DGENESIS

WRITTEN BY
KONO Tsuranori
ILLUSTRATED BY
ttl

Three Years after the Dungeons Appeared



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They (magic and science) lure the weary enquirer, the footsore seeker,
on through the wilderness of disappointment in the present
by their endless promises of the future.

——— *The Golden Bough, vol.I chapter IV / James George Frazer*

Prologue

Chofugaoka, Chofu City, Tokyo

"But do I have to?"

"Don't give me the pouty act now. Are you listening, Ryoko? Every sigh is another bit of youthful vitality leaving the body."

"But Karen, I've never even touched a piano before."

Ryoko Saito's manager, Karen Hanabusa, was lecturing the young starlet on the importance of today's task. Ryoko, having been cast as a budding pianist for an upcoming TV role, had been scheduled to learn the basics of tickling the ivories—or at least how to convince audiences that she knew them.

Unfortunately, the extent of her piano experience involved seeing one from afar during music class and at grade-school assemblies.

"And that's what these lessons are for," Karen declared briskly.

"They're going to ADR over the scene anyway."

"And? Will ADR hide your posture? Your arm movements? Audio replacement will only go so far."

"But..."

It was true—Ryoko needed to study the performances of real pianists in order to sell the physicality of the scene. A close-up could be used for hand shots, but overall believability depended on her whole-body performance.

"You should communicate the very essence of a professional pianist even when the audio is off."

"Uuugh..."

From archery to piano—the list of skills Ryoko was supposed to acquire for the sake of acting seemed endless. Come to think of it, she could add dungeon exploration to that list too. Haruki Yoshida had called her excitedly just the other day.

Miyoshi's involvement had changed the format and structure of the dungeon program quite a bit, and bought Ryoko a bit more time before filming would begin. But judging by when the program was supposed to start airing, shooting would still have to start fairly soon. Oh well. She figured that train had already left the station. Nothing to do now but ride it.

"I've worked to find brief openings in your schedule between your upcoming archery tournaments. We'll do short lessons each time."

"If the piano lessons are too far apart," Ryoko responded, "I'll forget too much in the interim for them to do me any good."

"*Not* forgetting is something that separates the wheat from the chaff."

"What?!"

Ryoko was practically ready to tear her own hair out as the two passed through the building entrance.

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"So we're going to focus on learning performance basics, rather than having a proper piano lesson," the instructor, one Ikuko Nakamichi, confirmed. Nakamichi was a music school assistant professor, and a concert pianist in her own right.

"That's right," Ryoko responded.

It was hard for Nakamichi to work up much motivation for something that wasn't even a real lesson. Nevertheless, it had been hard for her to turn down a direct request through Sany Music, to which she owed quite a debt.

Today would otherwise have been her day off. She spent about twenty minutes going over the basics of posture and hand movement, as well as offering a few tips on performance.

"I guess my nails are a little long." Ryoko looked down at her hands, comparing them to Nakamichi's. Manicured nails extended past the tips of Ryoko's fingers. There was thankfully no need to keep them as long as she'd been asked to back in her pinup days, but she had still been told to keep the fingernail tips visible from all angles.

"No trimming them until after your current shoot is done," Karen reminded her.

Even Nakamichi knew there were rules against changing one's appearance too much in the middle of an ongoing shoot. Still, the idea of a pianist with long nails was ridiculous. She gingerly emphasized that point.

"You can play piano with slightly longer nails, but let them get too long and you'll hear the sound of the nails clacking against the keys," she explained. "Plus, they can get in the way of keeping your hands on the keys."

If you struck a black key with the tip of your nail and rolled off, continuing to exert pressure, you would accidentally strike the neighboring white key. Long nails would inevitably lead to mistakes.

"There's always playing Horowitz-style," she went on, "striking the keys for a hard forte while hardly bending your fingers, but that's not for amateurs."

"Thank you," Ryoko responded. "Sounds like there are a lot of reasons pianists shouldn't have long nails. I'll probably clip them when I'm doing my main prep for the role."

Nakamichi readjusted herself on the bench.

"I'm going to play the piece now. Watch closely."

"Would you mind if we recorded it for review?" Karen asked.

"Not at all."

Karen extracted a tripod from her bag and set up a camera such that the piano's keys and pedals were visible from a three-quarters view.

"Take it away!" She gave Nakamichi a thumbs-up.

"Now then."

Nakamichi began playing Chopin's Étude Op. 10, No. 4. The étude was certain to be used in Ryoko's upcoming role. While it was played at a fairly brisk tempo and demanded a high overall level of technical skill, it didn't require too much expertise in any particular technique. Difficult to learn, easy to master, one might say.

With the goal of the lesson in mind, Nakamichi made sure not to increase the tempo too much, playing the piece in a slightly languid two minutes. Ryoko studied Nakamichi's hands intently the whole

time.

"Notice anything?" Nakamichi knew there was no point in asking an amateur, but did so out of politeness.

Seeming to snap out of a trance, Ryoko thought for a moment.

"Your fingers sure were moving a lot," she answered.

Nakamichi fought back a laugh.

"That's right," she responded tactfully. However, Ryoko's next comment surprised her.

"I feel like I could probably play it though."

"I'm sorry?"

Ryoko sat down in front of a second, neighboring piano and closed her eyes as if visualizing the performance she'd just seen.

Nakamichi, perplexed, was about to call out to Karen when Ryoko's left hand struck a G-sharp, while her right pounded out sixteenth notes in rhythm.

Wide-eyed, Nakamichi turned to Karen.

"You *sure* she's never played piano before?" In her shock, she accidentally dropped her polite phrasing.

Karen shook her head.

"This is her first time ever touching an instrument, as far as I know."

"You have *got* to be joking..."

Ryoko was executing a perfect replication of Nakamichi's performance. Sure, it was *possible* there was a genius sight reader somewhere who could turn in a professional-level Op. 10, No. 4 on their first go, but Ryoko didn't even have sheet music! What was more, her imitation even included all of Nakamichi's minor mistakes.

Just as Nakamichi was wondering if the manager hadn't mixed up Ryoko with an actress with years of pianistic experience, Ryoko's next comment eliminated all suspicion from Nakamichi's mind.

"Something's off." Ryoko looked up after striking the last note.

Nakamichi knew in an instant. Ryoko hadn't been using the pedals. Perhaps one could play Bach without pedals, but Chopin? Not once thinking to touch a pedal was sufficient proof that Ryoko was as inexperienced as she claimed.

"Were you actually playing from memory just now, based on my

performance?”

“I guess.”

Setting aside her own rising goose bumps, Nakamichi endeavored to explain the difference in their performances.

“It’s because you didn’t use the pedals.”

“Pedals?” Ryoko looked down at her feet, where a row of three shiny, brass bulbs jutted out from the piano.

“The middle pedal’s function depends on the type of piano, and isn’t used often,” Nakamichi explained. “Just getting down the right and the left for today will be fine.”

Nakamichi explained the functions of the right pedal, called the damper pedal, and the left pedal, known as the soft pedal, and demonstrated them as she went. She only gave a simple explanation, but in short, pressing down the soft pedal would make the notes quieter, while holding down the right would cause them to continue reverberating even after lifting one’s finger from the key.

Karen pulled out a laptop, calling up the footage of Nakamichi she’d recorded, and turned to Ryoko.

“Want to check out her pedal usage in the performance earlier?”

“Yes! Sorry, give me a minute,” Ryoko apologized to Nakamichi, then sat herself down in front of the computer screen, watching in fascination.

She muttered to herself here and there, noting the precision of the movements. Using the pedals was more than just an on-off phenomenon. The effect of the pedals could change based on minute differences in how they were pressed.

“If she can replicate the pedals after just watching, it’s about time for us nongeniuses to get out of the field.”

Karen merely smiled politely at Nakamichi’s comment, unsure how to respond.

“I’ve seen some pretty good imitators, but today’s actresses are really something else,” Nakamichi added.

“I’m pretty certain she’s the *only* actress I’ve ever come across who could do this,” Karen responded.

“Then she’s some kind of wunderkind. Even though she looks like an adult from where I’m sitting.”

Wunderkind... In the world of classical piano, Aimi Kobayashi—who at age nine had placed first in the Youth Piano Competition of the National Piano Teachers' Association of Japan—would certainly be worthy of the term. No fourth-grader had seized victory at the competition in all the years since.

"She's twenty-one. She was actually working as a pinup model until recently. However..." Karen quickly summarized the recent changes in Ryoko's career.

"A pinup model? Dungeon coach? I swear, I can hardly keep up anymore."

Still, if it was possible to achieve that in just a few months, regardless of one's starting talent, there were musicians who would be willing to sell their souls to do so, let alone endure some dungeon time. It was possible Ryoko might just be able to replicate even famed pianist Vladimir Horowitz's pedal work, if she had a recording to work off of—and do so without even the faintest understanding of music theory. The age of mass-produced virtuosos might have been at hand. A chill ran down Nakamichi's spine.

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"I'll prepare some additional keyboard and pedal footage for the selected pieces."

"Thank you very much!" Ryoko and her manager bowed.

Ryoko had wound up turning in a perfect performance of the Op. 10, No. 4—once again a copy of Nakamichi's down to the small imperfections. More frightfully, she had indeed also perfectly replicated one of Horowitz's performances of the same piece, recorded in his later years, after seeing the footage only once. Even the sounds of her nails clacking against the keyboard had diminished as the session went on.

