted, I suppose.”

It seemed a little too arbitrary, but the possibility was there.

“Wait. There is one distinct possibility that comes to mind,” Miyoshi commented.

“What?”

“The seeds that were polluted by D-Factors—”

“Whoa, hold on,” I interjected. “‘Polluted’? Can’t you think of an—I don’t know, more *palatable* phrase? We’re going to have to sell the public on crops that have been through this process at some point!”

Miyoshi tilted her head. “I know the phrasing isn’t great, but the description fits. Can you think of anything else that works?”

“It’s an image problem, not a scientific-accuracy one. Take off the lab coat and put your Queen of the Merchants hat on!”

“Hmph. I think it seems a little like splitting hairs between ‘effect’ and ‘impact,’ but how about ‘permeation’?”

“Still a little off-putting, but better than ‘polluted,’ I guess.”

“It’s a process that adapts them to life in the dungeons... Evolution?”

“Within a single generation? Still, I suppose it is basically like a rapid, environmental adaptation, so in that case it’s not too far off...”

“Like a Mitsubishi Lancer Evolution, except it’s a D-Ancer Evolution!”

“Sounds a little too close to a certain Konami game.”

“Well, why don’t we just come up with a new phrase? ‘Dungeonizing.’ ‘Dungeonization.’ I’m just spitballing.”

“Dungeon” being a noun, those kinds of phrases seemed fitting, but I had a feeling the quickest path to victory here would be appending a different ending onto the word to render it into a verb on its own, like “to Google.” Then again, “to dungeon” didn’t quite have the same ring.

“Dungeonify?” I shrugged.

“Let’s get religious and just D-ify.”

Miyoshi said it like a joke, but I couldn’t help but chuckle at how much we’d leaned into that exact trend.

“Okay, maybe we’ve been going a little heavy on the ‘D’ names, although that’s a certain someone’s fault. I guess we can keep it simple and go with ‘dungeonizing.’”

That structure would make it easy for Japanese students writing their dissertations in English to use the term in their research, too—“dungeon” was already used as a loan word in popular culture, and the phrase itself drew on English grammar. Academic papers could adopt it quickly and help spread and legitimize its use.

“Anyway, it’s possible that after a certain amount of D-Factor pollu—after a certain amount of *dungeonizing*, some kind of flag gets set on the object for it to be respawned next time it’s killed or damaged.”

“A flag?”

“Think about it, Kei. How many objects are in a dungeon? How many monsters, trees, blades of grass? You think whatever is responsible for observing things in the dungeon is running checks on hundreds of thousands of objects in real-time?”

“I guess the system polling on that scale is probably out of the question,” I responded. *Although I don’t know exactly what kind of forces we’re dealing with here.*

“Precisely. So instead, a flag gets set with a certain amount of D-Factors, and then the final dungeonizing—the incorporation into the dungeon itself—would utilize event-driven architecture.”

That would mean that rather than the dungeon querying every object for periodic checks, instead it would respond to certain, dungeon-flagged objects if and when something happened to them. For example, a monster being defeated would be an event that would trigger a respawn, with the monster being a flagged object. At present, most computer tasks performed outside of real-time operating systems relied on that kind of event-driven architecture.

For example, when someone tapped a touch screen, that tap would be registered as an event, with the event information sent to the relevant programs in response, which would then respond in kind. The system wouldn’t periodically scan its touch screen for contact, but respond to any taps when they happened.

“So then, in the same way, when something happens to a flagged object in the dungeon, maybe it goes into a dungeon event queue and waits for processing.”

In an event queue, data could only move in or out as direct input or output on each end. New information couldn’t be brought in and inserted into the middle. The order of responses and reactions was set.

As an allegory, with refrigerated drink shelving in a convenience store, an employee in back would feed in one can at a time, from behind the display. A customer would take out one can at a time from the front. Input and output, in sequence. The dungeon management may work similarly—sequential

responses to events.

“So the dungeon has to process events in order?”

“Right. And the effect of dungeonizing would be the setting of a flag for the object to be put into the queue when something happened. The dungeonizing itself probably isn’t an event.”

Ordinarily, the dungeon created all the objects flagged for respawns itself. They would come predungeonized, so to speak. Thus, there would be no reason to have an event that reported dungeonizing on its own. It would simply set the flag.

“Then, the first time a dungeonized object was destroyed...”

I could sense where Miyoshi was going. “That’s when it would respawn, and that’s where its copies’ development would be locked.”

“Well?” Miyoshi asked. “Wouldn’t that explain everything?”

I nodded. That would explain why our dungeonized seeds had been able to germinate, with their flags set for respawning before they’d been incorporated into the dungeon fully—and why their development halted when they were damaged and respawned in response to an event trigger that finally put them in the dungeon’s processing queue.

“If your theory is correct, then that respawned wheat really shouldn’t grow any further. I guess seeing if it does will be our built-in test to determine whether your hypothesis is correct.”

“If I am right, we have another big hurdle...”

“Yeah,” I agreed. “How to protect dungeonized crops long enough in a dungeon to get them to grow all the way from seed to harvestable plant.”

That was, on the face of it, one of the hardest questions about the whole thing. It wasn’t easy to raise crops out in the normal world, let alone with hostile monsters thrown into the mix. Even aside from the monsters, a bad insect infestation or inclement weather could pose problems all their own. Although I wasn’t sure if harmful insects existed in the dungeon in the first place.

“So, ultimately, we can think of full dungeonizing as a twofold process,” I observed.

The first step would be exposing the object to enough D-Factors to set the flag for the item to be put into the dungeon’s processing queue if an event was triggered. The second step would be triggering that event, so that it was moved into the queue and processed for respawning.

Once the second part of that process had concluded, the object in question would be fully incorporated by the dungeon it was in.

“Uh-oh. Explorers’ bodies might already have gone through that first part,” I fretted, nerves creeping back up on me.

“Let’s just hope they never hit step number two then,” Miyoshi replied.

“So,” I said, quickly changing the subject, “there’s also the question of whether the first and second steps could be split between two dungeons.”

Usually, when an object was plucked or removed from a dungeon, it would respawn within it, and the object removed from the dungeon would lose its dungeonized properties.

In that case, I couldn’t help but wonder what would happen if a seed which had undergone the first process of dungeonizing were removed from the dungeon and transported to another.

Theoretically, if a seed which underwent the first process in Dungeon A was then transported to Dungeon B where the second process occurred, one would expect its copy to respawn in Dungeon B. *Or would it?*

“Well, that should be a simple enough test, right?” Miyoshi commented. “Although it seems a little tangential to our main goal.”

There was also the processing queue time to consider, to make the best use of respawns. Ultimately, I imagined that farming in dungeons would most likely be conducted via automated combines moving in circles or ellipses through fields. As long as one lap took longer than the time the wheat took to respawn, we could have a 24/7, perpetual grain-harvesting system.

“Still, our hurdle is going to be protecting that first batch of crops,” I

lamented.

“Definitely.” Miyoshi sighed.

“But at least we have these seeds that have finished the first part of the process. That helps, right?”

“Absolutely. As long as we have them, why don’t we try that experiment? Take the RW wheat seeds from Yoyogi and try planting them in a different dungeon.”

“Hold on. Considering they already have the flag, maybe we don’t even need to plant them. Won’t they just respawn in Yoyogi as soon as we take them out?”

“Would you ever be able to find them again in this place to confirm that they had reappeared?”

“Oh, right. Tracking down a handful of individual seeds after a random respawn across the whole of Yoyogi does seem a little impractical.” We had previously confirmed that plants which remained rooted would respawn in the same place, but monsters and plant life unrooted from the ground seemed to respawn randomly.

To make matters more complicated, if our theories proved correct, our respawned seeds wouldn’t grow. Searching for a few nonsprouting seeds across something with the scale of Yoyogi meant we’d never find them again.

“If only there were a smaller dungeon floor somewhere,” I complained. “It’d really come in handy for running experiments like this.”

“A small dungeon floor would be useful for lots of reasons, so I’ll see if there’s one nearby. But in the meantime, I have to say, I think it’s unlikely that the nongerminated seeds would respawn in the first place.”

“What? Why not?”

“Because the bodies of explorers killed in dungeons—which, at least sometimes, seem like they should have gotten ample D-Factors by the time they’re recovered—don’t respawn. I don’t think we can expect the process to work with anything that isn’t alive and growing. Plus, if leaving inanimate

objects in dungeons long enough allowed you to respawn them, they'd quickly be used as large-scale 3D printers."

"That's true."

Seems like the processes only apply to living things, for right now. Wait, hold on a minute. What if we're looking at this the wrong way?

"Hey, Miyoshi. Ordinarily man-made objects left in dungeons get eaten by slimes, right?"

"Right..."

"But those seeds earlier—well, they weren't man-made, but they weren't native to the dungeon either, yet they didn't get eaten."

"Kei, are you thinking...?"

"If, and I mean *if*, we could figure out a way to get the first process of dungeonizing to occur with man-made objects—"

"We could leave man-made equipment in the dungeons?"

It would be like a dream come true.

"I guess that'd be way too convenient, huh?" I said.

"Maybe, but if it's possible, we should try," Miyoshi replied. "At the very least, we have proof of concept with our seeds from earlier, so in the meantime if we just apply for a patent on 'Dungeonizing,' people the world over should see that and start experimenting with various things."

With a smile on her face, Miyoshi wrote down the gist of the experiment we'd started in her notebook, and took pictures.

***

Meanwhile, Cathy was whipping around the perimeter of the second floor at a terrifying speed.

"*Whoops!*"

More than the occasional goblin, it was trees and dense thickets of grass that posed the greatest obstacles for her while moving at such high speeds, but she managed to deftly maneuver around them, continuing down her path.

The creature she was most wary of was Glessic, who appeared at her side occasionally and jostled her, but rather than being startled or angry, Cathy took to her companion like one would a trusty pet dog during trail running, enjoying herself the whole way.

Glessic, for his part, had merely been trying to guide her back onto the course path when it seemed like she might veer off it.

"*Amazing. I'm only doing light running, but this really feels like it might be good training*," Cathy mused to herself.

Having a big dog along is so nice. I wonder if Miyoshi would lend me one, she thought pleasantly.

Meanwhile, reports were spreading through the dungeon of a woman running alongside a large doglike creature. To the witnesses who had seen her, it had looked as though a woman was running at top speed while being chased by a beast.

Annotations

***Polling*:** A primitive computing process in which a system checks each resource at regular intervals.

If there are one hundred different resources, this would mean one-hundred separate query-and-processing tasks.

Used to be the dominant processing architecture, back in the DOS era.

Yoyogi Dungeon, Boot Camp

Shoulders heaving, Cathy threw open the door to the boot camp rental space almost exactly ninety minutes after she'd started her run. If she'd truly run all thirty-plus kilometers in that time, it was a world-record pace for sure.

"Good work," Miyoshi cried. "Now then, for the aboveground course. Kei, take it away!"

"Ahem. Cathy, you requested an AGI-STR build, so please step over here if you will."

I brought her over to a small room cordoned off with cubicle partitions. A sign reading “AGI” hung on its door.

“What is this?” Cathy asked.

“Wasn’t it in the material? Why, this is *beatmania II*, the rhythm game that swept a generation!”

Inside the cubicle, we’d had a *beatmania IIDX* arcade cabinet installed. It was your standard unit, *with* a few key changes.

“Oooh, so that’s what the ‘IIDX’ was.”

Miyoshi had written the materials. Apparently she’d used a slightly less understandable abbreviation, at least to those uninitiated in arcades.

“Okay, well...” I paused, recollecting myself. “We’ve had the cabinet modified just a bit. I’ll explain in a moment. Here, you’ll need these.”

This wasn’t an arcade, so we couldn’t have the machine blasting noise. I directed Cathy to a collection of various thick, wired headphones.

At first I’d prepared some high-end wireless earbuds instead, but the latency had been a problem. Even the lowest-latency models on the market, the aptXLow Latency, could come with up to four milliseconds of lag. That might not have seemed like much, but to someone with Cathy’s AGI, the disconnect between sound and visual input would be unbearable.

Thankfully *beatmania* wasn’t exactly a headbanger rhythm game, so I’d prepared several pairs of ear-cupping headphones for Cathy to choose from. Of course, it was fine if she preferred to bring her own; some people got a little touchy when it came to sharing headphones.

“Okay.” Once she’d put on the headphones she selected, I began explaining how to play.

“...and that’s about it!” I said, finishing the summary. “Got it?”

“That’s all? So I just press these seven keys on the board here in time with the falling notes and occasionally spin this turntable?”

“That’s all there is to it! All you have to do is push this button here to start.”

I'd had this cabinet specially prepped for AGI training. The play-style and name-entry screens would be skipped, launching the player straight into a session as soon as they pushed "Start." That wasn't the special part. The special part was the track they'd be launched into.

"Your ultimate task will be to aim for a Triple A rank on this track, but don't expect to get it right away. For the meantime, just try to get through without completely failing."

"Roger."

"If you aren't able to finish, I've had it set so that you get one more free try, but if you fail that one, too, it's game over."

"Understood. May I begin?"

"Be my guest."

Exiting the room, I couldn't help but smile imagining the carnage that was about to play out.

That was because the track this particular *beatmania* cabinet had been set to was the infamous "Ana Mei"—*IIDX*'s hardest track.

As expected, no sooner had I stepped outside than I heard a string of "Wha?", "Huh?" and four-letter English words starting with "F" pouring out of the cubicle.

"Kei, do you think you should dial it down? Sounds like she didn't even last a second."

"Nonsense. Ordinary nonexplorers have cracked 3800 for EX Scores. She's a superhuman dungeon monster. She should be able to do that or better."

When you hit a note on approximately the right timing, the word "GREAT" would flash on the screen. If you hit the note with even more accurate timing, you would be regaled with a sparkling "Perfect GREAT," or "Flashing GREAT," named for its lustrous effect.

Your EX Score was determined by the number of these two messages you received, with normal GREATs being worth one point each, and Perfect GREATs being worth two. "Ana Mei" had two thousand notes—two thousand button

prompts to time to their visual indicators on-screen—so its maximum possible score was four thousand, assuming one got Perfect GREATs across the board.

Although I had never gotten more than a few seconds into the song myself, so I was one to talk.

Suddenly we heard a banging sound from inside the AGI booth, and its door was thrown open.

“YO-SHI-MU-RAAA!!!” Cathy called. “What is this?! It’s IM-POSSIBLE!!!”

“So I take it you had a rough time?”

“Of course I did! Who wouldn’t! That’s not a game, it’s a joke!”

Only one way to convince her, I thought, and I pulled out my secret weapon: a tablet. I navigated to a video-upload site and searched for a gameplay video of the track; there were any number to choose from. The hands of the players in them would have convinced you that you were watching time-lapse photography.

Seeing the footage play out, Cathy could only let out a meek “Huh?”

“And this person isn’t even an explorer,” I added, driving in the nail.

The video had been uploaded before the dungeons had even appeared, so of course they weren’t.

“N-No way!” Cathy stammered.

“If you want to raise your AGI in a short time frame, this is the level you have to aspire to. No shortcuts.”

“Grr...”

“Anyway, for your AGI training, your aboveground course will consist of alternating between *beatmania* and trips into the dungeon. Every time you get a game over, I want you to go down to the second floor, take out one goblin, and come back. Rinse and repeat.” I pointed to the door to the AGI booth. “One attempt and one trip to the dungeon makes one set. Once you’re done with eight sets, I want you to down the special drink Miyoshi’s made for you. Those eight sets and the drink will constitute one round.”

In a paper cup behind us, Miyoshi had prepared some truly vile-looking brown liquid.

“Got all that?” I asked.

Cathy was silent for a moment. Then, suddenly—

“Rock, paper, scissors, shoot!”

She chose paper. I chose scissors.

“Grr...” she grumbled. “Understood.”

“Good then! Hop to it! One goblin and then it’s back to the EDM mines!”

“Rrrrgh, s—sir, yes, sir!”

Composing herself and standing at attention for her final response, Cathy turned and walked out of the room at a brisk clip.

“Miyoshi, what the hell is this stuff anyway?” I asked, gesturing to the drink. “Weren’t we just going to go with some kind of soupy veggie juice?” The contents of the cup bordered on an unsettling tar-pit black.

“Veggie juices are all the rage now, so I didn’t think it’d be all that off-putting. This baby, on the other hand... Want a sip?”

“I’ve got a bad feeling about this.”

“Now, now. We can’t serve it to customers without trying it ourselves.”

All right, all right, I thought, *fair enough*. But my fingers were trembling as I brought the cup up to my lips.

“Bleeech! What...what the hell is this?! Miyoshi! It feels like my tongue is on fire!”

As soon as the sludge had entered my mouth, a sharp, rotting stench had filled my nose and sinuses, and I’d started retching over the floor. It was all I could do to keep from actually throwing up. The bitterness was so sharp that it felt like my body was trying to tell me it had been poisoned.

“The main ingredients are amaroswerin and swertiamarin.”

“What is that, some kind of magic spell? Holy hell, this is *terrible*,” I wheezed.

“I asked a flavor specialist,” Miyoshi explained with a hint of satisfaction, “and they told me that what we tend to think of as a stereotypically ‘bad’ taste is really just about a matter of bitterness.”

“I’ve got some *bitterness* right here. Ewch, blech. Anyway, I have heard that humans are averse to bitterness because most poisonous substances tend to be bitter, so that tracks.”

“How ‘bad’ something tastes to most people is really just a matter of how many bitter glycosides it contains,” Miyoshi continued.

“And I’m guessing this had the max.”

“These same ingredients, prepared normally, would basically make Japanese green gentian tea.”

“Green gentian tea is *that* bitter?!”

“Well, no. The real stuff is a bit more palatable. But take the raw extracts from the plant it uses, and you see the results.”

“A *bit* more palatable?” I repeated, amazed. “But man, that sensation when it hits the back of your throat... I really thought I was going to die.”

“Ah, that would be due to the few drops of allyl isothiocyanate I added.”

“The what?”

“Basically, wasabi extract. Mustard oil.”

Is that what it tastes like when you heat wasabi up? Vile. Ugh, just inhaling the steam from the cup made me gag all over again.

“It’s pretty volatile, so the smell and flavor fade quickly. I was thinking of saving the allyl drops just for the final cup of the day. Make sure it really packs a wallop.”

“It’ll definitely do that. Hey, is this, like, okay for your health? We’re not going to kill anyone?”

“Don’t worry. I’ve kept everything to nonlethal doses.”

“Why do I have some suspicions about that? But anyway, that is wretched. You’ve really outdone yourself.”

“Thank you, thank you.” Miyoshi responded, pleased. “We can make it our motto: ‘With a taste like this, there’s no way it *won’t* raise your stats!’”

There was that phrase, “no pain, no gain.” If our enrollees ascribed to that mentality, they might be able to accept the necessity of the hell-drink. Although personally, I preferred gain *without* pain.

Envisioning our enrollees downing a cup of this sludge after eight rounds of grueling training, I couldn’t help but feel a little sorry for Cathy and all the new recruits to come.

Annotations

***“Ana Mei”*:** A remixed version of “Mei,” a track boasting one of the highest difficulties in the annals of *beatmania* history. Takes its name from the difficulty level “Another,” consisting of remixed, extra difficult tracks, hence its Japanese name—with “ana” phonetically recalling “another” while meaning “hole” on its own. “Mei” itself refers to “darkness,” so the two together present the idea of staring straight into the abyss. Appropriate for the song.

Pros tackling this track tend to look completely insane to the people around them—an impression that wouldn’t be wrong.

Yoyogi Dungeon, Reception

After helping sort through applications for upcoming first-time dungeon-diving seminars, Miharu Naruse removed her vibrating phone from her inner pocket, excused herself to her coworker, and took the call from her boss a little distance away.

"Yes. This is Naruse."

"Naruse," replied the voice on the other end of the line. "It's Saiga. Is now a good time?"

"Yes, sir. D-Powers are busy doing a test run of their boot camp course in the dungeon, so I'm just helping out with application paperwork in the meantime."

"In the du—ah, that might explain it," Saiga responded.

"Explain what?"

"Nothing." Judging from the noise accompanying Saiga's speech, he was adjusting himself in his seat. "It's just, uh, we've had some reports from the second floor about a woman being chased by a giant *hellhound*."

"A hellhound, sir. On the second floor of Yoyogi."

"Well, you know, stranger things have happened. What floor was D-Powers supposed to be on again?"

"Aaaah-hah," Miharu answered. "The second."

"Weren't they supposed to keep that whole—you know, with the monsters—a secret?"

"They've been registered as legitimate pets with vaccination records and dog tags at Shibuya City Hall."

"Registered as—with dog tags?!"

"Yes, sir. All four of them have been formally registered as pets. They're on the books."

A moment of stunned silence followed Miharu's statement. *Well, I'm just*

passing along the truth, Miharu thought. She could just picture the slack-jawed Saiga on the other end of the line.

“Um, sir?”

“Just what the hell is Shibuya thinking?”

“All you have to do is fill out the proper paperwork, so apparently they wrote ‘black dogs with yellow eyes’ in the ‘characteristics’ section and got it approved. Ah, there’s a spot to indicate breed, too, but apparently no one gave them any grief when they filled it in with ‘hellhound.’”

“Let me guess. Because it didn’t show up on the monitored breeds list...”

“Most likely.”

Internally, Saiga wanted to chew out Shibuya’s pet registration desk for not doing their jobs. He suddenly felt grateful for the relative diligence of the JDA, shortcomings and all.

Pets, huh. There was no rule against bringing pets into dungeons. Plenty of explorers who had shifted over from game-hunting had brought their canine companions along.

There was no way to ban D-Powers from bringing in what were, for all legal purposes, pet dogs that just happened to be of the breed “hellhound.”

“They aren’t going to cause any kind of public panic by taking those things for a walk, are they?”

“Sir, they may be dogs on paper, but they’re actually dungeon monsters.”

Saiga was silent for a moment. “Do you think I don’t know that?”

“Ah, right. Sorry, what I was getting at is that they have special abilities. The Arthurs—er, that’s what they call the four of them—are capable of diving into shadows.”

“What?!”

“Miyoshi usually has one tucked in hers.”

As do I, sometimes, Miharu added internally.

“I’ve never been more glad Miyoshi isn’t a terrorist,” Saiga chuckled wearily.

“Thank god for that one,” Miharu agreed.

Saiga couldn’t help but smile. “Anyway, you’re telling me the situation on the second floor is okay?”

“As long as no one attacks any hellhounds wearing collars or with gold eyes, everyone ought to be okay.”

“All right,” Saiga responded. “I’ll put out the message and make sure explorers on the second floor are aware.”

“Thank you, sir. Sorry for the bother.”

Putting down the phone, Miharu breathed out a long sigh.

No one around would have guessed that it was because she’d been overcome by the insatiable desire to run her hands through one of the Arthurs’ soft fur.

Yoyogi Dungeon, Boot Camp

“*Argh, what the f***!* What is this?! Bleck! Hack!”

Gagging on Miyoshi’s death tea, Cathy, who had returned from her eighth round of the above-ground section of the dungeon boot camp course, spat out her words between coughs.

“It’s a traditional secret recipe passed down through the ages that can increase people’s stats.” Miyoshi answered, using the Japanese word for “ancient secret”—“hiden.”

“*Oh! Hidden!*” Cathy responded.

“Not quite. Hi-den. Um...I guess like, *ancient arts*.” I handed Cathy, who was still gagging from the aftertaste of Miyoshi’s drink, some chilled mineral water.

Cathy gulped the water down, wiping away tears with her hand. She let out a deep breath. “Hhah...”

“So that’s your first round done. How’s it feel?” I asked.

“It basically felt like I was screwing around,” she responded. “I still can’t believe it’s going to have much effect.”

“Well, yeah, polish off the rest of that drink, wait five minutes, then we’ll try measuring your stats again.”

“The...rest of it?”

“Yep,” I responded. “No ifs, ands, or buts.”

Dawning a truly pained expression, Cathy downed the rest of the cup.

Oh man, just wait, I thought. *That isn’t even the one with the special Wasabi Kick.*

Keeping one eye on Cathy, who was still reeling from the aftereffects of the tea, I pulled up Making and increased her AGI by three.

Five minutes later—

“No way!”

Cathy was staring at a printout reading:

NAME:

HP: 87.90->88.20

MP: 66.70->67.00

STR: 34

VIT: 36

INT: 35

AGI: 35->38

DEX: 36

LUC: 12

She looked back and forth between her initial reading and the new one, unable to contain her surprise.

“Three points in one round? I could triple my stats with ten rounds?” she said excitedly.

“Don’t get too carried away,” I responded. “There’s a limit.”

“*If I started with around ten points, it would have taken me around the last*

one thousand days just to raise them by twenty-five. But now I got three in one round, so are you telling me one round is equivalent to 120 days of training?!" Cathy spat, hardly taking a second to breathe.

"Wait, hold on," I repeated. "There's a limit."

"What limit?"

At that point, I finally gave Cathy my explanation of (almost) how exactly the training system worked.

The way I explained it was that the purpose of the training was to distribute the experience she had already accumulated through dungeon exploration in a targeted manner. The amount of new experience gained through the training would be minimal.

In other words, as long as Cathy didn't gain any new experience points, the material resource for the training would eventually tap out.

"So the true purpose of all this nonsense is to draw out...my hidden power?"

"Something like that," I responded.

"*The moment of truth*," she muttered in English.

Of course! A program to draw out hidden power! Why didn't I think of that wording? That definitely had a nice ring. "The power was inside you all along," and all that.

"So how much power do I have left?" Cathy asked.

"Oh, that? Uh," I paused. "It's hard to say right now. But guesstimating from what we know of your background, I'd say at least enough for twenty rounds."

The amount of undistributed SP she had, according to Making, was 123.6 points.

If I raised her AGI by three points every round, it would actually sustain forty more sessions, but I wanted to build in some leeway for motivators like four-point bonuses.

"Really?!"

"Uh, er, yeah. Probably."

A single glimpse at her post-training stats seemed to have erased all Cathy's doubts. She was even more on board now than I'd anticipated. With renewed fire in her eyes, she took off promptly for the next set. We didn't even have time to stop her.

"Hey Miyoshi," I said. "How long do you think we have to keep going along with this?"

"After that last conversation, it doesn't seem like you'll just be able to hand over the keys and walk away." Judging from her enthusiasm, Cathy was going to want to check her stats again each round. "Better hunker in and be ready to stick around for stat adjustments until she burns herself out."

"What? But including the dungeon section, every round is going to take more than two hours! I thought we hired her in order to give ourselves more free time!"

"Well, I have to get ready for the press conference tomorrow, so I'm heading home."

"What?!"

Now that she mentioned it, the press conference was the next day. I'd heard the fact that we'd arranged the details on our own without clearing them hadn't sat well with the JDA.

"Don't worry, Kei. I hired a pro for the logistics, so there shouldn't be too much left to figure out. Plus, you'll have those exciting seed measurements to look forward to when you get back!"

"Ah, right. We have to get that done too. When was the slow life supposed to start again?"

"I still feel like I'm enjoying slow living just not having to go into work every day."

"Hm... Now that you mention it, fair."

Our time was our own, free to spend how we chose. We could wake when we wanted, go to sleep when we wanted, and any sleep lost was sleep lost for our own projects. Maybe this *was* slow living, city-slicker edition. Although recently

we'd taken up farming too.

"So I guess...the slow life's already started?" I said.

"Slowness is all in the mind of the beholder," Miyoshi responded.

"Are you trying to say I'm slow?!"

Left stewing over Miyoshi's words, I waited in the boot camp room for Cathy to return.

Annotations:

***The Moment of Truth*:** From *The Karate Kid* (1984). An oft-used phrase in genre fiction, but here its utterance is specifically in reference to the film. A young boy is taught in the ways of karate via odd, seemingly unrelated chores, becoming unbelievably strong in two months.

January 6, 2019 (Sunday)

JDA Headquarters, Ichigaya, Conference Room

"You're, uh, really going all out with the makeup, huh?"

"It's a character called Yomiko Readman. Apparently. With this cosplay outfit on, no one's going to recognize me!" Miyoshi's waist-length black wig, resembling the hair of a traditional Japanese doll, swayed back and forth as she talked.

"Are your cosplayer friends behind this? The ones from Comiket?"

"They were all too happy to provide the wig and glasses. Of course they were opposed to the makeup. Something about 'ruining the look.'"

"Figures. But is all this really necessary?"

"Kei, I don't want to not be able to walk around tomorrow without people stopping me on the street. Or worse."

Ah, true. If it were a choice between a disguise for one day and a disguise for the rest of her life, the choice would be obvious. But would it really work out?

The JDA conference room was bustling with reporters from a variety of studios and newspapers by the time we got in. In spite of Miyoshi's efforts to cut down on attendees by holding the event on short notice, we'd attracted a bit of a crowd. Apparently the event was even being livestreamed.

"You really lived up to your reputation. Looks like you were almost too good," Miyoshi said to Himuro, examining the scene backstage.

"Don't look at me. That's just the amount of impact your little stunts with the auctions have carried. Every single one of the reporters out there is going to be hoping they can get some juicy bit of info about that." He eyed the floor with a look of feigned pity. "Heh. Little do those suckers know they won't be getting a morsel."

"Well then, Kei. It's time."

"All right," I responded. "Break a leg."

"Better pray I don't get any questions I'm unprepared for."

"Blah, blah, blah, amen."

"What the hell kind of weak-ass prayer was that?!"

"Blah, blah, blah a-women?"

Onstage, Naruse was announcing the official start of the press conference.

"Thank you all for coming. My name is Miharu Naruse, with the Japanese Dungeon Association's Dungeon Management Section, and I will be your moderator today. It is my pleasure to welcome you here to the press conference for the launch of Dungeon Powers, LLC."

A chorus of chatter erupted from the conference room floor.

"Looks like my work here is over," Himuro remarked.

"Thank you for everything. Don't go too far though. We may have need of your services again soon." Giving a slight bow, Miyoshi departed for the stage.

"Wait. What does that mean?! Wait! Hold on!" Himuro tried calling after her, but his pleas were in vain.

Color drained from his face, Himuro collapsed into a nearby folding chair.

“Damn it,” he mumbled. “Of all the luck...”

I knew Miyoshi could be a taskmaster, and given how they had met, maybe some friction was to be expected. Even still, his level of fear was abnormal. *Miyoshi, what the hell did you do to this guy?*

“Hey,” Himuro called out to me. “You that crazy lady’s boyfriend?”

“What? No way!”

“Then are you tangled up with her in some other way?”

“Party members.”

“I see. Then you’re all the same.” Himuro’s shoulders slumped.

“Ah come on. She’s not so bad once you get to know her.”

“Hmph. Get too close to a devil and I guess you can’t make it out for what it is. Me, I’m still human. Just an ordinary man.” Mumbling, Himuro removed a cigarette from his pocket and placed it in his mouth. Then, seeming to remember the conference room’s no-smoking rule, he stood up and walked outside.

“Please raise your hand and limit yourself to one question at a time,” Naruse continued. “Please state your name and organization prior to asking your question. Finally, please note that any questions not related to the subject of this press conference will be skipped. You will not be given a chance to change questions.”

With that, Miyoshi took the stage.

Camera flashes went off in such great numbers that it looked like she was being assailed by strobe lights.

Giving a bow, Miyoshi took her seat at a table at the center of the stage.

“My name is Azusa Miyoshi. Thank you all for coming today.”

“With that, we will take our first question,” Naruse announced.

“My name is Harukawa, with Asatsuki Shimbun. How do you put your orbs up for auction?”

“Next question,” Naruse said without missing a beat.

“What?! What about mine?!”

“As I said, questions not related to the subject of this conference will be skipped. Next question.”

“Huh?”

“Orb auctions are not part of the business parameters outlined by Dungeon Powers, LLC,” Naruse answered more forcefully.

“I’m sorry,” Harukawa protested. “Were we not here for a press conference regarding the orb auctions?”

“I suggest more carefully reviewing the material you receive prior to the conference next time. Now then, next question.”

The room erupted into laughter.

“Makimura with Central Television. I’d like to confirm one thing before asking my question. Am I correct in understanding that today’s press conference is being held by D-Powers?”