Nakamichi had asked Ryoko if her wrists or hands hurt, but apparently the young actress hardly felt any physical stress at all. In addition, she'd even started to make adjustments of her own instead of just rigidly imitating what she'd seen, varying the piece's tempo and cutting Nakamichi's original two-minute performance down to a

minute and forty seconds. Her rhythm never wavered—it was as if her hands themselves were footage, and she were merely adjusting the playback speed to sync with some internal metronome.

If she could have also learned to inflect the pieces with different emotions, she would have gone from beginner to concert pianist in only a few hours. This went far beyond the hitherto understood concept of a "fast learner."

"Saito, have you given thought to giving up on acting and becoming a pianist?"

"There's no way. I can't even read sheet music."

"I see. A shame."

There were famous musicians who couldn't read sheet music—Jimmy Hendrix, for one, along with Ritchie Blackmore. Apparently even the Beatles' abilities on that front were suspect. But they were all in the fields of rock and jazz. Except in the cases of physical limitations, a classical pianist who couldn't read sheet music would find a hard time landing jobs. In classical music, the score was held to be a record of the composer's feelings and intent.

Were Ryoko to switch fields, she might be subject to criticism that she was merely a copycat simply arranging—or worse, plagiarizing—others' performances. Still, there might be merit to that approach, as crooked as it might seem at first. Her starting point would be some of the highest-level performances in the world, and they could be further replicated and altered with her own flourishes and twists. She could mix any styles she chose, copying and integrating them with perfect precision. She might just be lambasted as a copy, but—especially when accounting for how her good looks would help court public favor—she might just be heralded as being the "second coming" or "revival" of any number of past greats.

What was more, based on what Nakamichi had seen, if Ryoko only had access to the recording of a perfect performance, she'd be able to turn in a flawless rendition every time. At twenty-one, she would still be eligible for the bulk of international competitions. With footage to work from, all she would need would be one day to prep. *And* she was a former pinup model? The media wouldn't be able to leave her alone.

“Might really be time to start looking for another job while I can,” Nakamichi mumbled to herself, waving the two off in the parking lot.

Dungeons’ influence on the sports world was already brewing up a storm. She’d thought the arts might have been able to escape it, but it looked like there was no such luck. She wouldn’t be surprised if soon part-time explorers occupied all the first orchestra chairs. She sighed to herself. What was the right choice to make now? To advise aspiring musicians to begin a dungeon exploring regimen? Or to keep what she had seen to herself, and stave off the future to come for one more day? The choice seemed completely beyond Nakamichi’s ability to make.

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“Damn it, Coach! Pick up!” Ryoko fumed at her smartphone in the back of the car.

“We’re sorry. The number you have dialed is not available. Please try ag—”

She had only vaguely sensed the extent of her changes during her archery performances. But she knew how difficult it was supposed to be to play a musical instrument for the first time. All of a sudden she didn’t feel human anymore.

“Damn. I know this is your fault.” All she’d done was kill some dinky slimes. How had it had this much of an effect?! “Ugh...”

As if Yoshimura weren’t already strange enough as an “ordinary” G-Rank who had suddenly become the world’s top explorer... How had he managed to change Ryoko’s and Haru’s fates so much in just three months?

“Who the hell *are* you?” she mumbled to an invisible Yoshimura.

With a sigh, she stuffed her phone back into her bag.

Chapter 10: King of the Woods

January 29, 2019 (Tuesday)

Yoyogi-Hachiman, La Fontaine 5F

La Fontaine, the five-story apartment building behind D-Powers' office, was quickly becoming a mecca of international espionage. Members of a joint CIA and NSA team were currently gathered in a room on the top level, surveilling the unassuming home office across the street. Raleigh, one of the agents on duty, announced the arrival of a certain person of interest at the building across the way.

"*It's Simon again.*"

"*The USDD's been getting their balls in a knot over how often he's been over recently.*" Knoll, another team member, watched Simon approach the office. Knoll grimaced nervously.

The USDD had taken a special interest in Team Simon recently. Official word was that he was simply going over for coffee and chats. But in light of the orb auctions, rumors were swirling that he was selling off dungeon loot he should have turned in to the US government.

"Rumors" pushed by the USDD, of course.

"*They've never gotten anything on him, though,*" Raleigh responded. "*Apparently this all started with the USDD losing a lot of points to the DSF recently.*"

"*Maybe they'd win more favor if they focused more on dungeons and less on playing espionage. There's a proverb in Japan: Leave mochi-making to the mochi-makers,*" responded Kayama, a Japanese American member of the team.

Raleigh grimaced.

"*We mochi-makers haven't exactly been churning out the sweets*

lately ourselves."

Knoll gave a taciturn smile in response. Pulling up the latest reports on Simon, he raised his brows in surprise. "*Hold on, this visit is actually on the schedule. Apparently it's to discuss the handoff of the Mining orbs.*"

Yoyogi-Hachiman, Office

"*Pardon me!*"

"*Simon! What's up? Is this about tomorrow's auction?*"

"*Officially. But I'm actually just hoping to snag another cup of Azusa's joe.*"

The thirtieth, tomorrow, was supposed to be our date for returning the Mining orbs we'd begrudgingly agreed to store.

"*Any requests for the place and time?*" I asked.

"*Already cleared it with the JDA. They've gotta run the show anyway. Same place as last time. Small meeting room in Ichigaya, 2 p.m.*"

"*So the users are all set?*"

"*They came in along with some Patriot missiles late last week.*"

"*What? Couldn't you guys just go through Narita or Haneda like normal people for once?*"

"*There are things we can't bring in through civilian routes.*"

"*Erm...*"

Simon took a satisfied whiff of the cup of coffee Miyoshi had brought out and set the mug on the table. He leaned forward.

"*Now, there are some things I'd like to ask you two.*"

"*We're open books.*"

"*Azusa. Where the heck did you go afterward?*"

"*Afterward?*" Miyoshi asked.

"*While we were scrambling for finder's rights on the thirty-second floor, you—poof—up and vanished.*"

It wasn't a firm rule, but finder's rights played a big role in dungeon land allocation. It might not have been as simple as claiming first dibs in a safe area, but at the very least doing so would

help.

"*Last time I was here, I was in a rush to talk about Mining,"* he explained, *"but, thing is, it ain't like you to give up your claim to a valuable asset..."*

As I mentally urged him to drop it, Miyoshi gave him the cover story we'd decided on together.

Apologizing for taking so long to tell him, Miyoshi described running afoul of a group of leaftails in the dungeon. Since this was based on a true story, it was pretty convincing. Only the chronology, and my not being there, were fabricated.

"*That rumbling you mentioned hearing must have been Iori opening the stairs down to the thirty-second floor. So after that all the areas around the atrium reset to those auto-locking boss-room types...*"

"*And you didn't go back up to check?*" Miyoshi asked.

Simon waved his hands in front of him.

"*And risk running into another fight like the one with big ugly? No thanks. We didn't even have proper gear.*"

They'd all been transported from Yokohama, so they had only had light arms. *Yeah, that would make Cimeies-level bosses a struggle.*

"*If you were behind one of those doors, you must've run into another boss. What was it like? Another giant?*"

"*If it had been, I wouldn't be here to tell you about it.*"

Simon's grinned, then asked for another cup of coffee.

"*So what was it, then?*"

"*Lesser evils and suicide leaftails.*" Miyoshi poured him another cup from the carafe. Figuring he'd want refills, she'd made a little more from the start.

"*Lesser evils? Never fought any. What're they like?*"

"*What you'd think. Little demon-like critters.*"

"*Lesser, so...were they weaker?*"

"*The death mantises were probably stronger in terms of raw strength, but...*"

"*They had something else?*"

"*The ability to summon the aforementioned suicide leaftails like there was no tomorrow.*"

"*Hoh...*"

"*The leaftails are basically just big geckos, except they have this feature where their eyes glint, and then they come running at you, and...*"

"*And?*"

"*Kablooey.*"

"*It would be something like that,*" Simon mumbled, staring up at the ceiling.

"*Little reptilian suicide bombers. I was hoping the name was figurative.*"

"*Unfortunately they're invincible before their eyes glint. But once you see those sparkles, there's not much time before the lizards come come charging and—*"

"*Boom.*"

"*You got it. They're like walking hand grenades. Not a huge blast radius, but they'll overwhelm you with sheer numbers. If you encounter any lesser evils, be sure to take them out quickly before they can spawn in too many leaftails.*"

"*Roger that.*"

"*Ah, right. The boss doors apparently don't open unless you pick up all drop items in the area.*"

"*I see. Speaking of, you get a treasure box?*" Simon asked, since it had been a boss encounter.

Miyoshi nodded.

"*One. It had a fifth-ranked healing potion.*"

Simon whistled, commenting that maybe his team should go down there again.

"*The rest of the boss rooms on the thirty-first floor probably contain similar encounters and loot,*" Miyoshi explained. "*Although just like with Yokohama, there's no guarantee they'll be the same every time.*"

"*A new gambling floor,*" Simon assessed.

"*Maybe.*"

Yokohama was known as Loot Box Dungeon in Japan, but apparently folks overseas more frequently called it the "Gambling Dungeon."

"*We may actually be able to store some heavy weaponry there. It didn't seem like any slimes spawned in that plaza chamber.*"

That was true. Markings we'd sprayed around the main area hadn't disappeared the whole time we'd been there either. Though that didn't guarantee they were still there now.