“That is correct. D-Powers LLC,” Miyoshi responded.

“Does D-Powers LLC have some connection to D-Powers the party?”

“The leader of the party is also one of the company’s representative partners. That is, me.”

This time a sea of awed murmurs arose from the floor. The public appearance of a member of D-Powers was a momentous occasion. Another round of camera flashes went off.

“Urita with Yomiyomi Shimbun. From the material we received prior to today’s conference, the company’s main goals are providing dungeon-related training and dungeon-exploration support. With that in mind, why establish a for-profit corporate entity instead of an NPO?”

“It was too hard to make an NPO. An LLC was easier.”

“What? Is that all?”

“Correct. Thank you for your question.”

“Nonaka with Shinnichi Keizai Shimbun. Can you explain the details of your

dungeon training and support initiatives?”

“For support—let’s see—for example, we can provide skill orbs to explorers. Is that a good enough answer?”

The room grew so silent you could hear each reporter’s pulse.

“Skill orb...provision,” Nonaka repeated slowly.

“Correct. That’s—”

Before Miyoshi could move into her explanation of the dungeon training course, hands shot up from nearly every seat in the room. Naruse turned to Miyoshi for direction, but Miyoshi simply nodded to keep going. Naruse chose the next question-asker.

“Minomura with Tokyo TV. You said ‘provision.’ Once a skill orb is activated, its skill is bonded to the user. Is there some sort of return policy here?”

“None at all. We can’t ask for any returns that aren’t possible in the first place.”

“Then how does the business recoup? This ‘provision’ isn’t actually a codeword for ‘loan’ is it?”

A sea of dry smiles spread throughout the audience. There had to be some kind of catch.

“As you are no doubt aware, current property laws do not consider skill orbs capital assets. Thus, their provision is not recognized as a financial gift or transfer of property to the recipient. I’d like to make that clear. We’re not paying the recipients, and so don’t expect financial compensation in return.”

Many differing interpretations of skill orbs had battled it out in the drafting rooms of property law registration at first, but given their ephemeral nature and the permanence of their bonding to the user, ultimately they were excluded from distinctions as capital assets, and could be exchanged freely.

“Our company has been established with the goal of supporting dungeon exploration. To that end, we’re happy to let promising explorers keep orbs as compensation for lending us their skills for a time aiding exploration of Yoyogi, for example.”

Miyoshi's unreasonably casual response had the room back in a frenzy.

She had essentially just said that the exorbitantly priced skill orbs would now be *given* away in return for nothing but a vague promise to assist with exploration efforts for an unspecified time. Was D-Powers completely insane?

Ordinarily, skill orb provision itself would be unthinkable, but this was the group that had run the seemingly impossible skill orb auctions. Their background meant that their words had best be believed.

"Makimura with Central Television. Regarding the orbs themselves, how will you ensure you have enough of them to provide them to these 'promising explorers'?"

***

"*Ah, now there's a good question. Sharp cookie.*"

Hearing the interpreter's translation, a man with light brown hair and brown eyes, seated at the back of the room and wearing a suit well-contoured to his thin frame, whispered to the woman at his side. The woman was a red-haired, dark-eyed vixen whose striking figure was already attracting attention from surrounding seats.

"We'll have to rely on our team of explorers to procure them," Miyoshi replied onstage. "After all, I wouldn't last a second in the dungeon myself."

Her response garnered a laugh.

"*Fool! Don't be taken in by such obvious pretense!*" the man cursed.

However, the room's laughter grew even louder, and the conference moved on to the next question.

"*Gah! Of all the—*"

The man's name was one that would certainly have stood out among the reporters present—one David Jean Pierre Garcia. Formerly a two-bit swindler, he had risen through the ranks to become the kind of respectable statesman who could be, and had been, sent to the French government's Conseil d'État as the representative of an emerging but entirely legitimate religion.

"*So that's the representative of D-Powers we've heard so much about.*"

David Jean Pierre Garcia had exhausted nearly every available means in his mission to ascertain the secret behind D-Powers' orb auctions, and find their supplier.

He had employed the services of private investigators, moles in international dungeon associations, and even individuals within the JSDF leveraging his organization's considerable financial means. For all that, his investigations had turned up nothing but false starts and empty leads. It was as if D-Powers' supplier simply didn't exist. Although, putting the information together, he knew the answer had to lie somewhere within the networks of explorers in Yoyogi.

Ultimately the only choice had been to try to drag the info out of those contemptible D-Powers dimwits themselves. To that end, David Jean Pierre Garcia's organization had purchased the building across from D-Powers and set it up for surveillance, but they had still never seen anyone who looked as though they were the supplier come by. Simon Gershwin of the United States' DSF had made visits, but surely the DSF would never tolerate one of its own selling off orbs under their nose.

"*"All that work, up in smoke..."*David lamented.

When all else had failed, David had taken great pains to force D-Powers into the press conference. He had imagined that appearing unprepared in front of the media might finally pry open their lips—catch them off guard and provide something Altum Foraminis could work with—but things weren't going to plan. The journalists gathered were too softball, too willing to swallow any limp, evasive answers given. David couldn't believe his bad luck. It seemed like the questions the journalists were firing wouldn't so much as graze the topic upon which he'd set his sights. There was no accounting for the incompetence of others, he realized.

The woman next to David uncrossed and then recrossed her legs in a gesture that seemed almost intentionally designed to draw the eyes of those near.

"*Too bad. It's a woman. Looks like I won't have my chance today.*"

The dark-eyed ravishing red-head was known as Sara Isabella Magdelena.

She had once relied on her charm and sensual prowess to entice men to do

her bidding, but had fallen into a bit of neurosis after having a certain special ability foisted upon her by a man she happened to be seeing. She had enrolled herself in counseling briefly, but had eventually thrown herself at the feet of a certain holy woman, which was how she and David had first met.

David's unparalleled nose for sniffing out potential marks—combined with Sara's...unique talents—had made them a formidable duo when it came to information extraction and extortion.

"*I'm certain there's a male member of their party too. We spotted him around here earlier. If we could just get to him—*"

"*The usual routine?*" Sara asked.

"*The usual routine. However, be careful with her.*"

"*I've heard she possesses Appraisal. Is that true?*"

David shrugged. "*I don't know. According to our leaks from the JDA, it seems likely. Best to stay clear of her for right now.*"

If she could use Appraisal on people, down to seeing the skills they possessed, this Miyoshi could prove quite the impediment to Sara's craft indeed.

"*Maybe if you weren't doing such bad things all the time, you wouldn't have so much to fear from Appraisal.*"

"*I don't need to hear that from you.*"

David knew enough of Sara's past to know she was no angel—maybe the opposite, in fact.

"*Same to you,*" she replied.

Even something as simple as the natural and coquettish pout which accompanied her response would be enough to drive a man wild. However, going to bed with her would be like slipping under the sheets with a *rôdeur mortel*—a deathstalker scorpion. David alone would need both hands to count the number of men who had felt her sting, and that was only the ones of which he knew. She was no ordinary seductress.

"Nightmare Isabella." David knew all too well how appropriate a moniker that was.

***

“Misumi with MBS. When you speak about orb provision, exactly what kind of orbs would be included in your service?”

It was well known in the orb world that among the highly coveted magical offense and defense orbs, there were also those known as “dud orbs,” which seemed to produce no effect at all. It was possible that these were the orbs D-Powers was willing to part with, as an advertising gimmick.

“Let’s see. For starters, Mining, I suppose.”

Hushed murmurs spread throughout the conference room again.

“You mean the mineral resource retrieval skill?”

“The very same. If we can give it a home with an explorer who could use it to confirm mineral drops on the twentieth floor and beyond, we’d happily part with an orb,” Miyoshi explained. “Of course, that’s only if we find one first,” she added as a caveat.

However, given the party’s background, the journalists present had no problem accepting the ability to provide the orb as the truth.

“Harukawa of Asatsuki Shimbun again. Regarding exploration efforts aided by your company, will D-Powers be employing dedicated explorers full-time?”

“Our company goals are at this time limited to supporting dungeon exploration, rather than conducting it ourselves. We won’t be employing explorers directly, but rather, according to the explorer’s wishes, supporting their own initiatives in return for appropriate compensation.”

“Appropriate compensation?”

“It could be financial, of course. We won’t turn down those who wish to make contributions that way. However, more than money, we’d rather be repaid in initiative and skill.”

“Initiative and skill?”

“Our goal is the promotion of dungeon exploration. We want enthusiastic, skilled explorers who can contribute to the field. We think doing so is more than deserving of support up to and including skill orbs.”

“Nonaka with Shinnichi Keizai. Will those who enroll in your dungeon training program—‘dungeon boot camp,’ as I believe it’s called—be prioritized for orb distribution?” Nonaka held up the packet of materials that had been sent to news outlets prior to the conference.

“That’s correct. We hope to explore each ability more thoroughly too, so we’d like our enrollees to have first choice.”

“Kikuwa with Hinomoto TV. Could you provide some more details on the curriculum of the dungeon boot camp?”

“To put it simply, it’s a program designed to draw out enrollees’ latent powers. It provides an effective means of distributing one’s stats.”

A clamor erupted from the scientific reporters present. For nearly the whole of the past three years, there had been speculation of human ability parameters affected by exposure to dungeons, but no one had yet proven they existed. Was D-Powers saying they had done so?!

“Mikawa of Miyamiya Douga. Are you talking about the theoretical phenomenon known as dungeon stats?”

“Stats exist,” Miyoshi replied.

Mikawa sucked in his breath over his microphone.

theory

“One question at a time please. Next,” Naruse cut in.

However, the same question was now on every scientific reporter’s mind.

“Minomura with Tokyo TV. Are you trying to say the existence of stats has been proven?”

“I can’t speak to where the latest published research stands, but I can tell you with certainty that they exist. In fact, our company is looking forward to announcing a number of innovative products related to them. The first of which is—”

“A stats-measuring device,” she concluded.

“A stats...measuring device?!”

“Correct.”

“Mikawa, Niyoniyo Douga. In the event your company released such a device, how could consumers guarantee the accuracy of its readings?”

“Please keep in mind that stats are an abstraction of human abilities,” Miyoshi replied. “I can’t claim anything about ‘accuracy,’ in concrete terms, but as far as their use as common dungeon parameters is concerned, you’ll be able to ascertain that as soon as a second user appears.”

“'A second user'?” The hall was filled with hushed murmurs. What did she mean by “a second user”?

“Misumi with MBS. A second user of *what*, if I may ask?”

Miyoshi looked to Naruse, who took one step forward on stage.

“The JDA will be answering that question.”

All eyes in the room turned to Naruse, and the chatter that had dominated the floor vanished.

“Ms. Azusa Miyoshi is—and the JDA has verified this—currently the world’s only known user of a skill known as Appraisal.”

In chat windows accompanying livestreams the world over, the word “Appraisal,” accompanied by strings of exclamation points and question marks of various lengths, dominated the screen.

“Appraisal?”

“Did she say ‘Appraisal’?”

“What’s that?”

If the room had been loud before, now it had truly reached a clamor. A cacophony of laptop keyboard clacks accompanied excited speculation.

“Tsudanuma with Maiasa Shimbun. Does that mean that you can appraise other people, and confirm their abilities, or parameters or stats?”

“That’s correct.”

As if it hadn’t already been at fever pitch, the sound in the room grew louder still.

“Nonaka with Shinnichi Keizai. If Appraisal can ascertain the details of target objects, can it be used to verify the authenticity of goods, like say paintings or pottery pieces as well? Or identify where an object was made?”

Now it was the art and culture reporters’ turn to wait for an answer with bated breath. If Appraisal could do that much, professional appraisers would be out of a job. After all, anything Miyoshi claimed to be a fake would be a fake, regardless of professional assertions. Persuasion and expertise would cease to hold meaning in the face of the black-and-white “yes” or “no” offered up by a user of the skill.

However, the evasive answer Naruse offered would keep everyone waiting a bit longer.

“You may refer to the JDA database after the conference for questions about the nature of the skill. Please keep all questions related to the subject of today’s conference,” Naruse responded curtly.

“Kikuwa with Hinomoto TV. Will the boot camp be a means of targeting growth discovered by Appraisal in an elective manner?”

“The boot camp program is intended to draw out the existing potential of its participants, directing gained experience into the stats of their choosing, so yes, that is fair to say. I should mention that increasing these stats isn’t only useful for dungeon diving. Our program has been shown to have an effect in a number of other areas—such as acting.”

“Acting?”

Interest piqued by those words, a number of reporters in the entertainment sphere raised their hands.

“Sakurada with Akatsuki Television. When you say ‘acting,’ might this have something to do with the rapid rise of Ryoko Saito, whose ascent to prominence has made headlines recently?”

“Actually, Saito’s been through an early version of our training, before we’d solidified the final boot camp program.”

Now it was time for an uproar from the reporters connected to studio production. Of course we’d cleared the whole thing with Saito in advance.

Miyoshi's explanation should have taken care of the whole "coach" incident—I hoped.

"Urita with Yomiyomi Shimbun. Will the program be effective for athletes as well?"

"I don't see why it wouldn't be, although I stress that the main target is still dungeon explorers. In the case of Ryoko Saito, while she went through training based on similar principles to our boot camp, she wasn't a formal student."

Oh, man. No one would ever guess that the origin of our company lay in a monotonous spray-bottle-and-hammer slime-hunting regimen, I thought. *But hey, that's the truth!*

It looked like rumors about Saito had spread even further than I'd realized. If our training had produced such an effect on her acting, it didn't take much to imagine what it could do in even more straight-forward competitions for best times in sports.

"No way. Did you hear that?"

"I don't know if it's the end of sports as we know 'em, or the dawn of a golden era."

More questions concerning the ramifications of the training poured in one after another, and the conference ran well over time.

That was the day that marked the birth of the world's new most famous explorer—someone the internet would take to calling "Wiseman."

Annotations:

***Rôdeur mortel*:** Among the most dangerous varieties of scorpions, from which a single sting can mean death. The Japanese name, "obuto sasori" points to its tail being unusually thick, but the English name is more akin to the literal meaning of the french—deathstalker. (The name has an air of "your twelve-year-old brother named this.") In French as well as English, it's also known as the Naqab desert scorpion and Palestine yellow scorpion. It seems to be collecting just about every name it can.

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Message Board [And Thus] D-Powers 179 [Into Limited Liability Company]

1: Anonymous Explorer ID: P12xx-xxxx-xxxx-4198

From out of nowhere, the ridiculously named D-Powers appears and begins auctioning off orbs.

Are they swindlers? Or saviors of the world?

Next thread at 930.

24: Anonymous Explorer

D-Powers press conference starting soon. Wonder what it's going to be about

---

25: Anonymous Explorer

Look at the thread title, dummy >24 it's a press conference for their company launch

---

26: Anonymous Explorer

that all? seems like a lot of work for all that

27: Anonymous Explorer

The venue's a JDA conference room. Maybe it's a JDA joint project?

28: Anonymous Explorer

Yeah, come to think of it, it's weird that a private company would get to hold a press conference at the JDA

29: Anonymous Explorer

They're live!

30: Anonymous Explorer

they're live!

31: Anonymous Explorer

I'm in!

32: Anonymous Explorer

lmaooo the viewer count's shooting way up. Who's spending their Sunday watching this?

33: Anonymous Explorer

Lazy explorers?

34: Anonymous Explorer

Get divin', you lazy bums!

35: Anonymous Explorer

The moderator is Naruse!

36: Anonymous Explorer

Notice me, Naruse-senpaaaaai!

37: Anonymous Explorer

Huh? Is that person coming onstage now a member of D-Powers?

38: Anonymous Explorer

Uh-oh, she's kind of cute?

39: Anonymous Explorer

What did she say her name was again? Miyoshi? I think she's supposed to be a rep for the party?

40: Anonymous Explorer

This is for D-Powers LLC, so she's probably a founding member of the company. Not sure if she's also a member of the party.

41: Anonymous Explorer

Wonder what her ranking is

42: Anonymous Explorer

Dunno. But if she's with D-Powers, it can't be super low

43: Anonymous Explorer

The Phantom!

44: Anonymous Explorer

Oh, come on.

But...The Phantom probably does have something to do with D-Powers, given their auction site.

45: Anonymous Explorer

Whoa, no-mercy Naruse. Asatsuki Shimbun's Harukawa eating it right from the start.

46: Anonymous Explorer

Oh damn. btfo

47: Anonymous Explorer

Makimura from Central TV wading in cautiously

48: Anonymous Explorer

Rough. Hey, I get it. It's a D-Powers press conference, so of course you'd want to ask about the auctions.

49: Anonymous Explorer

Speaking of auctions, isn't it about time for the next one?

50: Anonymous Explorer

Seriously?! auction wen

51: Anonymous Explorer

lol it's not like they're on a set schedule

Still, the company has the same name as a party. Maybe that's why there's been so much confusion?

52: Anonymous Explorer

>51 You gotta check the materials before coming!

53: Anonymous Explorer

Oh! Miyoshi is the leader of D-Powers! Miyoshi-senpai, notice us!

54: Anonymous Explorer

Miyoshi = Phantom confirmed!

55: Anonymous Explorer

lol @ the answer that making an NPO was too hard

56: Anonymous Explorer

The reporter probably thought that was a gotcha

57: Anonymous Explorer

“Nope, just too hard to set up” kek

58: Anonymous Explorer

They’re not wrong. NPOs really are hard to establish.

It usually takes over three months. On the other hand, you can set up a company in ten days, and it gives you all sorts of structural flexibility as long as you don’t mind paying taxes

Plus you can’t set up an NPO alone. You need at least four directors

---

59: Anonymous Explorer

Hold on hold on. Skill orb...provision? Like gifts?!!!

60: Anonymous Explorer

Gotta be a mistake. That can’t be right

61: Anonymous Explorer

Lol the floor went dead silent

62: Anonymous Explorer

Well no shit, you’d be silent too lol

63: Anonymous Explorer

“Compensation” = loan scheme

64: Anonymous Explorer

Who the hell’s going to pay back a two billion yen loan lol That’s more money than you’d see in your whole life

---

65: Anonymous Explorer

Uh, lending skills “for a time”? Aren’t you just gonna be their slave for life?

66: Anonymous Explorer

Details are on the site. Looks like one to two years

67: Anonymous Explorer

There’s a site?!!!

68: Anonymous Explorer

Whoa, nice find >66

Uh, did any of the guys at the press conference realize there's a site?

69: Anonymous Explorer

Guess they really didn't expect it to actually be a company launch press conference

---

70: Anonymous Explorer

Still, an orb worth two billion yen for two years of part-time assistance?

71: Anonymous Explorer

It's like making a billion yen per year!

72: Anonymous Explorer

Whoa whoa whoa

They're giving --Mining-- away!!!!

73: Anonymous Explorer

They already have Mining?!

74: Anonymous Explorer

If they had it now, it wouldn't last long enough to give to any explorers

---

75: Anonymous Explorer

These are the auction guys, 'member? They have orb preservation tech.(Bold claim)

76: Anonymous Explorer

>75 Wouldn't they make more money by selling the technology then?

77: Anonymous Explorer

Whoa, wait. They're saying the kind of compensation they'd most value would be initiative and skill

---

78: Anonymous Explorer

That's...pretty abstract?

79: Anonymous Explorer

Hold on, that's actually lowering the hurdle on the orbs a lot, right? After all, anyone can display initiative

---

80: Anonymous Explorer

How are they going to help boost explorers' skill? lol

81: Anonymous Explorer

Hm?!

82: Anonymous Explorer

Hold on wtf

83: Anonymous Explorer

Stats!!!! Staaaaaaaats!!!!!

84: Anonymous Explorer

Wtf?!!!

85: Anonymous Explorer

〇-〇(Miyoshi voice) "Stats exist."

86: Anonymous Explorer

Whoa, whoa, whoa, and a measuring device?! This is all happening too fast

---

87: Anonymous Explorer

Scoooouters!!!!!

88: Anonymous Explorer

Huge missed opportunity if they don't call it a Scouter lol

89: Anonymous Explorer

Ah man. I don't want to be told I'm Power Level 5 trash

90: Anonymous Explorer

Hold on. It's like that reporter just now said. We don't have any way of knowing if these stats are real--

...is what I was going to write. Never mind.

91: Anonymous Explorer

Excuse me?

92: Anonymous Explorer

wtf

93: Anonymous Explorer

Appraisal? Like getting a quote on your house?

94: Anonymous Explorer

Appraisal like the skill in a video game!

95: Anonymous Explorer

The mythical Appraisal?!

96: Anonymous Explorer

Frfr? No joke?

97: Anonymous Explorer

>96 Naruse said it

98: Anonymous Explorer

Wtf? This is crazy

99: Anonymous Explorer

English chats are going nuts. They're calling Miyoshi "wiseman."

100: Anonymous Explorer

I for one welcome our new dungeon overlord

101: Anonymous Explorer

Not "wisewoman"? Are they being sarcastic?

102: Anonymous Explorer

Looks like they're serious, >101

103: Anonymous Explorer

Who's Ryoko Saito?

104: Anonymous Explorer

She's an actress who got famous all of a sudden for landing a big leading role in a film with a major

director. Haven't you heard?

They held an audition, but it didn't seem like it was fixed in her favor as a marketing gimmick. There'd be no reason to fix it for her anyway, since she was a total nobody

---

105: Anonymous Explorer

lol Brutal >12

Still, why's she such a big deal?

106: Anonymous Explorer

Idk. Maybe something happened at the audition.

107: Anonymous Explorer

It's because of her mentioning a coach in an interview

108: Anonymous Explorer

A coach?

109: Anonymous Explorer

She got an interview question about recent improvements to her acting ability and answered, "I've been undergoing my coach's training regimen."

Everyone just laughed her off at the time

110: Anonymous Explorer

I still don't see the big deal

111: Anonymous Explorer

If you could land a leading role in a major film just by undergoing the dungeon boot camp, how many budding actresses do you think are going to sign up?

112: Anonymous Explorer

They're saying it's going to work for sports too

***

812: Anonymous Explorer

Man, that was a wild ride.

813: Anonymous Explorer

What all did we learn? The boot camp, the explorer support initiative, stats-measuring devices...Appraisal?

814: Anonymous Explorer

Looks like “wiseman” stuck on the English boards

815: Anonymous Explorer

Well, she is the world’s only user of Appraisal. Although it’s not like it’s going to immediately give her access to major information like with Otherworldly Language Comprehension. It somehow seems less exciting in comparison

---

816: Anonymous Explorer

But depending on what Appraisal can do, people might be after her now, right? Wouldn’t be too surprised if she wound up being kidnapped for her skill

---

817: Anonymous Explorer

If it works for verifying art pieces and not just items and monsters, she’s going to be banned from every museum on Earth. lol

---

818: Anonymous Explorer

Walking around museums like Yuzan Kaibara from Oishinbo, pointing to different pieces like, “It’s fake! Bring me the museum director!” lol

---

819: Anonymous Explorer

Lmao >818

820: Anonymous Explorer

She could point out fraudulent food branding too

821: Anonymous Explorer

pointing to champagne bottle “This is just sparkling wine! Bring me the manager!” “That’s not organic! You’re done for!” lol

---

822: Anonymous Explorer

So who’s going to sign up for the dungeon boot camp?

823: Anonymous Explorer

It’d be nice to get a free skill orb or even just a potion...

824: Anonymous Explorer

I don’t think I’m a good enough explorer

825: Anonymous Explorer

Don’t you owe them work for the rest of your life or something if you get an orb?

826: Anonymous Explorer

Already been brought up. They said one or two years at the moist.

827: Anonymous Explorer

Srsly?

>826 lol moist

828: Anonymous Explorer

Wait, so if you got Water Magic (market price 2 million yen) it’d be like making a million yen per year!

829: Anonymous Explorer

>827: sry

830: Anonymous Explorer

I’ll try applying but I know I’m not gonna get in

831: Anonymous Explorer

I’ll try too, yolo

832: Anonymous Explorer

I just want a scouter lol

833: Anonymous Explorer

The scouters seem cool, but I bet they’ll be crazy expensive

834: Anonymous Explorer

Def not gonna be cheap. DA branches and private companies are gonna buy em anyway

---

835: Anonymous Explorer

They’re probably going to put entry restrictions on each separate dungeon floor now that they have a basis for judging. Like you have to have this many stats to enter

836: Anonymous Explorer

Different reception desks on each floor of the dungeon doesn't seem very practical

---

837: Anonymous Explorer

There's a food stall on Yoyogi's eighth floor

838: Anonymous Explorer

They sell meat skewers for one thousand yen per pop

839: Anonymous Explorer

That's a rip-off

840: Anonymous Explorer

It's tourist prices

841: Anonymous Explorer

You know anyone who would go vacationing on Yoyogi's eighth floor?

Sotobori Park, Yotsuya

"Yoshimura! Can I have a minute?"

Naruse had called out to me in the lobby following the press conference, and I'd agreed to follow her outside, walking down the street by the river. Even though it was Sunday, the conference had brought both of us into the JDA.

There was a high air pressure system covering Japan, and it was pleasant for January, but the temperature was still under ten degrees Celsius and we could see streaks of breath as we walked.

Reaching the crosswalk at Ichigaya-Hachimancho, instead of continuing on towards Ichigaya Station, we'd hung a right, heading towards Yotsuya.

"So that gemstone from the other day—looks like it was benitoite."

"Benitoite?"

"That's right. At first the Gemological Institute's JDA branch suspected

aquamarine, but the refractive index didn't match."

Naruse was reading the results of their inspection off of a tablet.

"Judging from the refractive index, the dispersion, the stone's relative weight and fluorescence under ultraviolet rays, they've concluded it's most likely a briolette cut of benitoite."

"'Most likely'?"

"The stone's properties point to benitoite, but it's rare to find a sample of this size. Gem quality samples are found only in California, and even one carat specimens are large. The gemstone pendant you found apparently weighs around *ten*."

"Huh."

Not being a big gemologist, I couldn't say one versus ten carats held much meaning for me. From what I knew, ten carats would still have only been around two grams. Was it really that special?

Evidently unsatisfied with my less-than-impressed reaction, Naruse continued, "Yoshimura, the largest specimen of benitoite *on record* right now is a facet cut in the Smithsonian weighing 7.7 carats."

To sum up Naruse's report, not only had I found a gemstone too large to exist, it had a level of clarity to make an appraiser's head spin. Because we had only requested a hasty identification, in light of its rather unbelievable qualities, the conclusion had been left at "most likely."

"The GIJ has actually requested more time with the stone in order to run further tests, but..."

"Nah, sounds like a pain. I'd rather get it back, if it's okay with everyone. I just wanted to figure out what kind of stone it was so I'd know how to take care of it properly."

There were harder stones and softer stones, ones whose colors would fade if exposed to too much sunlight, that sort of thing. I just wanted to keep the gem in good condition.

"Of all the..." Naruse mumbled under her breath.

“Is that what we left the JDA for?”

“No...”

In front of us, in the distance, we could just about see the glass tower of Yotsuya Comore Mall rising above the skyline. The centerpiece of the renovations occurring around Yotsuya Station, construction on the building was slated to be finished next year, for a 2020 opening.

Naruse walked on in silence for a bit, then opened her mouth again when we were a sufficient distance away from the JDA. “Actually, it’s about the Klingon message...”

“What was it?”

“Well...” Naruse pulled up the translated inscription on her tablet.

We’d entered the Sotobori Park grounds, walking along a small path and sticking close to the outer perimeter fence.

“There was too much left in doubt from just running it through machine translation, so I asked an expert I got in touch with through the KLI,” Naruse explained. “Afterwards, I just corrected some proper nouns here and there.”

“An announcement to my fellow man,” was how the message began. It was certainly unlike any of the other inscriptions we’d uncovered up to now.

“We could upload the translation through Heaven’s Leaks and let the chips fall where they may, but... Yoshimura, what do you think?”

What followed the salutation was an account of the dungeons that tied their origins three years ago to an experiment that had taken place in Nevada. If the reader wished to know more, they were invited to— “‘Visit the manor house study’?”

Manor house... Could that be...?

“Indeed, the Wandering Manor. We aren’t sure, but it seemingly bears a resemblance to an old manor owned by Dr. Tylor’s family, on his mother’s side.” Naruse took the tablet for a moment, pulled up a photo album folder, then passed the device back to me. “It was an eighteenth-century-styled home constructed at Monterey Bay, on the outskirts of Santa Cruz. However, it was

damaged in an earthquake in 1989 and sold. Apparently the manor itself no longer exists, but you can see portions of it in Dr. Tylor's old photos."

The folder displayed thumbnails for several older, seemingly low-image quality photographs.

Naruse opened one of the photos in the folder, which appeared to depict Dr. Tylor in his university days, smiling next to a friend.

"How'd you get this?"

"The other person in the photo uploaded it to social media three years ago in memoriam, after the incident."

In the background was a door to what appeared to be a grand manor, cut off by the edge of the frame. I *did* feel like I'd seen it before.

"So there's a little resemblance, right?" Naruse asked cautiously.

"A little resemblance, yeah." I hedged my answer in turn.

If we uploaded all this without more conclusive evidence, we were likely to receive pushback from the powers that be in America.

If the contents of the inscription had been deciphered using Otherworldly Language Comprehension, it might have lent us more credibility, but instead everything hinged on a passage written in *Klingon*. It would be too easy to argue that someone had doctored the inscription after the fact.

Hold on, is that why *he chose to write it in Klingon? To sow doubt?*

An old man came walking towards us down the path.

Passing the tablet back to Naruse, I placed a call to the one man I thought might know even more about the situation than we did.

Nishi-Shinjuku, Park Tower, Forty-First Floor

In a room on the forty-first floor of the luxurious Park Tower in the Nishi-Shinjuku district, Cathy and the four members of Team Simon had just sat down to a sumptuous afternoon tea.

Cathy, having been unable to complete her planned pre-boot camp training

regimen due to the fervor of the press conference, which she had gotten caught up in watching, had abandoned her afternoon plans to join up with the team for a combination status report and respite.

Seeming utterly at home in their new digs, Joshua gracefully lifted a cup of tea to his lips, the very portrait of poise.

Mason, on the other hand, feeling restrained by the tight collared shirt he'd been forced to wear for the occasion, set about shoveling one small sweet after another into his mouth. Finger foods and petit fours vanished from the trays in front of him at a speed which left the wait staff, tasked with replenishing the food, struggling to catch up.

The afternoon tea service had not only come with a bevy of fine leaves, but the aforementioned wait service and an all-you-can-eat food package, just as one would expect from the upscale Park Hyatt. Also just what one would expect from its forty-five dollar per-person price tag.

"*So? What'd you make of Yoshimura?*" Simon asked Cathy, setting down his cup of single estate autumnal.

Autumnal flush darjeeling leaves, typically harvested mid-fall, traded their characteristic white-grape flavors for a deeper sweetness and light astringency, a combination which brought them many fans.

Internally, however, Simon couldn't help but wish they'd been served coffee like proper adults. He was an unwavering adherent of the bitter bean.

"*Yoshimura*? *Not Azusa*?" Natalie couldn't help but be curious at Simon's question.

"*Nah. Yoshimura*."

For a moment Cathy slumped, unsure how to answer, but she quickly straightened up to attention. "*He's very good at janken. Sir.*"

"*Huh?*"

"*Janken, sir. The Japanese name for the children's game known in America as rock-paper-scissors.*"

"*I know that.*"

“*Ah! Apologies! Sir!*”

“*You challenged him to prove his superiority when you went into the interview right? I’m asking you what kind of skills he showed off.*”

“*Ah, that’s...*”

Cathy explained how Yoshimura had brushed off her challenge to a trial of dungeon skills and proposed a game of janken instead.

She had asked how a game of pure luck would prove anything, only to be rebuffed and told janken was no game of chance. If she thought otherwise, Yoshimura taunted, she was welcome to test her might.

Test her might she had, and to her surprise—

“*You couldn’t win?*” Simon asked. “*Not even a single time?”*

“*I must have challenged him a hundred times, sir, and I couldn’t win once.*”

“*Not even any aicos*?”