I wasn't sure how Simon envisioned bringing down field artillery, but there should be working models of porters before long. Falcon had recorded data of them armed with twenty-millimeter turrets before the trouble at Yokohama had started.

"*Getting artillery down that far seems like a hassle,*" Miyoshi commented.

Simon smiled. He explained that a secret weapon would be on its way before long.

"*If it's so secret, is it really okay to tell us?*" I asked.

"*Dungeon equipment's a little different from traditional military weaponry. It'll go public before long. You'll even get consumer models.*" They already had an attractive spokesperson lined up, he added. "*Anyway, our current equipment isn't going to cut it past the thirty-first floor. That much is obvious from the boss fight the other day. As soon as I sent in that report, our main manufacturer made sure to send over some experimental equipment.*"

"*Why not test at Yokohama like Falcon?*" I asked.

Its boss floors were far easier to access.

"*Yokohama's unique properties can make it hard to compare performance there with normal dungeons. Besides...*" Simon lowered his head, looking uncharacteristically sheepish. "*I'll pass on going down there for a while.*"

He didn't need to tell me twice. Who would want to go back inside Yokohama after what had happened there? Even if they were on one of the world's top teams.

"*So instead, why not Yoyogi? Exploration progress and interesting discoveries seem to be occurring there at a faster rate than anywhere else in the world. Plus, it's completely public. Can't get better than that. Yep, it's the best for testing new firepower on lower floors. It's big enough, and now we have those convenient boss chambers on the thirty-first floor.*"

So the DSF's main weapons supplier was ready to field-test whatever they were working on. But, public dungeon or not, was bringing these weapons into Yoyogi really going to be okay with the JDA?

"*Are there* any *kind of rules about bringing weapons into the dungeons?*" I asked.

"*Nukes'd be off-limits, I suppose,*" Simon answered.

"*Well that seems obvio—*"

Then again, there was a case of a certain country *allegedly* bringing a nuke into a dungeon quite recently. Though there had been no official accusations, and the incident hadn't made the news. The radiation and all other evidence had probably been broken down into D-Factors too.

Via international agreement, guns were allowed inside dungeons even in a firearm-restrictive nation like Japan, so it made sense that there were no particularly granular restrictions on what kinds of weapons could be brought in. The sheer difficulty of hauling heavy artillery down to the lower floors would take care of most potential issues naturally. That said, I was pretty sure at least nuclear, biological, and chemical weapons were off-limits.

"*Get ready for the show*" was all Simon would tell us. "*I'm pretty sure Japan is developing something similar, by the way.*"

Beyond the twentieth floor, 5.56-millimeter and even 7.62-millimeter ammunition had shown drastically reduced efficacy, and would likely be no more effective than peashooters against monsters past the thirtieth floor. More firepower would be needed. Tanks and armored vehicles might be the next step—it was only natural that every country would scramble to find ways to bring them in. It might ultimately be up to strong explorers to push forward on the front lines, but anything that could help lighten the load or boost the efficacy of mid-level explorers would be a major boon. Training more personnel to operate vehicles and help bring in equipment would also be a top priority.

"*Now, changing the topic a bit,*" Simon continued, "*does the JDA banning any Mining users from floors where the drop hasn't been set have anything to do with the report recently submitted to the WDA?*"

"*Wait, the ban went through?*"

"*You hadn't heard? The announcement went out yesterday, along with info on floors where the drop has been set.*" Apparently the attached lists had everyone's mouths—or rather wallets—watering. "*So now instead of heading straight back after getting the orbs, the users are going to spend some time in Yoyogi.*"

"*For tests?*"

"*Nope. That can wait. To rack up a little financial windfall by farming Yoyogi drops, apparently.*"

"*No free lunch, huh?*"

Apparently, after seeing the available mineral drops, the US government's plan was to have its explorers earn back the money that had been spent to obtain the Mining orbs by putting their new skill to work.

"How about that? Japan actually moved fast on a policy decision for once," I mumbled in Japanese.

Miyoshi then spoke up to inform me of what she'd heard from Naruse recently.

"All policy decisions related to the dungeons are the sole discretion of the Dungeon Management Section. There were too many issues when the dungeons first appeared that required immediate response."

With Mining users likely to start popping up one after another in the near future, this situation had required immediate response too.

"*What was that?*" Simon asked in English.

"*Just commenting on how fast the JDA moved.*"

"*So then you did have something to do with it.*"

"*Just a bit.*"

"*'A bit.' Heh. So is that WDA report true? You can set dungeon mineral drops at will?*"

"*Yep. You can even set a floor's drops to categories like 'raw gemstones' and 'noble metals.' There are even more possibilities than we first thought.*"

"*Just the kind of idea you'd expect from the land of manga. We'll probably start seeing mithril or orichalcum before long.*"

I wasn't sure anyone could envision those clearly enough to

cause drops, but then again, the dungeons did seem to be working from a common cultural knowledge base. Maybe it *was* possible. We'd just have to hope someone trying to get fantasy metals didn't accidentally set a floor's drops to ordinary steel or brass.

"*We might, eventually,*" I conceded, "*although I think that's still a ways off.*"

I wasn't sure how much detail the WDA report had gone into, but I explained the role of personal focus and, well, mineral mania in setting the drops.

"*So the choice moving forward will be to either train up experts as explorers, or train up explorers as experts,*" he concluded.

"*The former would probably be less time-consuming.*" It took less time to go through basic training than to get a PhD.

"*Not too many Professor Challengers in the modern day, huh?*" Simon mused.

"*Be sure to tell the DSF Mining user not to come back with any pterodactyls,*" I warned.

Arthur Conan Doyle's *The Lost World* saw George Challenger, its protagonist and an action-hero academic, travel to a plateau in the Amazon where ancient creatures still lived. To prove to Londoners that his stories were true, he displayed a pterodactyl he captured and brought back. The book ended with the creature escaping and returning home.

"*Ultimately, until drops are set everywhere, you'll probably want to avoid giving Mining to anyone who seems like they'd be more useful on the front lines,*" I advised.

It would be nearly impossible to focus on mineral drops while battling through uncharted territory. It made more sense to have a Mining user visit once the floor had already been charted.

"*Now you tell me! America's already made its selections. Both the DSF and USDD are giving their orbs to up-and-coming aces.*"

That would have been the conventional wisdom. You'd want to give your expensive orb to someone young and promising, with years left to serve in the field. But did that mean—

"*Hold on, is one of the users on your team?*"

"*Nope. We're needed in too many different places. For Mining,*

they wanted someone who can stay put. Thank goodness. If one of us *had gotten it, we probably would have wound up accidentally setting drops the world over to iron.*" Plus, he added, they weren't much for taking orders, which might have taken them out of the running.

"*Soldiers who don't take orders?*"

"*Technically the DSF isn't military. Because of the way our group was created, we actually have a surprising degree of autonomy in the field. Anyway, thanks for the advice on Mining. We'll have to run some tests of our own later too. If only we had a better dungeon for running tests back home... If I'd known things would turn out like this, maybe it would have been better to have left Evans uncleared.*" He sighed. What was done was done.

"*But what about BPTD?*"(1)

It had come up in conversations recently, due partly to being a dungeon where wild cleaners were present, and partly because it was the site for the big upcoming IRL dungeon enthusiast meetup.

"*It's an amateur, or rather, nonmilitary dungeon. Plus it's only been explored down to the sixteenth floor.*"

"*Nonmilitary?*"

"*There are a lot of land ownership disputes around it, and it's technically under the jurisdiction of New York City. The current mayor was elected on a platform of addressing economic inequality. Most of that involves taxes on the wealthy, but the dungeon helps pick up some of the slack.*"

"*So you're saying...?*"

"*Major municipal moneymaker. There are actually a lot of limitations that wind up slowing down capture progress.*"

NYC would be out of luck if the dungeon were fully captured and wound up disappearing. With a public dungeon like Yoyogi, all decision-making fell to the national Dungeon Association branch—the JDA. Correspondence with other national agencies could consist of simple reports. The JDA's relative autonomy was what enabled fast decision-making. On the other hand, if Yoyogi had fallen under the city of Tokyo's jurisdiction, all decisions would have had to run

through city legislative bodies first. Entry charges wouldn't have been unlikely either.

"*There's no place to set up a base aboveground near BPTD, and you'd be courting all sorts of trouble if you tried to bring heavy military equipment in.*" The roads to the dungeon crossed through private land. Visitors who wanted to avoid trouble took the long way, walking along the coast instead, on beaches where no one would take kindly to military caravans constantly running through. "*So instead, Yoyogi's our best option—a dungeon where we can easily reach floors lower than the twentieth without causing any national or international incidents.*"

America could be kind of...out there in its commitment to "logical" approaches. It wouldn't have surprised me if they wanted to set up some kind of automated weapons on a floor with valuable Mining drops to systematically farm monsters.

Would any dungeon let them do that? Ah, well, maybe Yoyogi if it were in a deserted area. If they could find an area with a dense enough monster population to make gun-installation worth it, that was.

"*By the way, while I have the chance, what is the DSF thinking?*" I asked.

"*What do you mean?*"

I told Simon about the boatload of DSF boot camp applications we'd received.

"*Phew. That'd be just about every frontline DSF member. They're really going for it.*"

"*What happened to due diligence? This is a relatively untested program.*"

"We *tested it, after all.*"

That was true. They had their evidence as soon as Cathy had beaten Mason at arm wrestling.