“‘*Aico’?*”

“*It’s what they call a tie.*”

“*Oh, no ties, sir. Come to think of it, that...that* is *rather strange.*”

The odds of winning a game of rock-paper-scissors, not counting ties, were one-in-three. The chances of winning one hundred games consecutively would be...

“*One in five hundred quattuordecillion*,” Natalie reported, having run the math. “*Give or take.*”

“‘*Quattuordecillion’? Jeez, I’ve never even heard that word*.” Simon blinked.

“*It’s a one with forty-five zeroes after it. Ten to the forty-fifth power.*”

“*I’m gonna be honest, I can’t even wrap my head around that. Might as well be infinity.*”

“*It’s about how many water molecules there are on Earth.*”

“*Oh, well* that *makes it perfectly easy to understand.*”

At any rate, it was a preposterously huge number, and an infinitesimal

chance. One had better odds of being struck by lightning and winning the lottery on the same day.

"Was he using some kind of trick?" Simon asked Cathy.

"*I figured he must have been, so I asked him point-blank. I thought maybe he had some sort of skill that let him read the opponent's mind."*

"*And?*"

"*He said in that case I could win by just thinking about a different play.*"

"*Did you try it?*"

"*Of course, sir.*"

The result had still been a shutout for Cathy.

Yoshimura's win streak should have been impossible. There had to be some sort of trick or skill at play. Simon just couldn't imagine what.

"*He said since no one's going to get hurt from more janken, I could challenge him again anytime. And if he lost, he'd even accept another kind of competition.*"

Simon couldn't imagine Yoshimura had any intention of losing, but the open invitation suited their purposes well.

"*Cathy. I want you to try to monitor Yoshimura's abilities for a while. Keep pushing him. See if you can't get a bead on what's behind those janken scores.*"

"*Understood.*"

Someone with Cathy's competitive streak didn't need an order to keep testing her luck against Yoshimura. She wasn't going to let him off easy.

"*Now then, did you get an explanation of the training program?*"

"*I've been through it. However, I can't report on it for a while.*"

"*What do you mean? You sign some kind of NDA?*"

"*That's not it. They said, 'Since your CO will be among our first enrollees, if you have to report to him, at least wait until he's started the course.' Sir*."

"*Hmph. Why's that matter?*" Simon snorted.

“*They were worried you might be less impressed.*”

Impressed? By a training regimen? D-Powers were as crazy as ever. What the hell did they intend to have Team Simon do?

“*They had you sign some kind of NDA.*”

“*No, sir. They said—*”

“*What then?*”

“*They said there’s nothing to hide, but that I should save my report to my superior until after they’d started the course.*”

“*Ha ha, dammit, those guys read us like a book!*” Simon couldn’t help but smile.

The service staff coming to provide a tray of freshly baked scones politely ignored Simon demonstrating his skill of performing a tamped down, nearly silent belly laugh.

Mason took one of the scones and indiscriminately slathered on jam and clotted cream. Joshua took the opportunity to school him on the finer points of scone topping application.

“*So, anything else come up?*” Simon asked.

“*Let’s see. Ah, there was the matter of my remuneration.*”

“*Ah, well. On paper you’re just working extra part time, so your salary with us shouldn’t be changed. Except for—hm, you were E-6 originally, but with the dispatch you should go up to E-8*.”

“*It’s not that.*” Cathy paused. “*Would it be okay for me to receive payment from D-Powers too?*”

“*Well, you’re not a volunteer. It’s only natural for you to get paid.*”

“*But...*”

“*What’s the matter?*”

“*Would it be okay even if that compensation were in the neighborhood of,*” Cathy hesitated again, “*$250,000 per year?*”

Simon inadvertently whistled in response. All eyes turned toward Cathy.

"*Now* that's *generous. You're going be making more than O-10s,*" Natalie commented, a tinge of jealousy in her voice.

O-10 was the military pay grade reserved for senior officers with twenty years of experience or more. Its pay was around $20,000 per month.

"*Your job* is *just drill instructor, right?*" Simon asked.

"*That's correct.*"

"*You're not getting any bonuses for secret-keeping?*"

Such bonuses were often part of military severance packages.

"*Forgive me sir, but once again, I was told there's nothing I can't disclose, once the training has started.*"

Paying a drill instructor that much? The members of D-Powers really *were* crazy.

"*Nothing wrong with a staff sergeant making more than a general, is there? This isn't the USMC*," Joshua interjected, while ordering another round of black tea.

"*If they'll pay you that much, then take it,*" Simon concluded. "*The DSF's frontline teams get de facto bonuses through orbs and other drop items. That totals even more than your drill instructor pay, so no need to feel guilty.*"

"*Roger.*"

Of course, frontline team members were risking their lives. Their benefits were set high to compensate for that fact. Plus, without them, the DSF would never be able to do things like put in bids for orb auctions.

Picking up a madeleine, Simon posed another question.

"*What was your first impression of Yoshimura?*"

"*That he's a rather strange man,*" Cathy answered.

"*How so?*"

How so? Cathy wondered. To start off, he was an average Rank G explorer,

but seemed unusually knowledgeable about dungeons. Yet in light of that knowledge, and fearlessness, he wasn't too bossy, and if anything rather meek. There were too many aspects of his character that didn't seem to align.

"*That's just good old-fashioned Japanese modesty, don't you think?*"

"*Is it? I wonder. Plus, sometimes Ms. Azusa, who's supposed to be higher ranking, displays signs of allegiance to him.*"

"'*Signs of allegiance?*'"

"*Sometimes she calls Yoshimura's attention by shouting out 'Semper Fi!' I never expected to hear the Marine Corps motto over here.*"

"*Cathy, are you sure that wasn't 'senpai'*?" Natalie asked.

Natalie had been raised in Yokosuka until she was twelve years old, and spoke fluent Japanese.

"*Ah. You know, it might have been.*"

"*That would make a lot more sense,*" Natalie responded.

"Senpai" made for a difficult translation. Age differences weren't weighed as critically in English-speaking countries as they tended to be in Japan. "Senior" wouldn't communicate anything but the age distinction, and "mentor" didn't seem to fit either. Among certain circles, the word, untranslated, was gaining use even in English-speaking countries, but to the straight-laced go-getter Cathy, who spent more time in the office and in dungeons than slinking around message boards and social media, it remained obscure. Even for someone with her proficient conversational Japanese, it was a tough word to explain.

"'*Sempai'?*" Cathy responded.

"'*Se-n-pai.' It's, er, used for someone who's reasonably close to you, with more experience in the same work.*"

"*Aaah.*"

"*Yoshimura was Azusa's tutor at their previous job,*" Simon commented.

"*What are you? Their stalker?*" Natalie responded.

"*Hey, they're the enigma of the century. I've gathered what intel I can.*"

"*An enigma. Well, Azusa certainly seems to be that.*"

She was the woman responsible for the orb auctions which had gripped the world's attention, and had just revealed herself as the world's first user of Appraisal. Using her ability, she'd even helped invent a stats-measuring device—requests for which were already pouring out from national research centers.

"*Nope. The one to watch is Yoshimura. Bet on it*." After placing an order with the wait staff for a cup of coffee, Simon leaned over the table. "*Listen. The first time Azusa ever went dungeon diving was at the end of the first year after the dungeons appeared. She was a college sophomore at the time. According to the records, she didn't go diving again until after Yoshimura picked up his license.*"

Natalie scrunched up her face, wondering where Simon had gotten his information.

"*Now, the first time Yoshimura is on record as having gone diving was three months ago. Around the same time as he quit his job with his previous employer*," the lieutenant continued.

"*So he suddenly quit his job and started dungeon diving?*" Natalie's eyes had grown wide at Simon's last comment. That was decidedly exceptional behavior in Japan, especially for Mr. Good Old Japanese Modesty.

"*That's right. Now, I know what you're thinking: Who just up and bails on the job they've been working for years to suddenly go full-time dungeon diving? Maybe if it'd been their hobby, but he'd only just gotten his license.*"

"*That is...odd.*"

"*Odd? Even a high schooler could tell that plan was stupid. This was a full-grown man.*" Simon shrugged.

Joshua was listening intently. Mason had moved on to a tray of small cheesecakes.

"*And then, right around the time Yoshimura quits, Azusa puts in for a JDA commercial license.*"

"*So what does that mean?*"

"*She hadn't been diving in two years, then all of a sudden she gets the idea to*

apply for a license to sell dungeon items, without even setting foot in a dungeon in the interim?"

"*Maybe she planned to sell items for some kind of connection she'd made through her company.*"

"*Maybe. But their old company only got involved with dungeon materials after a point of sale. Anyway, even if she could have leveraged some work connection, the fact of the matter is she didn't. I looked into it. No contact on record with other explorers—not through company work. In fact, the only business relationship she's pursued in the past few months involves her connections at a small medical equipment start-up.*"

"*Look at you, Mr. Gumshoe. You oughta open up a PI office,*" Natalie quipped.

"*At any rate, Azusa registered for her commercial license right around the time Yoshimura left their old company. Any way you look at it, Yoshimura is the instigator, right?*"

"*Now hold on. There* are *crazy couples who decide to get married and go right into opening a business together.*"

"*Well, I can't say for sure that there are* no *couples who would go all in on a business idea where they have no experience or hopes of succeeding, but I don't think these two are that dumb.*" The coffee Simon had ordered still hadn't come. He wet his throat with a nearby water glass, and took a deep breath. *"Then when it comes to Yoshimura, over his first month of diving, he doesn't go lower than the first floor*. *According to Yoyogi regulars, they thought he was hanging around contemplating offing himself in the dungeon. You know, dungeon-assisted suicide.*"

"'*Dungeon-assisted suicide'?*"

"*He wasn't wearing any defensive gear, and he kept wandering back and forth, in and out of the entrance."*

"*Ah. Like he wasn't quite decided and was trying to work up the nerve.*"

"*Right. And that's when he met the JDA's Naruse."*

Simon's coffee arrived. Taking a sip, Simon couldn't help but contemplate

how much better it truly was than tea, and how much better Azusa's homemade brew was than this cup. *What kind of beans does she use anyway?* His mind still half on dark roasts, he put up his right index finger, beginning to organize his thoughts.

Point one.

"*So, first point: Yoshimura quits the company, and continues this strange behavior on the first floor of Yoyogi for one month.*"

He put up his middle finger. Point two.

"*Then, right after Yoshimura starts diving, Azusa goes and gets her commercial license, even though she's barely dived, and quits her job too.*"

Finally, he put up his ring finger. Point three.

"*Third point: Not ten days after Azusa leaves her job, out of the blue—bam, we get our first orb auction.*"

"*Hmm...*" Joshua mumbled, seeming deep in thought.

"*What's more*," Simon continued, *"during this period, all Yoshimura does is repeat whatever he's doing on the first floor. Azusa goes diving with him his first time, but that's it. In between then and the party registration, she never set foot in the dungeon. But that's not all. Last year, explorers bearing their likenesses were spotted on levels lower than the second floor at least four separate times.*"

"*Where did you get all this information?*" Natalie asked.

"*Heh, well, let's just say JDA security's a little lax.*"

"*Unbelievable.*"

"*But if all that is true,*" Mason said, having paused his food intake for a minute, holding a glass of orange juice, "*then where did they get their first auction orbs? It doesn't make any sense.*"

"*That's right,*" Simon answered. "*I agree. Something doesn't line up. Then on top of it all, Azusa goes ahead and reveals that she's the world's first Appraisal user. Most people'll be fussing about what that ability can do, but the real question is: How the hell did she get it?*"

“*She defeated the monster that drops it?*”

Simon had checked the skill on the JDA database. The monsters listed as dropping Appraisal were eyeballs on the tenth floor. The eyeballs were thought to be special monsters spawning only at the Wandering Manor.

“*Are you guys saying you could defeat 373 of a given monster in a day? That seem plausible to you?*”

“*In a day? Given twenty-four hours, that should be—actually, that* would *be pretty tough.*”

“*Right? Even if we chalk up her orb to a lucky drop, D-Powers would still have needed to spawn the manor. That means 373 monsters in a day. According to the official write-up, the monsters used were zombies, but even if they were goblins, that’d still be nearly impossible. Those two have some kind of ace up their sleeve the rest of us haven’t seen.*”

Everyone nodded but Cathy, who was listening with a blank look on her face.

“*Now, I have one theory that helps make sense of all this.”*

“*They have a vast network of veteran explorers at their beck and call?*”

“*‘A vast network’? Heh, if they could manage to keep that secret, the CIA could learn a thing or two from them. The more people you have involved, the easier secrets get leaked. No, the fact that no one knows anything has to mean an extremely small number of people are involved.*”

Joshua unfolded his arms, a thought dawning on him.

“*A...theory, you said?*”

“*Of course,*” Simon answered. “*Just a theory. Got a guess?*”

The leaves of the Hawaiian bamboo stalk in the corner swayed lazily in the air conditioner breeze, translucent afternoon light passing through them to throw a pattern of dancing shadows across Joshua’s face.

“*Yoshimura is the rank-one explorer. The mysterious person who jumped to the top of the WDARL lists last year. And he’s number one by a huge margin.*”

Simon shaped his right hand into a finger gun, pointed it at Joshua, and

mimed a shot. “*Bingo.*”

Natalie remained unconvinced. “*Where in all of that do you get Yoshimura being number one?*”

“*Nowhere. That’s exactly the point. He’s the kind of person you’d never expect. That’s why The Phantom’s been able to fly under the radar for so long. I don’t know how he managed it, but if you accept that he is the enigmatic top explorer, everything else starts to make sense.”*

“*Interesting ‘theory’ you’ve got there*,” Natalie said, making air quotes, “*but I suppose you have some more compelling evidence than that.”*

“*Oh, sure. Loads of it. Circumstantial evidence anyway. What if I said Yoshimura quitting his company happened right after The Phantom showed up? Like maybe he quit his job right after he became number one.*” Simon took a swig of his coffee. “*I’ve got plenty of connections like that. But what really convinced me were the answers I got from interviewing regulars at Yoyogi recently.*”

“*‘Answers’?*”

“*The rank-one in area 12 shot onto the scene totally out of the blue—like a meteor. There weren’t any likely candidates among other high-ranking explorers.*”

“*Okay...*”

“*Now, we assume they’re some low-ranking anonymous figure. If they’d been diving before, their teammates would figure out it was them. Even if they didn’t know exactly, they’d at least realize something was up.*”

“*I follow.*”

Somehow jumping to number one from all the way in the low hundreds or thousands... Even if The Phantom could hide their prowess in an individual battle or two, it would be impossible to hide such a change long term.

“*In other words, The Phantom has to have been a solo or a newbie. As for narrowing it down between those two, there was no change in the local dungeon item marketplace.*”

If an active explorer had jumped up to the top of the rankings, the value of the items they sold would increase.

Even if the increase was gradual, it was impossible to imagine the markets continuing with no observable change after such a drastic shake-up. If the top-ranked explorer had withdrawn from the markets in order to conceal their identity, there would still be a marked change aligning with their movements, in the form of a reduction in the number of items sold. However, no one had noticed any such drastic changes taking place.

"*So I landed on newbie. However, whoever it was wasn't selling any of the items they should have been getting their hands on. So I got to wonderin', 'How are they making cash?'*"

"*Orb sales?*"

"*Maybe. But whatever it was, it shouldn't let them fly completely under the radar. But no matter how many explorers I talked to, no matter how many JDA staffers I asked, no one seemed to have a clue who our Phantom was. It was like they didn't exist.*"

"*Well, that figures. They are called 'The Phantom' after all.*"

"*Yeah. But they aren't an invisible person. They must be around somewhere. They just had to be someone no one had thought to consider.*"

"*What do you mean?*"

"*In all this time, over the past four months since The Phantom hit the scene, who has consistently been the most conspicuous explorer in Yoyogi? Who has everyone seemed to notice, in proximity to every major event? And who has no one considered as The Phantom's alter ego? Keigo Yoshimura.*"

He had even managed to give the USDD's strike force the slip when they'd attempted to track him through the dungeon. No matter how much they might have paled in comparison to Simon's team, they weren't the types to be outdone by an amateur. Other teams after Otherworldly Language Comprehension should have been tailing D-Powers too, and yet Yoshimura and Azusa had managed to slip by them all.

"Okay, Simon. What do you want us to do with that info?"

"*Our work is dungeon-capturing. I guess our ultimate goal is ultimately probably capturing The Ring.*"

"*Okay...*"

"*But here we are three years—lord, almost four—later, and we're still struggling with petting zoos like Evans's thirtieth floor.*"

"*That's correct.*"

Face contorted by memories of the beating he'd taken from Evans's thirty-first floor boss, Mason spoke up. "*If those guys know a way to blow past our three years of experience in such a short time, I'd like to know what it is.*"

If it was something they could replicate, he'd do anything to learn it.

Continuing on as they were, the team would hit their next wall soon. Their recent skill orb acquisitions had bought them a little more time—another ten comfortable floors or so—but the ceiling was bearing down on them. Just when they had been fumbling in the dark about what to do next, suddenly it felt like they were at last grasping something tangible.

"*At our current rate, we'll probably be old men and women before we even see a massive-depth's lowest floors.*" An unusual look of tiredness flashed across Simon's face. He fell silent.

"*So that's why you signed us up for their training program?*" Natalie asked.

"*More or less.*"

The afternoon tea service was just about drawing to a close. In the distance, the jovial voices of other patrons had vanished, and a pronounced silence filled the void.

"*So, Cathy,*" Simon said, looking up and turning to his backup team member.

"*Sir!*" Cathy responded, having been caught off guard.

"*You keep a good eye on Yoshimura, you hear? Like a hawk.*"

It was all Cathy could manage to silently nod her head.

Annotations:

***Forty-Five Dollars*:** The price of the Park Hyatt Tokyo Peak Lounge's Signature Afternoon Tea. Raised from four thousand yen to five thousand yen in June 2019, but at the time of this story, the price remained four thousand yen. At the time, one dollar was about 109 yen. The eight percent consumption tax and five percent service fee aren't included in the price, so look out.

Incidentally, the note about the mid-service petit fours and finger food being all-you-can-eat is only written in Japanese on the menu, not present in the English. Whether that's because the hotel assumes it would be common knowledge to English-speakers or because they don't trust tourists to eat within healthy moderation shall remain an eternal mystery.

***USMC*:** United States Marine Corps. Cathy was originally a member of the USMC before being dispatched to the US Dungeon Strike Force.

***Semper Fi!*:** The motto of the US Marine Corps. Short for "semper fidelis," meaning "always faithful."

January 7, 2019

Yoyogi-Hachiman, Office

Leaning forward on the couch, Naruse kept her eyes glued to the TV, on which feeds from different channels flashed one after another in the lower-right-corner picture-in-picture display.

“Every station’s talking about D-Powers.”

We must have checked a dozen channels, and nearly all the broadcast networks were filled with talking heads spouting wild ideas about our company and orb auctions. Given its astronomical price, Otherworldly Language Comprehension received particular attention.

“After Miyoshi went through so much trouble at the press conference to not touch on the auctions at all.” Naruse sighed.

“Yeah, but it’s an easy way to grab viewers’ attention,” I observed.

Picking and choosing which footage best suited the topic and direction of conversation was as old a news tactic as there was.

“They’re talking a lot about telepathy too,” Naruse responded.

“Probably because it’s blowing up online.”

At least one channel had also contacted the National Center Test, and was alluding to the problems facing the exam.

“Ah, we’re going to start getting even more applications to our first-time explorer seminars,” Naruse sighed.

Even though the JDA had increased their number of first-time explorer seminars recently, each session had still been booked full.

“Ah, come on. Enough people know about the telepathy exploits already that demand probably can’t pick up too much more.”

“The kinds of people who watch daytime TV are a completely different set from the kind who actively seek information on the web. We’re probably going

to get another crop of helicopter parents pushing their kids into it in order to get them an advantage...”

I see. For minors to get a D-Card, they need their legal guardians’ permission. Parents who hadn’t heard about the advantages of D-Cards before might start permitting their children to get them now.

“Hm. The supposed food drops that occur once worldwide explorers hit five hundred million and the mineral drops from Mining are starting to hit the airwaves too. You can see it in the number of hits on Heavens Leaks, which have skyrocketed recently...right?”

Looking over to Miyoshi, who was supposed to be checking the website, I was met with the face of a half-dead, exhausted zombie.

“Kei... Listen to this.”

Zombie-Miyoshi came and plopped herself down on the couch next to me, sitting with her arms wrapped around her knees.

“As soon as the company launch press conference was over, I got a call from home.”

“And?”

“To sum it up, it was basically ‘We saw you on TV. Everything okay?’”

That’s parental instinct for you, I guess. They’d instantly recognized Miyoshi even through her disguise.

“Did they bother you about what your plans were?”

“Thankfully not...”

“Going straight from having to worry about you quitting your job to seeing you on the news founding a company... I guess that’d be a different kind of worry on its own.”

“It’s not just that. The prices from our orb auctions are being reported right alongside news about the press conference...”

“Estimating the auction fees did feel like a little much...”

“What can you do though? It’s a story that’s sure to turn heads.”

“So, what’d you say?”

“I said we’d just leased a space, so we weren’t making that much money yet, that I was, you know, okay, etc., and left it at that.” Miyoshi unfolded her legs, stretching out sideways and kicking the heels of her feet into my thighs. “The problem was *after* that! I’ve started getting all these calls from people I’ve never met claiming to be my relatives!”

I was going to ask how they’d managed to find her phone number, but if they really were relatives, it wouldn’t be strange that they knew it. Doubly so if they were older folks from the countryside and more reliant on keeping written phone numbers.

“They try to cajole you out of cash?”

“No. They probably knew that even with a family member, they couldn’t get away with that right off the bat. Ugh, I wish that they had though. At least then I could have shut them down. Instead it was like they were dancing around trying to ask how much money I was making.”

“Even the great Wiseman’s at a loss for how to turn away previously unknown relatives who come knocking at her door.”

“From Orb Hunter to Wiseman,” Naruse grinned. “Not many people can claim to have multiple monikers.”

Miyoshi rolled herself over, lying on her stomach on the couch, and shot Naruse a glare.

“I’m not the only one with an alias. Did you know they’re calling you The Interpreter online?”

“What? Really?”

“Both Russia and America have come out and said they have nothing to do with Heaven’s Leaks, so that means the site’s content’s being provided by some anonymous third party. They’re calling whoever that mysterious person is ‘The Interpreter.’”

“Miyoshi, if word about the hellhounds ever gets out, you can probably expect a third nickname,” I pointed out.

“Give me a break already,” Miyoshi pouted. “I was fine just being me!”

Putting her head in her hands, Miyoshi shot a telepathic message to me.

You know you’re also called The Phantom*, right?*

If anyone ever found out about my storage skill, I guess I could expect a second sobriquet too.

Great. An alliance of aliases.

What a strange journey it’d been. Four months since starting, and our office had become a clubhouse for people with enough pseudonyms to seem like they had a career in international espionage.

“By the way, Kei, until all the heat dies down, you’d better wear a disguise going diving.”

“What? Why?”

“Maybe you’re not aware, but your face is making the rounds among media types right now too, in connection to one Ryoko Saito.”

“Seriously?!”

Naruse grinned. “You’ve been becoming a minor celebrity lately. Didn’t you know? Although in your case it’s mostly for being a bit touched.”

“‘A bit touched’?”

“You spent a month going in and out of Yoyogi and diving in casual street clothes, remember?”

“Ah, *that*?!”

I’d been trying not to stand out, but being spotted with Iori and Simon in that getup had apparently been my big—break?

“Dang it. I don’t want to wear disguises. Wouldn’t ordinary gear that just lets us blend in with everyone else be enough?”

We’d bought beginner-explorer equipment sets and everything.

“I used that makeup-caked getup at the press conference, so *I* ought to be fine!” Miyoshi puffed out her chest pridefully. “Everyone will be after someone

with glasses and hair down to her waist like a Japanese doll!”

“You seem like you’re enjoying this,” Naruse observed.

“Well, we try to make enjoying life to its fullest our mantra around here,” I replied. “By the way, Naruse, what’ve you got going on now?”

Until we discovered a new inscription, there wouldn’t be any work in particular for her connected to Heaven’s Leaks.

“Yoshimura, I *am* an employee of the JDA, I’ll remind you.”

“No, I know that, but—”

“We have the National Center Exam plans, management of orb and item information to maintain—I can’t just sit around here waiting for more work. Ah! By the way, I’ve also been tasked with looking into the identity of this mysterious ‘Interpreter.’”

Miyoshi and I exchanged glances and burst out laughing.

“That’s not all. We’ve also gotten a number of requests for appraisals and introductions to Miyoshi pouring in. And it’s only been one day.”

Miyoshi scrunched up her face and flung herself back down prostrate onto the sofa.

“I guess we’ll help out with items and orbs that seem like they might be dangerous,” she grumbled, “but everything else is a hard pass.”

“I thought you’d say that. In that case, it might be for the best to not show your face around the JDA for a while.”

“Why’s that?”

“Apparently Executive Director Mizuho’s been boasting that he’s a personal acquaintance of Miyoshi’s.”

Uh-oh. Ignoring that the conference had been hosted at the behest of the JDA, letting that blowfish take advantage of having hosted didn’t sit well with me.

“Urgh, Kei. Maybe we’d better lay low for a while.”

“But where? And anyway, we’ve already got a visitor scheduled for today.”

“A visitor?”

I explained who was supposed to be coming to a visibly confused Naruse.

“I’ve invited over the person who I thought might be the most knowledgeable out of all the people we know about a topic we discussed yesterday.”

***

Naruse had left for Ichigaya and Miyoshi was cleaning up dishes when she called out as if a sudden thought had just struck her.

“Kei, I forgot to mention, but I got a call from old Enoki earlier. He was asking if I’d help appraise a certain material.”

“Ah, he must have seen you on TV. I guess we can’t help being outed to former acquaintances.”

“I did use my real name...”

Some people we’d rather not hear from would already have our contact information on hand. *What a pain.*

“‘All your old coworkers are struggling because of you, so you could at least pay us back by helping out!’ was the gist of his request.”

“Man, that guy never changes. At least some things are constant in life. But if it’s just ordinary materials appraisal, wouldn’t that be something for the physical properties research project team?”

“That was your old project team, right?”

“Yeah. They were constantly threatening to cut the project while I was there. Said it didn’t turn enough profit. Wonder what happened to change their tune.”

“Maybe they realized they couldn’t sell products using dungeon materials without properly analyzing said dungeon materials?”

“That’d be the day.” I wasn’t sure what had changed Enoki’s philosophy around, but sometimes people do see the light. “So, what’d you say?”

“Basically, ‘Not my problem.’”

“Phew. Bet Enoki was pissed.”

“I’m not his employee anymore. Even he knows he can’t blow up over the phone.”

Although, Miyoshi added with a shrug, she had sensed a sort of quiet, seething anger.

“But man, Appraisal. If even the JDA’s being bombarded with requests, maybe we should think of a way for you to use it for some kind of public contribution. We don’t want to be pariahs.”

“How about I publish my appraisals of orbs and items?”

“Maybe! If we just do it through the JDA though, it might not be clear the information is coming from us. Maybe we could have them build some kind of ‘Azusa’s Item of the Day’ feature onto the site?” I chuckled.

“Whatever. People can think what they want, but...okay. What if I started a YouTube channel like, ‘The Bureau of Item Appraisals’? That’d be sure to rake in the hits. We’d make bank!”

“You seriously want to become a YouTuber?”

“Maybe in my next life. Then again maybe not.”

“Just about sums it up.”

“But if I did it using the same outfit as the press conference, it really seems like I could cement a brand!”

“Are you trying to become the world’s first real VTuber?”

“I have no idea what that word even means anymore.”

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Message Board [This Time...] D-Powers 170 [Mining?!]

1: Anonymous Explorer ID: P12xx-xxxx-xxxx-2237

From out of nowhere, the ridiculously named D-Powers appears and begins auctioning off orbs.

Are they swindlers? Or saviors of the world?

Next thread at 930.

2: Anonymous Explorer

second post!

3: Anonymous Explorer

Mining tiiiiime!

4: Anonymous Explorer

Whoa, no advance notice, no warning, just all of a sudden “Mining Auction”! Are they crazy?

5: Anonymous Explorer

azusa is love, azusa is life

6: Anonymous Explorer

What’s happening?

7: Anonymous Explorer

The auction started just now.

8: Anonymous Explorer

They’re already doing it again?!!

9: Anonymous Explorer

They put up Mining orbs. Two of them!

10: Anonymous Explorer

D-Powers must have a provider within the explorers diving the 18th floor.

11: Anonymous Explorer

Shouldn’t that let us narrow it down and discover their source?

Or, wait, there are like a bajillion explorers from all over the world diving there right now, huh?

12: Anonymous Explorer

From totally abandoned to the hottest floor around. What a glow up.

13: Anonymous Explorer

couldn’t we just pull the explorer lists from the day before the exchange is made?

14: Anonymous Explorer

lol who the hell’s going to do that work?

15: Anonymous Explorer

with all these explorers running around the 18th floor, maybe we'll finally find out what's up with its peak

---

16: Anonymous Explorer

You mean the off-limits zone?

17: Anonymous Explorer

for it to be marked off-limits on the map, something really bad must have happened during the initial exploration of the floor. Something like poison gas, or a completely insane boss monster.

18: Anonymous Explorer

Maybe there's an exposed bed of uranium

19: Anonymous Explorer

>18 lol That's it!

20: Anonymous Explorer

The genomos which drop Mining are supposed to be subterranean. There's no reason to approach the mountain peak.

21: Anonymous Explorer

No country on earth has managed to get a copy of Mining yet, and D-Powers is putting up two! how the hell do these guys do it?

22: Anonymous Explorer

Wait, remember? The JDA published that info on a vanadium drop confirmed with Mining on the twentieth floor. Someone has it.

23: Anonymous Explorer

but we haven't heard anything since then

24: Anonymous Explorer

So what?

25: Anonymous Explorer

someone got their hands on Mining, and we got that info when Yoyogi had already been explored down to the 21st floor. Why stop at the 20th? If you had the orb, wouldn't you want to see what the

drops were on the next floor?

26: Anonymous Explorer

Okay, that is weird. The monsters are supposed to be around the same strength on both the 20th and 21st floors too, so it’s not like that would hold them back

---

27: Anonymous Explorer

Hold on, the 20th floor is snowcap mountains, and the 21st is a swamp. Maybe the skill owner is just allergic to water?

28: Anonymous Explorer

water allergy lol

29: Anonymous Explorer

lol not in a million years, plus wouldn’t the snow be just as bad?

But maybe they did try and whatever drop they got was just too crazy to publish?

30: Anonymous Explorer

After already revealing the vanadium drop for the twentieth? The cat’s already out of the bag. That’s already crazy enough that staying silent on later drops wouldn’t do anything to quell public speculation

---

31: Anonymous Explorer

But hey, ignoring Mining for a minute, I’m curious about Accelerated Growth too

---

32: Anonymous Explorer

It has the results from Appraisal written on the site too. Apparently it gets you 2x experience intake

---

33: Anonymous Explorer

Double experience? Best item!

34: Anonymous Explorer

But it also caps your growth

35: Anonymous Explorer

damn

36: Anonymous Explorer

:((((whaaaat no, stat caps whyyyyy

37: Anonymous Explorer

But according to the info, the cap’s higher than the level projected for all known top explorers

---

38: Anonymous Explorer

Wait, so we could shoot up to the level of Dmitrij and Simon at twice the speed they did? Best orb is best

---

39: Anonymous Explorer

If the info is correct, anyway

40: Anonymous Explorer

Hey, it’s Wiseman. I think we can believe what she’s written >39

Unless it’s some kind of weird trap

41: Anonymous Explorer

You guys don’t have to worry about that. You’ll never get your hands on it anyway lol

---

42: Anonymous Explorer

Yeah, well, neither will you!

43: Anonymous Explorer

Water Magic’s really shot up in value thanks to Team I’s exploits

---

44: Anonymous Explorer

Team I’s exploits? >43

45: Anonymous Explorer

Didn’t you hear? Team I recently got through four more floors to reach the 25th. Read the news

---

46: Anonymous Explorer

Huh. But what’s that got to do with Water Magic?