"*Joshua's a by-the-book kind of guy. He probably turned in a pretty thorough report.*"

"*But we can't handle this many people. We have our own capacity, you know.*"

The boot camp was, as far as anyone knew, operating entirely on

a lottery system. We couldn't have all these DSF members expect to automatically be given slots. We had a hard enough time as it was dealing with all the questions about fairness coming in from the athletics world.

"*Can't you deal with it somehow?*" Simon shrugged. "*You're running it three times a week. Why not move up to four?*"

I gave him a stern look. No one wanted to work that much! Next he'd be asking us to run it Monday to Friday! "*Boot camp participation obligates you to help us for a year in Yoyogi. Is that really okay with everyone?*" I asked, changing tactics. Surely America wouldn't want to give up so many of its soldiers to a Yoyogi assistance program, right?

"*You kidding? Top brass would be shaking your hands for giving us the opportunity.*"

"*Huh?*"

"Kei, America even imports resources as important as oil. Access to foreign resources is nothing to sneer at," Miyoshi mentioned in Japanese.

"But dungeon exploration? I guess...that basically *is* a matter of access to resources, now that I think about it."

"*Yoshimura.*"

"*Yes...*"

"*I don't know about the USDD, but in the DSF, our final goal is clearing the Ring.*"

"*You mentioned something like that before...*"

"*So, no one should care where we practice on the way to achieving that.*"

"*Practice?*"

"*Plus, we'll be wanting to observe the mettle of other countries' explorers. How about it? Any JSDF applicants?*"

"*Um...Miyoshi?*"

"*There's been rumbling, but no applications yet.*"

"*It's only been a few days since Yokohama. Plus Japan's always slow to act. They'll probably start coming to us before long.*"

"No applications?" I asked Miyoshi in Japanese. "But there are tons of personnel involved in dungeon exploration apart from Team

I."

The JSDF's dungeon exploration was conducted expedition-style, meaning a lot of hands were needed to support ace teams like Iori's on their way down. The information relay system alone required a sizable number of troops. The route down to the thirty-first floor already probably required upward of five hundred personnel.

"We'd probably need to offer a four-digit number of slots to accommodate everyone," Miyoshi agreed.

"There's no way we can handle all that."

"*Even if they do apply, we'll have to turn them down. We just can't handle everyone,*" I explained to Simon, switching back to English.

"*You'll have to figure something out. But put the DSF first on your list if you can. Of course, you'll probably start seein' copycats before your capacity gets too stretched.*"

"*Imitators?*"

"*Sure. People trying to run the same kind of boot camp.*"

Apparently more than a few enterprising opportunists were already trying to get into the act, taking applications from eager would-be explorers. I wouldn't have been surprised if they'd gotten enough information to try replicating our curriculum down to the nitty-gritty.

"Come to think of it, that maintenance guy the other day did mention a bunch of new orders coming through for a certain arcade cabinet..." Miyoshi commented in Japanese.

"You can't be serious..."

"They're even exporting them. You have to admit it's kind of funny."

Our camp's curriculum was totally arbitrary. Just replicating our selection of activities wouldn't yield any results.

"You have to feel a little bad for them too," I responded.

"Play stupid games, win stupid prizes," Miyoshi quipped.

Fair enough.

"*Hey, they're welcome to it,* if *they can. It would decrease our workload,*" I said, responding to Simon at last. "*If anything, we'd be grateful.*"

"*So you have reason to think they couldn't?*" Simon cocked his eyebrow.

"*I mean, right now? Who knows. We're currently the only ones who can offer stat-measuring.*"

"*Don't underestimate scammers,*" Miyoshi countered. "*All they have to do to bring in customers is claim they've invented their own measurement system and display some arbitrary numbers.*"

"*You think anyone would fall for a dumb scheme like that?*"

"*As far as anyone knows, that's all we're doing.*"

"*That's where you're wrong,*" Simon said, jumping to our defense. "*You can* feel *the difference with your program right away.*"

"*That's worth a lot, huh?*"

"*But there are still probably some desperate athletes who would fall for that bit,*" Miyoshi commented.

"*If those scam boot camps pick up, people will probably start getting suspicious of us too. Can't say I like that.*"

"*Don't worry. We're choosing the right athletes. Everyone will get to see how effective our program is with their own eyes.*"

"*I thought you picked applicants at random,*" Simon commented.

"*Eh heh heh. Well, we* do *reserve the right to check each person's dungeon history.*"

Miyoshi didn't miss a beat. You'd have no idea from that exchange just how often she missed them in daily life.

"Kei, you wouldn't be thinking anything disparaging about me, would you?" she asked.

"No way!"

Just then, Rosary flitted down, landing on my head and letting out a little trill.

"*Who's the bird?*" Simon asked.

"*The latest-model biological lie detector,*" Miyoshi answered smugly.

She added that we were looking into expanding our facilities and would have to consider how to respond to the DSF requests. That wrapped up the conversation...or so I thought.

Grinning, Simon lobbed another bomb at us.

"*So, how did you two get back up from the thirty-first floor so*

quickly?"

"*Huh?*"

And a pretty potent bomb at that.

"*What are you talking about?*" Miyoshi asked.

"*That Miharu or whoever from the JDA came around recently asking me what time I'd last seen you on the thirty-first floor, Azusa. That got me curious.*"

"*Curious is one thing, but how do you know what time I came out?*"

"*Hey, we're allied nations.*"

"*How does that factor into this? We're going to have a word with the JDA.*"

"*Careful now. If word gets out that I asked, the NSA'll be after my ass.*" Simon threw up his hands, still smiling.

"*Ah, whatever.*" Miyoshi shrugged in defeat.

Disclosing entry and exit time records as part of an information-sharing agreement wouldn't normally do anyone any harm, but in this case... We'd have to discuss our right to privacy with Naruse later.

I shifted in my seat, then leaned in toward Simon.

"*I was thinking about how to bring this up...*"

"*What? Is this something I'm not going to want to hear? Did you two get a teleportation orb or something?*"

"*Nah. Though if one exists, we'd love to have it.*"

I wished he would drop that "you two" business. The only one who had been in the dungeon was Miyoshi... As far as anyone knew.

"*Simon, remember that stuff you were mumbling to yourself about the dungeons' origins when we last talked about the Ring?*"

"*Can't say I recall a conversation we definitely never had,*" he answered with a wink.

"*Well, we confirmed your theory.*"

Simon's eyes widened. A crack formed in the mug he was holding.

"*Whoa! Sorry about that.*" He frantically apologized, setting the cup back down on the table. "*Did you meet him?!*"

"*Miyoshi did. Not in the manor study though.*"

I told him about the apparition of Dr. Tylor that had appeared in that strange dungeon location, as well as hearing the truth about the experiment three years ago in Nevada.

"*So that's why we never found any bodies...*" Simon mumbled. He put his elbows on his knees and leaned forward, knitting his fingers together. "*What are you planning to do with this information?*" he asked.

"*In what sense?*"

"*Who are you going to bring it to?*"

"*This cockamamie story? About meeting someone who's supposed to be dead in the middle of a dungeon, and that person revealing the secret origin of the dungeons? Who would believe it?*"

"*Knowing you guys though, there's probably a recording.*"

"*There* should *have been,*" Miyoshi shot back.

"*Should have been?*"

"*I was recording the encounter, but the footage came back blank.*"

"*No kidding...*"

"*Swear to god,*" I responded.

Simon couldn't help but laugh at the idea of swearing to gods you don't believe in.

"*Anyway, we're just letting you know what happened.*"

"*Understood. But you know I can't do anything with this info either,*" Simon responded.

"*That's your problem now. See? Now we get to wash our hands of it. No more worrying about what to do with it anymore.*"

"*I've never known you guys to keep your noses out of something.*"

"*Sometimes even* we *have common sense.*"

I was feeling slightly smug about having successfully passed the buck when the doorbell rang. We weren't expecting any visitors. Maybe it was Naru—

"Eeeeeh?!" Miyoshi, who had gone to check the camera feed, let out a gasp.

Yoyogi-Hachiman, La Fontaine 5F

A wave of silence fell over the American team. A second man had approached D-Powers' office.

"*Knoll!*"

"*What?*"

"*There! At the entrance. Isn't that Dmitrij Nelnikov?*"

"*You're shitting me.*"

Knoll ran over to check the monitors. There, sure enough, was "Dmitrij the Demented," as he was known in certain circles. A Russian hero visiting D-Powers? Something fishy was afoot. Plus, Simon was still inside.

"*Some sort of meeting between Dmitrij and Simon?*" Knoll turned to Raleigh, who had first observed Dmitrij walking in. "*Do you know anything about this?*"

"*Nothing. You really think it's a rendezvous?*"

"*Does this look like a coincidence to you?*"

"*No, but...*"

"*What about audio? Can we hear anything from inside?*"

"*We haven't been able to get anything through those walls.*"

What was going on? Team Simon making some kind of grandstand play for Dmitrij's defection? Passing along orbs or information on the side? The team could only pray this wasn't the international incident it promised to become.

***

"*Sasha. Take a look. It's Dmitrij.*"(2)

In a corner room on the opposite side of the fifth floor from the CIA and NSA team, a team of Slavic-looking men was hard at work surveilling the same subject as their American counterparts—a certain neighboring home office. They had one other thing in common with the US team: They were no less shocked to see who had just walked inside.

Sasha, sporting a rugged beard and narrow, steely eyes, was the one who answered.

"*Dmitrij? He's on the eighteenth floor. Doronya, you're seeing things.*" Sasha's voice dripped with doubt, but Doronya noted that he came over to check the monitor even so.

"*He got his orb yesterday.*" In the back of the room, a stoic team member with traditionally handsome features and a tightly cropped beard unfolded his legs. "*He's on break. You sent photos?*"

"*Already en route to the Dungeon Team.*"

"*Good. Ask them if they know anything about Mr. Nelnikov's plans.*"

It had only taken the team seconds to spring into action. No sooner had a man who resembled Dmitrij entered the premises than they'd begun executing their assigned roles.

"*If it is him? It looked like Simon walked in there a moment ago as well.*"

"*Russia's top explorer meeting the American team at D-Powers' headquarters? It's a bad look. If he's making a bid for defection, then it could be the Mitrokhin incident*[(3)] *all over again.*"

"*Then before it gets that far—*"

"*Hold your horses. We're not here to rush into confrontation. Still, very curious... You think D-Powers are working with the Americans?*"

"*If they were, I don't think our American counterparts would be making such a fuss.*"

Japanese data networks were basically sieves to an experienced intelligence agent. Even if the team couldn't crack the American unit's encryption, they could at least tell *how much* data was flowing out. Based on the way the amount had spiked when Simon, and then Dmitrij, had entered, it appeared they were just as surprised.

"*The WDA? It's an international organization. Maybe they're arranging some kind of coup to establish a dungeon-based government. Perhaps D-Powers is a front.*"

It was already suspicious that D-Powers' office had proven so impervious to espionage. Despite the number of intelligence agents gathered in this neighboring building, not a single one had managed to get inside. All the caught spies had been extradited, and all reported sudden loss of consciousness with no memory of what had

happened. There was something spooky going on there, make no mistake.

They'd even lost Lyonya the other day trying to plant a bug on one of the women who had often been seen coming and going from the office. Lyonya, too, had been discovered unconscious, with no memory of his assailant, then extradited. His target had been an ordinary-looking petite woman in her twenties. Yet she'd somehow managed to subdue a highly trained operative.

"*Don't you feel like the whole world has gone mad lately?*" Doronya asked.

"*What are you yapping about?*"

"*Nothing. It's just...I can't shake the feeling that the world's somehow passed us by while we've been surveilling that house.*"

"*Cut it out. It's not like it's built on Salem's Lot.*"

"*Maybe, maybe not. Maybe that's why we haven't been able to get anyone inside. If we could peer through their windows right now, maybe we'd find them readying a human sacrifice.*"

Sasha smirked.

"*You two have been consuming too much American media,*" he said, scolding Doronya and Seryozha.

"*Blame thirty years of glasnost.*" Seryozha turned his attention to the response that had just come in from their dungeon-focused counterpart—the Dungeon Team.

Yoyogi-Hachiman, Office

Miyoshi and Dmitrij sat across from one another on the living room couches, the tension so palpable it felt as though a string was pulled taut between them. They eyed each other warily, each sizing up the other.

Dmitrij had hardly even registered Simon's presence. There'd been just the faintest hint of recognition—you wouldn't have noticed it unless you were looking closely. Apparently, to our surprise, he had come to talk to Miyoshi.

Simon and I ceded the living room, retreating to the dining room

table.

"*What do you think he's here for?*" I hissed to Simon.

"*Don't ask me!*"

I stood up from my seat, peering into the living room.

"*We ought to offer him a drink, at least. What do you think would be standard in Russia*?"

"*Who knows. I'd say a healthy kompot as a joke, but... I don't know. Maybe something sour, or some kind of light fruity thing? Honey flavored?*"

Needless to say, we didn't have any kompot on hand. No kefir(4), medovukha, or sbiten(5) either.

"*They're not big on coffee, right? Uh, I guess we could bring out some tea.*"

"*Maybe you should just skip straight to the point and bring out some vodka,*" Simon suggested.

"*Now I* know *you're joking.*" I grinned. Ultimately I called out to Dmitrij. When in doubt, the best tactic was just to ask.

"*Gospodin Nelnikov,*" I called out in slightly stiff and antiquated Russian. He barely glanced my way, only moving his eyes.

"*Um, for chai, we have zeleny and cherny. We also have kofe and wodka.*"

Tea in Russia was typically divided into umbrella categories of "green" ("zeleny") or "black" ("cherny"). Apparently the latter was steeped until it was so dark it generally needed to be cut with warm water before drinking. The first time I'd heard the Russian name said out loud, it would only register in my brain as "cho nurui"—Japanese for "super lukewarm." As you might guess, "kofe" meant "coffee."

"*Wodka.*"

Welp... Not all stereotypes land so far from the truth.

"*I guess they really are made of butter and vodka over there.*" Simon shrugged.

It was French-made rather than Russian, but Grey Goose, which we happened to have on hand, wasn't bad. Miyoshi also had some Ciroc, distilled from grapes. Nearly all modern premium vodka was distilled to be colorless and odorless—fitting for its role as a major

cocktail component. That said, we did also have some Beluga Noble, said to be made closer to traditional vodkas, with less filtration...

"*Do you know where Dmitrij is from?*" I asked Simon.

"*Well, from Area 22, for a start... I'm pretty sure his first dungeon was Oreshek.*"

"*Where's that?*"

"*Don't they teach you any European history in Japan? It's a famous old island fortress, in the middle of a lake.*"

To hear Simon tell it, Oreshek Fortress, also known as Shlisselburg Fortress, was an island fortress situated in Lake Ladoga near where the lake's waters flowed into the Neva River, to the east of Saint Petersburg. The entire island had been converted into a military fortification. Russia had fought fierce battles with Sweden in the thirteenth century, and later with Germany, over its ownership. Oreshek Dungeon had opened up on the island's north shore. It was sometimes said that the statue of Peter the Great looking out onto the river must have been built in anticipation of the dungeon's coming, guarding the citizens against it.

The dungeon was only three floors deep, putting it in the category of super minor-depth, and yet it hadn't been cleared. Not only that, access to the third floor was restricted. No one knew why.

"*I don't get these Russians at all,*" Simon grumbled. "*I don't get Japanese people either. Or Americans.*"

"*So you just don't get other people,*" I summarized.

But a super minor-depth dungeon would make it easy to come and go from the surface... Maybe *that* was the source of Dmitrij's ridiculous SP accumulation.

I settled on a bottle of Russian Standard and withdrew it from the fridge. Russian Standard was distilled in Saint Petersburg. I'd tasted some of their premium Russian Brilliant sub-brand several years back at a FOODEX JAPAN event hosted by Promtec Biz. Regrettably, neither the Brilliant Gold nor Platinum had been imported to Japan. Nevertheless, the Standard Gold—smooth and sweet with light wheat notes—was no slouch for quality on its own. It was an exemplary traditional vodka. Not even a modern-day hero like Dmitrij would thumb his nose at it... Probably.

I poured the vodka into an Edo Kirko short glass with red trim—he was Russian after all—chilled to the point that the glass frosted, and prepared some smoked salmon to go with it. Caviar would have been ideal, but it wasn't something an ordinary household would have lying around. If we could have been called ordinary, that was.

Miyoshi couldn't exactly sip tea with her conversation partner drinking vodka, so I whipped up a weak vodka tonic for her as well.

I brought the drinks and salmon to the living room, then beat a hasty tactical retreat to the dining room.

"*You guys are crazy well stocked. I'll take some salmon too,*" Simon requested.

"*You want vodka with that?*"

"*I'll pass. But I'd take a beer if you've got any.*"

Sure, sure, make yourself right at home. Despite my grumbling, I grabbed an American craft beer for him. They'd been blowing up even in Japan recently. I selected a Stone Ruination Double IPA 2.0. The "2.0" was a bit of a buzzword, but the beer was the real deal—crisp, bitter, with strong notes of citrus. An exemplary craft IPA. It seemed like it would go great with pizza. Smoked salmon? I wasn't so sure.

Americans loved this stuff. It was like their preference was more for the full-bodied experience than the flavor. Of course that was just my generalization, but from the way Simon was guzzling it down, stereotypes might have been proven right for a second time today.

Uhh, Simon, that isn't a Corona. Maybe it'd be better from a glass... Ah, well. Drinking straight from the bottle suited him.

Miyoshi, how's it going? I telepathied.

I don't know. He's just...staring at me. Occasionally he's taking a sip of vodka or nibbling at the salmon, but that's it.

Huh...

He showed up right after Simon. Think maybe he's trying to meet with him?

At our office? Why not just go to the embassy...?

I leaned in close to Simon, whispering.

"*You aren't trying to arrange Dmitrij's defection, are you?*"

Simon spit his beer into my face with a loud "Pffft!"

"*Hey! What the heck?!*"

"*'What the heck,' yourself! Come on, you can't just go throwing around baseless accusations like that!*"

I grabbed a paper towel, wiping away the spray.

"*Then is this just a coincidence? Were you* really *just here about the orb exchange?*"

"*Of course! Look, I did a literal spit take, right?!*"

"*That was the last of our Stone, by the way. I can get you some Guinness or BrewDog.*"

"*Punk?*"

"*That and some Tactical Nuclear Penguin.*"

"*If you think I'm going to tip back a thirty-two percent beer on a weekday, you've got another thing coming. I'll take a Punk.*"

I extracted one Punk IPA from the fridge. A strong brew with a slight aroma of grapefruits, it had been one of the trailblazers of extremely hoppy American craft beer in Japan.