47: Anonymous Explorer

The JSDF bought that Water Magic orb D-Powers put on auction a while back. Lt. Kimitsu talked about it playing a big role in their team pushing through the next four floors

---

48: Anonymous Explorer

Ah, so it's combat-proven, huh?

49: Anonymous Explorer

I heard orbs without roman numerals were supposed to be harder to use

---

50: Anonymous Explorer

Yeah, but if you get good with them, they're even more powerful than numbered ones. It's easier to get ones with numerals, but they're locked into set uses.

51: Anonymous Explorer

You can use the non-numeral ones for lots of different techniques. Source: Team I

52: Anonymous Explorer

Apparently just not needing to take water along has been a big help, since it freed up space for other equipment

---

53: Anonymous Explorer

Water's necessary but weighs a ton, huh.

Wait, hold on, so you can drink the water from Water Magic??

54: Anonymous Explorer

Apparently the water from the Create Water technique is pure and completely potable.

55: Anonymous Explorer

If you have enough MP, you can even take showers with it.

56: Anonymous Explorer

So somewhere in a dungeon, Iori is...??? (gulp)

57: Anonymous Explorer

Don't even say it!! >56

How dare you put these impure thoughts in my head!!! >>>>:(

58: Anonymous Explorer

So have they revealed the route down to the 25th floor?

59: Anonymous Explorer

Yup. Already public.

60: Anonymous Explorer

Then that makes the mystery of whatever the person with the first Mining is doing even weirder.

61: Anonymous Explorer

Maybe they just, uh, don't want to attract much attention?

62: Anonymous Explorer

What kind of person becomes an explorer, let alone one who could get all the way down to the 20th floor, without wanting to attract much attention?

63: Anonymous Explorer

About the only private explorers I can think of who can hang out around Floor 20 are Team Shibu

---

64: Anonymous Explorer

Those guys are the definition of glory hogs!

65: Anonymous Explorer

Trust me, they're gonna come up handing out free ingots any minute.

66: Anonymous Explorer

Stop it! My sides hurt from laughing!

67: Anonymous Explorer

Okay, enough talk about Shibu-T. Please stick to the topic of the thread.

Yoyogi-Hachiman, Office

"*So what's up? When you called yesterday and said you had something to ask me, I figured I'd come over right away.*" Requesting a fresh cup of coffee from Miyoshi, Simon leaned forward on our couch. "*This have something to do with your bootcamp?*"

I shook my head. Negative. I decided to just rip off the bandage and get right into it.

"*Do you know anything about an American researcher—Dr. Tylor?*"

“*Tylor? Dr. Theodore Nanase Tylor?*”

“*That’s correct.*”

Simon leaned back on the couch and crossed one leg over the other.

“*Dr. Theodore Nanase Tylor. Forty-seven at time of death. A particle physicist.*” Simon spoke as if dredging up some ancient memory. *“In charge of a particle acceleration research facility built under Groom Lake in Area 51, Nevada. Height...just over five-feet eight-inches. On the shorter side of the American average.*”

Miyoshi brought over the coffee. Simon took a luxurious whiff of it before bringing the cup to his lips. Taking a sip, a satisfied smile spread across his face.

“*He was dedicated to his research, though maybe a bit of a strange duck depending on who you asked. Still, he was well-liked by his colleagues. Apparently everyone called him‘Ted.’*” Simon returned his cup to his saucer and set it on the table.

“*Are you sure he’s deceased?*”

“*What d’ya mean? You know about the accident back then, right?*”

“*A dungeon appeared in the middle of a large-scale particle accelerator experiment. The facility was destroyed, and the tunnels used for the accelerator turned into the dungeon itself.*”

“*That’s right. Listen, I saw video feed from rescue attempts performed right after the incident occurred. Trust me, if anyone survived that, they’d have to have been from Krypton. Anyone alive after the initial dungeon genesis was monster chow.*”

“*Was a body ever found?*”

“*Why’re you asking me this?*” Simon narrowed his gaze.

Turning away, I let out a light sigh, then took the tablet showing the translation of the final *Book of Wanderers* page from Miyoshi, and passed it over to him.

“*This is a dungeon inscription we found. It hasn’t been uploaded to Heaven’s Leaks*.”

Simon took the tablet, silently reading over the contents on the screen.

"*You're absolutely positive this came from the dungeon?*" he asked.

"*Between you and me, this came from the Wandering Manor. But we can't confirm whether the signature is real.*"

"*Hold on. Is this what all those questions from Naruse to Monica were about?*"

So they had *been monitoring Monica's contact. Monica is an extra-special VIP, so it figures.*

"*Did Naruse ask Monica to look into this?*"

"*Not directly. It was just an ordinary business chat.*" Simon spoke as if knowing the contents of someone else's emails was the most normal thing in the world.

"*We've been racking our brains over whether we should upload this. Hence running it by you first.*"

"*Azusa, can I get another cup of joe?*" Simon asked.

"*Of course. Kei?*"

"*In that case, me too.*"

"*Roger.*"

Seeing Miyoshi disappear into the kitchen, Simon leaned forward and began speaking in a hushed tone.

"*Does this room have any measures against bugging? Wiretapping?*"

"*Come on,*" I responded. "*You know the answer to that.*"

According to Secret Agent Tanaka, our neighborhood was crawling with spies from foreign intelligence agencies. There was no way that network didn't include spies sending intelligence back to the US president, which meant there was no way Simon's team wasn't being briefed.

"*Well, if we haven't managed to crack this egg, I guess it's safe to assume other countries haven't either. Knock on wood.*" Simon grinned. "*What I'm about to say is off the record. Need-to-know, and no one but you needs to know.*"

"*G-Got it...*" I stammered.

"*To answer your question from a minute ago, no, we never confirmed a body. More specifically, even though the control room was supposed to be crowded with personnel, we never confirmed any remains at all.*"

"*You mean no one ever went in to check, or...?*"

Simon shook his head slightly, then continued.

"*Just after the incident, an Air Force squadron went in for a rescue operation. Area 51 is originally an Air Force installation.*

"*The elevators leading down into the research facility were completely wrecked, so at first they tried going in through an emergency exit located on the west side of Bald Mountain. However...*"

"*However...?*"

"*They were met with a troll-like creature that immediately forced them out.*" Simon shrugged. "*As a result, rescue efforts were forestalled. We couldn't even get in through the emergency exits.*"

"*The DSF was originally formed as a strike force to help with that rescue, right?*" I inquired.

"*That's right. But it takes time to set up a team—especially when the enemy is unknown. We didn't even know what kind of equipment it would be necessary to bring.*

"*Busting in unprepared would only have resulted in more casualties. Ultimately by the time we got in, two weeks had passed since the incident.*"

"*Then the control room...?*"

"*Yeah, we went. Just in case.*" Simon closed his eyes, deep in recollection. "*The way The Ring is structured, there are tunnels for personnel movement running alongside the main accelerator. Those tunnels are connected to the particle acceleration rings every twenty meters*.

"*The personnel tunnels are about five meters wide, which wasn't enough space to bring in an Abrams. However, we could just about fit an M113 Stryker NBCRV mounted with an M2-equipped CROW through the vertical ventilation*

shaft by the emergency exit."

The M113 Stryker NBCRV (Nuclear, Biological, Chemical Reconnaissance Vehicle) was a military detection and surveillance vehicle deployed to sites thought to be at risk from nuclear, biological, or chemical contamination. The M2 was a 12.7 millimeter heavy machine gun, and the CROW referred to a mountable structure rigged to fire an M2 remotely.

"*Of course there was no such thing as making a U-turn with the Stryker, but not knowing what the situation was like inside, we had to send some sort of reconnaissance vehicle in. 'Course we were mainly grateful to have a way to bring in M2s. Looking back, getting a piece of ace-in-the-hole equipment like the Stryker brought in without a whimper from brass spoke to just how dire the situation was.*

"*After that, the rest of our equipment was standard army gear. We had a cargo of M141 BDMs and AT-4s towed in. We'd heard 5.56 millimeter rounds hadn't left a scratch on the first monster the Air Force unit had encountered.*"

The M141 BDM was a single-use rocket-launcher, and the AT-4 referred to a recoilless, disposable antitank weapon. They were weapons suitable for use even on lower dungeon floors, but as single-fire weapons weighing nearly seven kilograms, it was hard to imagine their having any practical use outside of this specific scenario.

"*So what'd you do once you entered?*"

"*We sped through the personnel tunnels as fast as we could. We were worried about the place collapsing.*

"*Luckily the reconnaissance info didn't show any risk of contamination, but there were still plenty of monsters to deal with. Even using upgraded FN Herstals, our M2 barrels were taking a beating.*

"*Thinking back on it, the monsters may have been drawn in by the engine noise, but all of us were so frantic, no one noticed at the time.*

"*The strange thing was, the further we went in, the weaker the monsters seemed to get, so once we were past the first area, progress was smooth-sailing. Eventually, we reached the main facility entrance.*

“*The lights were out and it was pitch-black. The door was unlocked, but as far as we could tell with our flashlights, there was no sign a struggle took place.*

“*More’n anything, it’d been two weeks since the incident. We were prepared for the smell of decomposing bodies, you know. Not only was there* not *the pungent smell of dead bodies, there was hardly the scent of dust in the air. In fact if there was any smell, it was almost...fresh.*”

“‘*Fresh’?*’”

“*Like the scent of ruptured ozone after a lightning strike. I don’t know.*

“*Anyway, keeping our wits about us, we searched all the surrounding rooms, then made our way deeper in.*”

According to Simon’s story, no fighting seemed to have taken place within the main facility. Even though the tunnels outside had been crawling with monsters, none seemed to have gone inside. On top of that, the dozens of site staff who should have been working inside were apparently nowhere to be found.

“*We figured maybe the personnel had all evacuated together to some other room.*” Simon was walking back through his memories as if tracing the rim of a cup. “*Not finding them anywhere else, we finally decided to move to the control room.*”

“*Was the control room the furthest in?*”

“*No, but it was locked, so we’d decided to save it for last.*”

“‘*Locked’*?”

“*The control room had a mechanism to lock it from the inside whenever an experiment was in progress so that no one else could enter.*”

“*And from the outside?*”

“*No way to open it. Under normal circumstances.*”

“*So you figured the staff holed up in there?*”

“*Well, yeah. It made sense. Unfortunately, when we knocked there was no answer.*”

“*So what’d you do? Did you bust in?*”

“*We blew open the door with a breaching-use rifle grenade. Ordinary slugs wouldn’t dent it.*

“*We were prepared for a pretty gruesome scene. Even if the staff had made it away from the monsters, they’d been left without food and water for two weeks, all crammed up into one room. I don’t need to spell out what we were thinking.*”

“*Yeah...*”

People had been known to turn to cannibalism under conditions less grim than that.

“*However, what we found inside was...*”

Simon paused for a moment, then looked me in the eyes.

“*What we found inside was, there wasn’t anyone there. It was like everyone had vanished into thin air. We didn’t find a single body. No remains.*”

“*The room only locked from inside?*”

“*The room only locked from inside.*”

“*But there was no one there?*”

“*Not a soul.*”

“*Ventilation shafts?*”

“*We checked, but there were no signs anyone had entered them. Plus, they were still shut when we got there.*”

“*Maybe something—a slime or something—got in through a ventilation shaft and melted all the bodies away.*”

“*There’d still be some kind of sign of a struggle—something to indicate everyone had been hiding out inside. There was nothing in that room but an undisturbed layer of dust.*”

“*Maybe they’d escaped the control room, and were wandering around the tunnels somewhere?*”

Simon prefaced by noting that shouldn’t be possible while the control room remained locked, then continued.

“*The tunnels immediately surrounding the control room were equivalent to a dungeon’s first floor. And the further out you got, the deeper the floors got. The emergency exit we entered through would already have been the equivalent of several dungeon floors deep.*”

In other words, at only a few floors deep—in the traditional sense—the dungeon was already crawling with monsters resistant to all but M2s and AT-4s. In terms of Yoyogi, it would be like starting from deeper than the twentieth floor.

There was no reason to think too deeply about it. A team of scientists, untrained for combat, and furthermore moving in a large group, could never have gotten through.

Just then, a thought struck me.

All we had wanted to check was whether there was a possibility Dr. Tylor was still alive. What had happened at The Ring beyond that was of no concern to us. Of course I was interested, but...



“*To get the record straight for a second, you* didn’t *confirm Dr. Tylor’s body*.”

“*Judging from the situation, I can say he’s as good as dead, but as far as physical evidence...unconfirmed.*”

“*Then this inscription...*”

“*Is what you’re trying to suggest that Dr. Tylor made use of some kind of hidden tunnel in The Ring to escape to the Wandering Manor, or some other dungeon somewhere? Is that it?*”

“*There were passages in and out from the surface.*”

“*Not possible.*”

From the time of the incident, activity at Area 51 had been monitored with even more scrutiny than usual.

Entrances to the facility were limited, and since they’d now been transformed into dungeon entrances in addition, they were subject to twenty-four-hour surveillance. It would have been impossible for an individual to slip out unnoticed, let alone a whole group of staff.

“*Anyway, I’m not trying to suggest any particular thing. I’m just trying to ascertain what kind of shocks we’d be in for if we uploaded this inscription to the net.*”

Simon seemed lost in thought for a moment.

“*I’m just thinking out loud here, but...*”

“*‘Thinking out loud’? What is this all of a sudden?*”

Simon continued as if he hadn’t even heard me.

“*The* official *story for three years ago is that a dungeon formed in the middle of an experiment... But looking at the records, it seems more like a dungeon spawned as the* result *of an experiment.*”

“*What?!*”

What’s that supposed to mean?! If that were true, it would mean that America was responsible for all the disasters brought about by dungeon genesis, wouldn’t it?!

"*But hey, that's just me thinking out loud. Doesn't mean anything.*" He looked up as if just now noticing I was still there.

"*So in conclusion?*"

"*Might be best to keep that translation to yourself for right now. Along with the rest of our conversation today.*"

"*Why trust us with this?*"

"*Because you'd publish that sucker if I didn't, knowing the two of you. And I can't imagine that leading to good results for either yourselves* or *Uncle Sam.*"

"*And supposing we're suddenly spurred on by a sense of journalistic justice, willing to sacrifice our own safety in the name of the ideals of truth?*"

"*Yeah, that's not gonna happen. You're reckless, but you're not so stupid you don't know where that kind of shortsighted impetuousness leads. If you were, you wouldn't have asked me in the first place. Isn't that right, Yoshimura?*" A sly grin crossed his face.

"*Thanks...I guess.*"

"*I'm beginning to understand why brass was making such a fuss about obtaining Otherworldly Language Comprehension, and so rattled when Heaven's Leaks popped up. Some of the information in dungeons can be hazardous.*"

"*So what are you going to do now that you've seen the inscription?*"

"*For right now, I'm gonna take your training program. Then I'm gonna get my hands on Mining. Maybe if the opportunity crops up, I'll even pay Dr. Tylor a visit.*"

For better or worse, you could count on Simon to remain unwaveringly focused on the task at hand. He wouldn't stick his nose into business outside of his work.

We, on the other hand—lately it felt like we had our hands in just about every pot we could manage. We were stretching our interests too thin. *Or, no! This is what they call adaptability! Multitasking! That's it!*

"*So...is that it?*" I asked.

“*I reckon it is. Azusa’s coffee truly is the best. Mind if I come around for another cup again soon?*”

“*Any time.*”

“*Thanks. Well then, I’m heading back. As soon as the boot camp schedule’s settled, give me a call right away.*”

Simon got up, shook my hand, and walked out of the office, seemingly in high spirits.

What does he think this place is, a café?!

“Seems like that inscription’s contents are even more dangerous than we thought,” Miyoshi, who had been listening, commented.

“Tell me about it. That last *Book of Wanderers* page doesn’t appear to have any essential information for dungeon exploration, so let’s hold off on publishing it for now.”

“All of a sudden we’re kind of faced with an identity crisis for Heaven’s Leaks, huh?”

“Heaven’s Leaks’ purpose is unveiling information with enough care so as not to totally disrupt world order. As far as I’m concerned, there’s no problem.”