"*So then, forgive my asking, but if you aren't here to meet Dmitrij, doesn't that mean...you can go?*"

"*And miss the fireworks? Come on, you can't expect me to leave at a time like this!*" He gestured behind him with his thumb. "*Look, he's sitting there like a nervous gentleman caller! Think he's come a-courtin'?*" Miyoshi and Dmitrij were still sitting awkwardly on the sofas, neither saying a word.

"*Okay, you might actually have a better sense of how Japanese dates tend to go than I thought. But you're not serious, right?*"

Then again, Dmitrij was just staring, seeming to grow more and more flushed. Maybe...

"*Could this be the beginning of true love?*" Simon crooned.

"*I'm pretty sure that's just the vodka.*"

"*Lighten up,*" he responded, disappointed. "*Learn to roll with a joke.*"

"*Learn to make better ones.*" Speaking of feeling the vodka, was Simon getting tipsy after just two beers?

"*Don't worry,*" he said after a minute. "*I'm just kidding. I don't know him that well, but he doesn't seem like the sentimental type. That guy... He's not ordinary. It's like the only thing on his mind is*

finding the next challenge."

Come to think of it, we'd caught him staring out toward the mountaintop the other day with that strange, almost possessed look.

"*I heard he was the top-ranked explorer when the rankings were first announced.*"

"*Yep. Until just recently. And he came to Yoyogi trying to find whoever knocked him down a peg, figuring they'd be there. And now*"—Simon gestured behind himself again, this time with the lip of his bottle, and leaned forward—"*tell me, what's their relationship?*"

Nothing, was my first thought, then... *Wait...*

"*Well, she did warn him about a boss on the eighteenth floor.*"

"*She warned him?!*"

I told Simon about how we'd run into Dmitrij staring out at Batian Peak.

"*Aha ha, you guys really are something.*"

"*What do you mean?*"

"*Now it makes sense. He was the first-ranked explorer in the world for three years, and you have the sheer brass balls to go up to him and tell him he's too weak? That'd stick with him. How many times do you think he's ever heard that?*"

"*Now hold on, she didn't exactly say it like...*"

"*It doesn't matter how she said it. It matters how he* heard *it.*" Simon crossed his arms and leaned back. "*Jeez, she's probably the first woman to ever really get his attention. Think about it. The guy grew up being trained for the dungeons, never knowing love—not even a mother's—losing comrades, fighting every day to survive. Even simple friendship was a luxury he couldn't afford.*"

"*Is any of that true?*"

Simon grinned.

"*Yoshimura, I'm bullshitting you! It's only been three years since the dungeons appeared!*"

"*You...*" What was this guy, some kind of Osaka grandpa? You couldn't trust him to keep a straight conversation for a minute.

"*Perhaps that will be enough idle speculation for now.*"

"*Gwah!*" Simon shouted.

"*Dmitrij! How long have you been there?*"

"*Yoshimura...was it? You were asking, earlier, about where I'm from?*"

"*So,*" Simon announced happily, "*the great Dmitrij can remember people's names!*"

Dmitrij cast an exasperated glance at Simon, then turned his gaze back toward me.

"*You can call me Keigo,*" I implored. "*And Simon filled me in a bit.*"

"*Keigo. You can call me Mitya,*" he responded.

"*Like in* The Brothers Karamazov."(6)

"*Correct. Although I will pass on being sent to Siberia.*"

He extended his hand, and I shook it.

I'd heard classic Russian literature was a surefire hit of a conversation topic when meeting someone from Russia for the first time. Unfortunately my knowledge base tapped out at Dostoevsky and Tolstoy, but knowing some common themes like novels ending in prayer, I could probably fake it if I needed to. (Fighting words, I know.)

Simon was beaming. He spoke into the lip of his beer bottle.

"*All I knew was that you were from Area 22, and trained up in Oreshek.*"

"*That's correct. The wodka you provided brought back fond memories of my hometown.*"

"*Want another?*" I asked.

Mitya nodded.

"*Have a seat, buddy.*" Simon pulled out a chair.

"*Kei, why don't you fix something up?*" Miyoshi asked, joining us in the dining room as well. "*I think we could all use some more snacks.*"

Miyoshi got out some wine, then took a seat next to the chair Simon had pulled out, facing Simon. She'd selected something from Moldova, also a booming wine-exporter to Japan. The biggest importer of Moldovan wines was still Russia, although they'd been subject to periodic import bans there over the years due to political-economic machinations. She might have selected the wine with our

current guest in mind.

"*What about making something yourself?*" I asked.

"*You make it better.*" She filled her glass with wine, raised it up, then shifted to a serious tone: "*My father, who wished to own a house, lacked the means to buy one. My father, who owned the means to buy a goat, lacked the wish to have one! Gentlemen! May our wishes and means be in sync, such that all our desires come true! Cheers!*"

Wine glass met beer bottle met sake glass, sending a clean, crisp "clink" through the air.

"*Where did you learn that toast?*" Mitya asked, grinning.

"*A Leonid Gaidai comedy. How'd I do?*"

"*Spectacular.*"

"*A whoozie-whatsit comedy?*" Simon waved his beer bottle back and forth by the neck in a subtle request for another.

"*Comedies from the sixties that are basically ubiquitous in the former USSR,*" Miyoshi responded, as if it were common knowledge.

"*Didn't know Russki toasts all lasted a half hour.*"

"*We have been known to make short ones too,*" Mitya responded.

"*Like what?*" Simon accepted the new beer bottle I was handing him, then leaned forward to refill Mitya's glass with vodka.

Mitya picked up the glass.

"За здоровье."

"'*Za ztrovey'? What's that mean?*"

"'*To your health.*'"

"*Not far off from the French 'a votre santé,' then,*" Miyoshi commented. "*Seems like toasting to people's health is culturally universal.*"

Even though drinking isn't healthy at all, Miyoshi added in Japanese.

"*We normally just go with a simple 'cheers,' though occasionally you do hear a 'to your health,*'" Simon observed.

"*Really, Simon? From you, I'd probably expect 'Here's looking at you.*'" Miyoshi did her worst Humphrey Bogart impression.

"*Hmph. Maybe Joshua could pull that off. That kind of flirting's not my style. Ah! How about this? There's this other toast-word I*

learned from joint operations with the French and Italian teams. It goes 'chi—"

"*Ookay!*" Miyoshi hastily interrupted. "*Simon, you need to be careful with that one in Japan.*"

France, Italy, and Spain all had a common toast derived from the sound of clinking glasses—vocalized as "chin chin," which happened to be slang for a certain male body part in Japanese.

"*Why? Why? Tell me,*" Simon kept badgering Miyoshi. He probably already knew.

"Man, it's like a literal tricultural friendship summit over here," I commented in Japanese.

"*Kei, less talk, more snacks!*" Miyoshi shot back in English.

"*Yeah, make with the grub, bub!*" Simon called.

"*Okay, okay. Let's see... Ah, this should be interesting!*" I took out the Setoka oranges we'd picked from the dungeon the other day, passing one each to Mitya and Simon.

"*Yoshimura.*" Simon looked up. "*An orange isn't normally, like, drinking food, you know?*"

"*That may look like the super high-quality Japanese hybrid orange, the Setoka, but—get ready for this—it's dungeon-grown.*"

"*What?!*" Both Mitya's and Simon's eyes widened in unison.

"*You're saying you found orange trees in a dungeon somewhere?*"

"*On the twenty-first floor of Yoyogi. Dig in. They're good.*"

"*You hearing this, Mitya?*" Simon asked. "*Are these guys nuts or what?*"

Mitya rolled the orange around in his hand, eying it suspiciously.

"*Keigo,*" he uttered. "*Would you permit me one question? Did these oranges respawn?*"

Miyoshi and I exchanged glances.

"*They did. It took about...what? Ten to thirty seconds?*" she responded.

"*Have you reported this anywhere?*" Simon asked.

"*Erm...Kei, have we?*"

"*Don't look at me. You're normally the one who handles that.*"

"*I guess we got so caught up in the Mining results...*"

"Y*ou guys just solved world hunger, and you forgot to mention it?*

Or, okay, maybe not quite solved world hunger, but infinite oranges aren't bad!"

That was true. I guessed, since we'd already set our sights on the infinite wheat-farming system, the gravity of the orange discovery hadn't really kicked in.

Kei, what about the wheat? Miyoshi telepathied.

I sent in the stalks just the other day. I guess there hasn't been any major news about them yet. Simon and Mitya don't seem to have heard anything. We should probably stay quiet until we have JDA approval for the fields. I don't want to complicate anything.

Got it.

"*Maybe we'd have solved world hunger if we'd found orange trees on the first floor,*" I responded, "*but these were twenty-one levels down.*"

"*It's big enough news just that you found respawning fruit in the dungeon at all. You'd better try to claim dibs on them, or you know someone's going to try to bring one up to the surface.*"

"*Hmm...*"

It did seem pretty likely someone would at least try to uproot a tree and carry it up to the first floor. If they could manage to uproot it considering how hard dungeon ground was, that was. Though, after that, would they be able to bring it up to the first floor? Monsters ordinarily wouldn't voluntarily move between floors, but that didn't mean they couldn't be carried. Occasionally they'd even been accidentally brought up to the surface, having glommed on to some explorer's clothes.

Apparently no one had really studied what became of those monsters brought up to higher floors. There was speculation that if left alone on the surface, they would naturally weaken and die, but I didn't know of any firm evidence to that effect. We hadn't been able to let any cleaners stick around on the surface the other day either.