When providing material for someone to use as the basis for a decision, there was no such thing as harmful information—everything would provide further evidence to take into consideration. However, this wasn’t material for decision-making. It was at worst potentially libelous, and at any rate left plenty of room for pushback on its veracity alone. It had been found written in *Klingon* of all things.

It was all too easy to envision accusations that we’d inserted the Tylor addendum on our own in order to discredit America.

At the present time, it didn’t seem like there existed a team alive who could conduct a thorough study of The Ring either, given the strength of the monsters apparently lurking inside.

About all we could do for the time being was to keep our mouths shut. No one would be particularly hurt, nor gain, from our doing so. It wasn’t fair to ask

any more of us small folks.

Miyoshi thought for a minute, then looked up with a smirk.

“Okay, but I leave the explanation of all of this to Naruse up to you.”

“Why me?!”

“There are parts of the conversation I didn’t hear, right?”

“Guh! You really thought that through.”

“Anyway, I’ve noted that this page is to be tucked away for safekeeping for right now.”

An explanation to Naruse...

She’d been wavering on whether or not to publish the inscription herself, so the problem wouldn’t be our decision. The problem would be how far to explain the reasoning behind it. If I didn’t explain the whole thing, it would be difficult to get her to understand America’s jumpiness, or the precarious position publishing it would put us in...

It didn’t seem like a decision on this was going to come easily.

Annotations:

***Upgraded FN Herstals*:** FN Herstal is a Belgian arms maker. Known for creating an M2 with an easily exchangeable barrel—the M2HB-QCB (M2 Heavy Barrel-Quick Change). Doesn’t require manual adjustment of the headspace or timing after the barrel heats up either.

Epilogue

JDA Headquarters, Ichigaya

Finishing reading the materials which had been sent over by Miharu, Saiga glanced up at the petite woman sitting across from him on the other side of a visitor-reception table.

What the hell am I supposed to do with this?

The materials had been sent over from the director of the GIJ—the Gemological Institute of Japan. They contained a written recommendation—if one could quite call it that—concerning one of the GIJ's employees. Really, rather than any recommendation letter Saiga had ever seen, the document struck an almost pleading tone. Furthermore, reading between the lines, it almost seemed to be begging for Saiga to *not* accept.

"Erm... Komugi Rokujo, was it?"

"Yes, sir."

"Well, I've read over your materials. You'd like to obtain a copy of Mining, followed by an escort to the twentieth floor?"

"Actually, I'll have to go even lower than the twentieth floor, sir."

"Excuse me?"

Speaking passionately, as one would of a childhood dream, Rokujo opened up about her interest stemming from a request the GIJ had recently received from the JDA.

Apparently, the gemstone she'd encountered during that appraisal had left quite an impact, and, knowing it had been produced by the dungeons, she decided she had to dive into them to see more.

There was a sense of ordained duty in the way she spoke, a resolve unseen among ordinary people.

"I'm afraid the twentieth floor is simply out of the question. That's nearly the

deepest level of Yoyogi yet cleared. We can't approve ordinary civilians going down there, especially alone. We hope you'll understand our position."

"That's all right."

Rokujo was wearing a smile. Saiga couldn't help but wonder *what*, exactly, was all right.

"I saw the press conference the other day, on the news," Rokujo continued. "They said anyone who showed strong initiative could receive a skill orb. They even mentioned Mining."

The press conference? D-Powers? Was the GIJ director actually asking Saiga to facilitate Rokujo's introduction?

However, they had asked for strong initiative and *skill*. Was Rokujo some kind of high-ranking explorer? Saiga had never heard her name...

"Well then, Ms. Rokujo, perhaps if you could explain some of your history as an explorer."

"I don't have any. I was just about to get my D-Card."

"I'm sorry?" Saiga blinked.

She was going to get Mining and head down to the twentieth floor *as a rank amateur*?

"But it's all right! Really!"

Now hold on a minute. What's *all right about any of this?*

"Naruse told me something would work out."

Who told you?! Naruse, don't just throw these problem cases my way!

However, the GIJ and JDA had strong ties. It wouldn't do for Saiga to ignore an official request from its director—no matter how strange he found its content or tone. Still, the problem remained—could someone who was just now going to pick up their D-Card really make their way to the twentieth floor on short notice? *Maybe* with D-Powers' support...

Come to think of it, this might be the perfect opportunity to learn a thing or two about how the boot camp training program worked.

The way the camp had been explained, it was intended for intermediate explorers. However, if it could make something of a total beginner like Rokujo, their regimen might be even more useful than previously thought.

In addition, it could provide an opportunity for learning more about D-Powers as a whole.

“Understood. I’ll clear your introduction to D-Powers. However, I can’t guarantee whether you’ll actually be able to make it to the twentieth floor.”

“Fantastic! Thank you so much!”

Rokujo stood up with a bounce, and lowered her head in a bow.

In the face of her starry-eyed innocence, Saiga felt a pang of conscience.

Yoyogi-Hachiman, Office

The Ryoko Saito who graced us with her presence that afternoon wasn’t her usual poised self, but someone so flustered she shouted, “Coaaach! I need to speak to yoooou!” as soon as she walked through the door.

“What is this, all of a sudden?” I asked.

“Trouble!” she whined. “Oooh, this is really bad.”

“For who?”

“For me, of course! And maybe for you?”

Hold on a second. For me?!

“Look at this!” she continued. “Look!”

Saito held out a photo, showing me in full living color cradling her and Mitsurugi under my arms as we made our escape from the collapsing Wandering Manor.

“What?!” I shouted. “Where did this come from?!”

“That’s what I’ve been trying to say...”

Apparently Saito had been contacted by someone called Haruki Yoshida the other day, about a request to appear in something called a “pilot program.”

“‘Pilot program’?”

“Like a pitch for a TV show. A sample episode to see whether or not a show can get off the ground.”

“Hmmm. And?”

The role wasn’t even a drama, but an appearance in some kind of weird variety show, and furthermore one that wasn’t even confirmed to air. Naturally, she’d turned them down. However...

“They gave you this picture, am I right?”

She silently nodded.

Ordinarily, having our photos taken within the dungeon wouldn’t be a big deal, but this had the Manor in the background of the shot. That did seem likely to brew up a bit of a scandal. Still, given the photo quality, it would be difficult to claim with certainty that it had to be me and Saito. If push came to shove, we could argue it was simply a couple of look-alikes.

“About that, we actually did see the picture-takers back there though, right? I may have accidentally let that slip. Ugh, I’m so bad at acting.”

“Oh, come on!”

I couldn’t help but laugh at her choice of words.

“Listen,” I said. “Honestly, at this point it’s not really such a big deal if they caught us there. We can weather it. You definitely don’t need to agree to the pilot over something like that.”

“Whaaaat?!” Saito’s eyes went wide. “Y-You mean, Yoshimura, you didn’t actually care if this was kept secret?”

“Wait, don’t tell me...you already accepted the role?”

“Uuuugh, I’m so stupid! Why didn’t you tell me earlier?! I was seriously losing sleep over this!”

“But Saito,” Miyoshi called, bringing out cups of tea, “aren’t you still filming a movie? What are they going to do if you get hurt in the dungeon or something?”

“I had the same thought...”

She had at least one first-rank potion, but that still wasn’t enough to completely guarantee her safety.

“Is it too late to back out now?”

“I already signed an agreement...”

Wow, she really put herself out on a limb to protect our secrets. I’ll have to make it up to her somehow.

“Ah,” I mumbled. “I’m...really sorry you got dragged into this for my sake.”

Saito took one of the small sweets Miyoshi had brought out, and washed it down with some Japanese tea.

The reason we were serving Japanese tea instead of coffee for once, by the way, is because we’d gotten some hanabira-mochi—flower-petal mochi—from the Misakiya confectionery shop to pair it with.

Hanabira-mochi was a folded mochi leaflet resembling a flower petal, from which it took its name, originally inspired by sweets served at imperial court ceremonies. During the Meiji era, it had been popularized as the accompaniment of choice used in New Year’s tea ceremonies under the Urasenke tea ceremony school. Eventually, in addition to being popular around New Year’s, they had also taken on a connotation of early spring. The mochi paired mysteriously well with fillings of miso-simmered shaved burdock, sweet miso paste and even simmered fish, so in all it was a bit like eating a Kyoto-style New Year’s stew in the form of a sweet.

“Anyway, they say the filming for the pilot is supposed to take place on the tenth floor,” Saito continued.

“The tenth floor?!”

It made sense. If I were looking for sensational footage in Yoyogi, the tenth floor would be where I’d go. But weren’t they biting off a little more than they could chew? If they weren’t seasoned explorers, I’d be worried for the safety of the crew.

“I’ve never been down that far,” Saito whined, “and when I looked it up, it

seemed super scary. There are zombies and skeletons crawling around everywhere!”

“If you’re down there during the day and use an assimilation drug, you should be okay, but if you get into a skirmish...”

Saito’s main weapon was a bow. Using a bow meant relying on arrows, and against the hordes of the tenth floor, her arrows wouldn’t last long. If she had Storage, it would be another matter, but...

“Kei, why don’t you go with her?” Miyoshi suggestd.

“Huh? I don’t want to get involved in any filming. When it comes to safety, I’d probably just be in the way too.”

“Who said anything about being directly involved? You could trail her from behind, keeping an eye out.”

“What? You’d really do that for me?” Saito asked enthusiastically.

“Y-Yeah. I guess, if it’s just that...”

“All right! Yay! Yaaay! With Yoshimura around, I’ll be invincible!”

“Whoa, hold on, who said anything about ‘invincible’? You’ll still have to be care—”

“You were in that big spooky mansion and came out just fine, didn’t you? Plus you took down a ton of those icky eyeballs while you were running away. Come on, admit it. You’re way stronger than you look!”

“Better give in, Kei. Besides, this could be our chance.”

“Our chance? For what?”

“For your big debut!”

“My what?”

A devilish grin spread over Miyoshi’s face.

I have a bad feeling about this.

Afterword

Well, here we are. We've gone and gotten even further off track from the web novel. Who would have guessed what a tangled web I would weave? Who would have guessed this would be so much work?

There's an old Japanese poem about not knowing how strong feelings could be until successful completion of a tryst. Now I know what they meant! My feelings, too, have grown impossibly strong, Herculean even, compared to what they were when this volume's published contents were but a twinkle in my mind's eye. (Wait, no—maybe that poem doesn't apply here.) All this is to say, how's everyone doing this fine spring? Kono here. Pleased to make your acquaintance again.

I figure a lot of authors, stewing on their regrets, wind up spinning yarns about the paths their lives might have taken.

"The world is simple!" I once thought. "Get out there! Make bread!" (Delivered with the starry-eyed optimism of a Toshiko Endo manga protag.) I really was a young fool. Now I'm paying for my transgressions, believe me. The world's not so easy, you see.

After tinkering and toiling, doing patch-ups and full-scale remodeling on the house that was the web novel, I'd wound up with a manuscript far exceeding two hundred sixty thousand characters (for reference, an average novel page holds around five hundred characters). "What're ya, nuts?" they all asked, and so certain portions had to be shunted off to the next volume, and the pacing I'd envisioned was awry, and believe you me, the story of this volume is a story of suffering and tears.

What? I'm the only one crying?

Ah, no one knows how great the burden is but the one on whose shoulders it's borne. (I tell ya.) Like a fish floundering in the waves, like a traveler through the mountains, I crank hard on the steering wheel until I've become hopelessly lost—I float on, adrift. Where will the story take me next?

I'm truly in a hell of my own making, and even striking dramatic poses in the mirror like Yoshimura offers no relief (well duh). How many times have I greeted the hazy light of dawn with bitter laughter, having waited in vain for the muse to visit during the night?

But enough about me—this volume: We've seen the Haruki Yoshida Explorer Squad—not to be confused with the old TV serial *Hiroshi Kawaguchi Explorer Squad*—on the move, and with it, a major increase in Tenko's appearances.

That's fine. That's all well and good. But Tenko's increased presence has turned out to be a trap.

You see, bro, in Japanese, Tenko speaks with an over-the-top fake Kansai dialect. Writing this, it turns out, was unexpectedly hard. How hard? It's even more onerous than the first volume's Okinawan.

The Okinawan dialect I'm most familiar with is that of the Yaeyama Islands, which differs a bit from the main-island speech. Thus, the main-island dialect Leading Private Miyagusuku speaks in the first volume proved exceedingly difficult, but at least his role was fleeting, and he knew when to stay silent. Tenko, on the other hand... This guy never shuts up!

Incidentally, at least the generation of contemporary middle-schoolers in the Yaeyama Islands (I say middle-school because the region's sole high school is located in Ishigaki) have given up on the traditional Yaeyama dialect and tend to speak something closer to a mix of traditional dialect and modern standard Japanese. They can understand what their grandmothers are saying, but not necessarily speak it back. We often hear about experiences being able to write and read, but not speak, when learning foreign languages, but the idea of being able to comprehend but not replicate in one's own native language feels a bit unique. So it goes with shifting dialects. All those grandparents speaking the old tongues—they've got something else in their voice boxes—no mistake.

But I digress.

Coming up with Tenko's dialogue, I strayed a bit from your typical Yoshimoto dialect (which you often hear TV comedians use), to something like a weird mix of between Kyoto and Osaka and Harima. I wanted something that felt forced but also plausible. Ultimately...

“Brah, wouldn’t it justa been easier to go with somethin’ normal like Osaka dialect?”

“Brother, you know it.”

By the way, every speaker of Kansai dialect I know believes their region’s variation is the “normal” Kansai dialect. Add on all their individual vocabulary preferences and pronunciation quirks on top of that and Speaker A thinking something about the way Speaker B talks is just wrong is an everyday occurrence. Ultimately I have no idea which version is “normal” Kansai dialect, and apparently neither does anyone else. You guys are born right next door to each other! Can’t y’all figure it out?!

It’s too late for regrets, but now every time Tenko gets a scene, my room is a cacophony of wails and groans like a zombie convention is in town. And now I’ve gone and given him a bigger part. The zombie moans are only getting louder.

In a manga, if, say, a character’s long black hair proves troublesome to ink in, a simple haircut does the trick. With speaking patterns and dialogue though, there’s no simple solution through violence—there are no scissors for words. I never imagined I’d be causing myself such problems back when I introduced him. I just thought he’d be a colorful addition to the cast.

I’m truly in a hell of my own making, and even swooshing around a cape playing the disaffected cool-guy like Yoshimura offers no relief (well duh x2). To make matters worse, my long-suffering wife, stumbling across this ghastly scene, has stuck me with the nickname “gentleman creep.” (Couldn’t even manage “gentleman thief”? A guy gets no relief. Was it because other than the cape, I was only wearing a T-shirt and boxer shorts at the time?) Which brings me to—next volume, the moment you’re here for: We’ll finally get The Phantom’s big debut. The Phantom getup didn’t get to play much of a role in the web version, but I’ve built in more for it here, somewhat begrudgingly...

See, Kei’s chosen disguise may be all well and good while he’s skulking around in the dark, but the second he wears it in public, his identity’s going to be blown to Queen Shi and co. I’ve really stuck myself in a pickle...

Truly a hell of my own making. But even nibbling on the mushrooms I

received from my younger brother just before they could go bad (my brother grows mushrooms and at this point I'm no longer sure whether it counts as a hobby or a job), flopping down on the sofa, and concealing my talents from the world like a certain Yoshimura offers no relief (well duh x3). The sounds of my tossing and turning are the only things going bump in these nights.

Next time: After taking all the pains to rent out Yokohama, Kei and Miyoshi face their greatest crisis yet (probably). We get the behind-the-scenes development of the porters, the miraculous new dungeon technology (maybe). As the principles of dungeonizing are made public, Altum Foraminis finally launches an all out assault to obtain the secrets of immortali—wait, hold on, was that in the next volume? Let me check my notes...

A wrapping cloth becoming harder to fold the more times it has been folded can be expressed by the formula L=**π**t(2^n-1)6, where L is the length of the cloth, and n represents the maximum number of times it can be folded over itself. Ignoring the very reasonable protestation that no one just keeps folding them in half that many times, the point is that there's a limit.

So don't feel bad if you can't fold up everything you've spread out! (Or, wait—does that make any sense?) With that, I hope to see you next volume.