"*Have Russia or America done any experiments with live monster capture?*" I asked.

"*We're mostly focused on capturing dungeons, so I haven't been involved in any, but... It wouldn't surprise me if some private companies have tried. Especially ones involved in military R&D.*"

"*Bioweapons development? Yeah, not unlikely,*" I observed.

"*Hey, don't get any weird ideas! Still, am I catching your drift? You're wondering whether or not you could bring those trees up to the surface?*"

"*It has the potential to become one of Aísōpos's fables,*" Mitya commented.

There was some debate on whether Aísōpos, or Aesop as he was more commonly known in Japan, had been Greek or part of the ethnic group that would later become the Turks. Whatever he was called, I caught Mitya's drift. He was probably referring to the fable of the goose that laid the golden eggs.

"*Are we talking about someone digging all of them up, moving them to the surface, then finding out they just shrivel up there and die?*" Simon asked. "*Argh, no, wait. It's a dungeon. Wouldn't the trees just respawn?*"

"*Uprooted trees don't respawn in the same spot,*" I answered. "*Even if they did respawn, you wouldn't necessarily be able to find them again.*"

"*You tried it?!*" Simon shouted.

"*Don't worry. Not with the orange trees. Just with plants on the second floor.*"

We'd observed the phenomenon by our wheat field.

We'd have a better idea of how plant life respawns worked if we could use microsized dungeon floors like the staircase landings at Yokohama, but, needless to say, nothing grew there natively. We'd have to dungeonize something there first.

"*Damn. Hearing all this, I'm starting to feel like maybe we've built up too much of a wall between dungeon exploration and research,*" Simon commented.

"*Society loves keeping things in their lanes,*" Miyoshi lamented.

"*We in the DSF have probably gotten even more narrowly focused since we started having to keep up with the USDD. Uh, don't tell Russia.*" Simon shot a look at Mitya. The two US dungeon organizations' feud was an open secret. "*Anyway, you two'd better hurry up and report that to the JDA.*"

"*We will.*"

Our tricultural friendship summit continued merrily for a bit, until interrupted by Naruse, who was scheduled to come over to discuss our provision of stat-measuring devices to the JDA. When she came in and saw who was there, she froze up like a robot badly in need of oil.

"За Дружбы," Mitya uttered, downed the last of the vodka from his glass, and was off.

"'*Druzby'?*" Simon asked. "*Whazzat mean?*"

"*I'm not sure,*" I responded. "*Maybe `take care'?*"

"*Prob'ly. On that note, I'd better get going too.*" He stopped in front of Naruse in the doorway. "*You keep an eye on these two. They've got a story about oranges that's a doozy.*" He added that last bit with a wink.

"*That kind of flirting's not my style" my ass.* Some things never changed.

Yoyogi-Hachiman, La Fontaine 5F

"*He's out!*" Doronya, who had been watching the office the whole time, shouted to Sasha, observing Dmitrij's exit.

"*That took a while. Alone?*"

"*It seems so. Seryozha is checking to see if there are any collaborators nearby.*"

"*What the hell was he doing in there?*"

Just then, Doronya's eyes widened.

"*Holy shit. He's humming. We have audio! Dmitrij Nelnikov is humming!*"

A giant hole might as well have opened in the ground. The news couldn't have been any more shocking. The other team members rushed to put their ears to the mic.

"*Unbelievable,*" Sasha muttered.

"*He must have cut a deal with them! I knew it!*"

"*Get the Embassy Dungeon Team on the line! We need all eyes on Dmitrij! Tell them not to let him out of their sights!*"

"*Roger!*"

Yoyogi-Hachiman, Office

"Um, are those...oranges?" Naruse asked, still shell-shocked.

"Yep. Basically. Have one."

"Thank you." Naruse took one of the Setokas, suspicion visible on her face. As soon as she dug her nails into its rind, the room was filled with the hybrid's distinctive sweet aroma.

"Mm. Tasty. But isn't it a little early for Setokas to be hitting shelves?"

"Ah, sorry for the late report. We actually got those from the dungeon," I explained.

You could practically hear Naruse's joints freezing up like the pistons on a bus that had lurched to a halt. She stopped chewing. The orange fell from her hand. I dropped down to catch it, then looked up.

"Naruse? You okay?"

"You...found these...in the dungeon?"

"Hello? Naruse?"

"There's fruit growing in Yoyogi?!"

According to a very...lively report from Naruse delivered centimeters from my face, this marked the first time anything resembling real-world food had been discovered growing in a dungeon—the first time since they had appeared three whole years ago.

"We found them in an uncharted area of the twenty-first floor," Miyoshi added. She passed a map and other materials she had spent the last few minutes gathering over to the newly reanimated Naruse.

"What is this X?" Naruse asked, pointing to a spot on the map.

"That's the grove, in some foothills near a lake. The X is where we set up our base."

"Base?" Her pistons lurched again.

"Um, like a permanent camp for exploration."

"In an uncharted area of the twenty-first floor?"

"Well, yeah. It's pretty far down. I know it might basically correspond to monopolizing floor space, but we figured, you know, you couldn't exactly ban it either, so..."

"That's true, I suppose." Naruse cocked her head. "But, to satisfy my own curiosity, what kind of scale are we talking?"

"It's a cylindrical building around ten meters in diameter. Height...what, not quite ten meters? I'll pull up an image." Miyoshi got out her tablet and pulled up a photo of Igloo 1 overlooking the lake and the grove. Needless to say, the surreal sight of a domed building in the middle of that nature caught Naruse's eye.

"Storage?" she asked.

"Of course."

"Sl-Slimes?"

"We're trying out various countermeasures."

"Trying out...?"

We gave poor Naruse a moment to process everything. She stared at the photo, eyes narrowing.

"By the way, what was Mitya actually over here for?" I asked Miyoshi in the meantime.

"Who knows? Just to sample some vodka from the homeland?"

"First Simon with the coffee... We're not running a café. You have your own work to do too."

"Okay, so I don't know what he was over for. But thank goodness we had vodka on hand, huh? My hobbies really do pay off. Hey, speaking of, Lance said he'd drop by sooner or later too. What kind of drinks should we serve him?"

"He's from Washington state, technically. Craft beer's really been booming in Seattle thanks to some loosened state laws. I guess that'd be *his* 'vodka from the homeland.'"

"Though he had a six-pack of Molson(7) on the eighteenth floor."

"That's true..."

"Maybe we could give up on the beer. We can just serve Canadian Club."

Sitting on a stump in the middle of nature, lit by the soft glow of a campfire, bronze mug in hand. He really could be a spokesperson for Canadian Club whiskey. I could see the poster now.

"Uuuum...!" Naruse seemed to have sprung back to life once again. She was pointing to the photo of Igloo 1. "Is it okay if I report

this?”

January 30, 2019 (Wednesday)

Dungeon Management Section, JDA Headquarters, Ichigaya

“So, the stat-measuring device. What was it called again?” Saiga looked up.

“The SMD-PRO, sir. That’s the model name, anyway,” Miharu Naruse answered. “The official product name is Dr. Stats.”

Saiga grinned. That kind of name fit D-Powers’ MO. But part of him still had to ask...

“Why ‘SMD,’ then? Why not ‘DRS’?”

“That was Miyoshi’s...unique...idea. The description ‘stat-measuring device,’ leads to the abbreviation ‘SMD,’ which is reformulated to become ‘Stats, MD.’ Uh...it may help if I drew out a flowchart.” Miharu scrunched up her lips.

“Never mind.” Saiga furrowed his brow. “Anyway, are we good to go with the installation like we discussed yesterday?”

“All systems go! There’s a spot for it in front of the main dungeon entrance, past reception. It’ll open the same day as the camp session, on the twenty-third of next month.”

“Good. Now, it almost seems too good to be true—the ability to get direct, quantifiable data on explorers’ abilities. What’s the catch?”

“According to Miyoshi, it’s just a way of meeting their corporate mission statement—supporting explorers.”

“Right, but what about their *real* goal?”

“I...think she’s being genuine? Although she *was* rubbing her hands together mumbling, ‘Data, data’...”

Saiga grimaced.

“Stats *are* private information, right?”

There were no laws specifically governing them yet, but they

certainly felt in line with personal data like medical records.

"The only thing transferred to D-Powers' server is raw numbers. Nothing that could tie them to any individual. In addition..."

She explained that while two people were unlikely to have the same stats, stats were constantly changing. That would make it nearly impossible to trace any given set of measurements back to a specific explorer.

"But *we'd* have records linked to individuals..." Saiga mused.

"Sir?"

"It wouldn't be too hard to link stat measurements to WDA licenses. Why, then we could base rank on dungeon stats, and use them to restrict or provide access to certain areas. It's better than our current system. But, ah... I suppose that's out of the question."

"There'd be a lot of pushback."

Saiga sighed. The day would probably come when stat data was recorded for WDA licenses, but that was still a long way off. They would need far more time to lay the groundwork first.

"By the way, when I went over to their office yesterday, both Mr. Gershwin and Mr. Nelnikov were present."

"Simon and Dmitrij together at the D-Powers office?!" Saiga shouted, then leaned back and folded his arms, expression dour. "Simon I understand, but why Dmitrij? Do he and D-Powers know each other?"

"They met on the eighteenth floor."

Miharu wasn't sure what kind of meeting D-Powers had held with the two explorers, but it must have been something big for Dmitrij to make a house call.

"You don't think he's trying to defect, do you?"

"Miyoshi said both of them being there together was just a coincidence."

"And you think their governments will buy that?"

"Hm..." All Miharu could do was shrug.

"Either way, it's bad timing," Saiga grumbled.

"Timing?"

"Exactly. We just found a safe area. There are already people wondering about the WDA making a bid for statehood, as

preposterous as that sounds."

"Why would anyone think that?"

"Where there's a way, there might be a will. And now a clandestine meeting at D-Powers' office? That isn't going to squelch any rumors." Saiga smiled wearily. There was nothing for the JDA to do about it now. Even issuing some sort of denial would only further draw further attention, and what, exactly, would they be denying? "Now, about those oranges... Setokas, you said?"

"They found them on the twenty-first floor."

Saiga could only manage to blink dumbly.

"Excuse me?"

Oranges on the twenty-first floor? Perhaps he needed to get his ears cleaned.

"I've sent some samples to NARO for urgent analysis. The results should be in tonight."

The JDA, like any national branch of the World Dungeon Association, was required to submit samples of potentially edible drops to the WDA's Department of Food Administration—the DFA—for safety analysis. Composition identification and other tests fell under the jurisdiction of each national organization, however. The JDA relied on subcontractors like the GIJ (the Gemological Institute of Japan) to evaluate mineral drops and NARO (the National Agriculture and Food Research Organization) for botanical ones.

"Hold on," Saiga stammered. "Oranges? On the twenty-first floor? Don't tell me. Did they respawn?"

"According to Miyoshi, yes."

Saiga's jaw went slack. This would be the world's first report of respawning food in the dungeons, outside of D-Powers' artificial wheat-respawning system. This was going to be another mountain of work. For starters, they'd have to decide right away what sort of rules to impose around the respawning orange trees.

"Have you notified the DFA?" Saiga asked.

"Not yet. Everyone there was already eating them, so they seemed safe, and there weren't many spare samples, so..."

"Eating them?!"

"Miyoshi gave them her blessing."

"Ah. Appraisal?"

Most explorers would hold off on trying new dungeon drops even if they *seemed* edible—usually submitting them for analysis first. Though there was the occasional daredevil. The tale of the first explorer to get an orc meat drop grilling it up and taking a bite on the spot was the stuff of legend. Thankfully he had proven fine physically, but that hadn't stopped him from being subjected to quarantine and a round of "grilling" of his own.

"Also, Miyoshi has a commercial license," Miharu pointed out.

Commercial licenses allowed explorers to buy and sell dungeon items independently, but they were still required to keep transaction and acquisition records, and to submit those records if needed. Still, there was no obligation to submit them each time an item was sold or acquired. It was fairly common, if legally risky, for items obtained and consumed by the license-holder themselves to never make the records. The sheer volume of dungeon visitors nowadays made it unfeasible for the JDA to really crack down on this issue, so the entire reporting framework had shifted to a bit of an honor system. That loophole might just have saved them a lot of trouble.

"No one's going to take her to court over that...but it is a little dicey."

Internally, however, Saiga breathed a sigh of relief. The fact that the items had been consumed by individual explorers and disappeared would buy them some time to set up a more formal framework for dealing with the unexpected citrus. Plus, they knew from Appraisal that the oranges were already safe, so it didn't seem like there'd be any danger even in the one-in-a-million chance someone else got their hands on the fruit in the meantime. The oranges being twenty-one floors down also reduced the odds of anyone else stumbling upon them.

Every second for preparation they could buy mattered. Twenty-one floors down though they might have been, the announcement of respawning oranges would make waves—and there were enough top explorers gathered on the eighteenth floor right now that you could bet quite a few would immediately make the trek down.

Even with extra time, they had a long road ahead. Saiga

internally let out another long sigh.

"Okay," he said. "Is that all?"

Miharu, merciless as ever, shook her head. She passed her section chief a photo.

"What is this?" he asked.

In the photo, Igloo 1 sat atop its hill, backed by a clear, blue sky.

"D-Powers' permanent base of operations. It's also on the twenty-first floor."

"I'm too tired to be surprised by anything else at this point," Saiga replied.

He could explain how the building had gotten there—Storage—but how did they plan to keep it unmanned? Did they have some sort of countermeasure for slimes? The Yoyogi Research and Planning Team members would be frothing at their mouths if that was the case. This time, Saiga's sigh was audible.

"Another revolutionary invention, but it's still technically a private party's invention. *Thankfully*, we don't have any obligation to report it." He slid the photo back across his desk. "Think we can trust them not to stir up any trouble? At least until the fervor over the safe area blows over?"

"Bidding for safe-floor construction space is scheduled to open February 22nd, right?"

"That's right. Three weeks. I'm counting on them to keep their heads down for that long."

In response, Miharu nervously smiled.

Fujimoto, Tsukuba City, Ibaraki Prefecture

At the National Institute of Fruit Tree and Tea Science (NITS) within NARO, the National Agriculture and Food Research Organization, a man with glasses and rather pale skin stood nervously before his supervisor. The researcher's name was Shigeru Sayama. The supervisor he was about to deliver his fateful report to was one Akinori Mizuki.

"Chief, about that request for the citrus DNA analysis that came in

this morning...”

“Are the results done already?”

“We’re...not quite sure.”

“Not quite sure? About what? The results being in, or the results themselves? You just need to check the CAPS markers.”

Using the nine types of CAPS markers available at NARO should have allowed for easy identification if the citrus in question was any variety of domestic fruit.

“It’s just that...” Sayama explained that, as a matter of due diligence, after running the tests himself, he’d asked another researcher to perform a second round of testing. And... “They came back as totally different varieties.” He gulped.

“Were different fruits mixed into the sample batch?”

“We used the *same* sample, sir. I can’t explain it. We ran the tests over and over...” Growing ever more pale, Sayama opened the file he’d brought with him, rifling through pages he had already read many times. “The results came back as both Setoka and Amakusa.”

“Setoka and Amakusa?”

They were both hybrid oranges, but Setokas were a combination of a Kiyomi and Encore hybrid and a Murcott. Meanwhile, the Amakusa was a combination of a Kiyomi and Okitsu Wase hybrid and a Page orange. In CAPS marker testing, the two would have different results along both the Cp0089/HindIII and Tf0013/Rsal markers. There would be no mistaking them.

“So...it’s some new variety combining traits of Setoka and Amakusa?”

“No, sir... You see...”

“What?”

“This is going to sound insane, but looking at the results...” Sayama paused for a long moment, then, seeming to have made up his mind to speak, rattled off his theory at a fast clip. “It appears the variety it registers as changes depending on who’s conducting the analysis!”

Mizuki blinked.

“I’m sorry. What are you trying to say?”

Sayama looked ready to cry.

"Sir, I'm the one reporting it, and even I don't know!"

"Sample or equipment contamination?"

"If that were the case, the results wouldn't be so consistent. But they matched perfectly to either Setoka or Amakusa every time." Sayama looked down at the notes, then back up at Mizuki with the eyes of someone who was drowning. "Sir, where did we get this sample?"

Mizuki fell silent for a moment.

"The JDA."

"Are you saying these are dungeon-grown?" Sayama asked.

Mizuki hadn't been told. That was par for the course, a basic step to prevent biases from influencing results. However, he could pretty easily guess. The request had come through at high priority. There was no chance the JDA would've asked them to verify whether a bunch of grocery-store oranges were really Setokas.

"I can't say for sure," Mizuki responded, "but...probably."

If they were from a dungeon, they would be the first edible produce ever discovered in one. Mizuki had heard that, before he'd assumed his current role, NARO had tested other dungeon vegetation, but it had never exhibited any anomalous properties. Mizuki made a mental note to learn more about the oranges' origin.

"So was there a pattern to the results? Or were they random?"

"The variety seems to be consistent between researchers. Anyone who got Setoka the first time has continued to get Setoka after that. The same goes for those who got Amakusa initially."

Sayama looked increasingly flustered. Mizuki could only crack a grin.

"DNA that doesn't fix itself until observed? When did genetics become particle physics?"

"You don't suppose it has multiple DNA sequences, and only settles on one when observed?" Sayama joked, but then he shook his head. "I know about fullerene double-slit tests and interference patterns, but I never thought the same thing could happen with deoxyribonucleic acid..."

Mizuki's mind was racing. They weren't just about to prove the multiple-worlds theory with molecular biology results...were they?

No, calm down...

This wasn't some eldritch monster—just oranges. Just a benign collection of citrus fruits. The results could be verified and explored further. But for that, they needed more samples.

Unfortunately, he couldn't expect much of a budget would be granted for obtaining them or running further tests. DNA results changing based on the observer? If anyone besides his own trusted subordinate had brought the claim to him, he wouldn't have given it the time of day. No, they would need something more convincing...

"How do you think we should report this?" Mizuki asked Sayama.

"Results: Setoka! No abnormalities present. Then we forget the whole thing."

Mizuki grinned.

"You really think that'll work?"

The JDA must have suspected something was unusual when they submitted the request. If anything, failure to notice the anomaly might put NARO's reputation in question.

"No..." Sayama slumped. "Oh, if only I hadn't asked someone else to double-check. Biggest regret of my life." Now he was going to have to author a report—with his own name on it—containing results he *himself* only half believed!

"Now don't be so quick to say that," Mizuki said, observing his forlorn subordinate. "Your regret might just be the greatest discovery of all time." Mizuki's eyes narrowed, cheeks turning up into a grin.

This report *could* change the world, with NARO leading the way. If they weren't dismissed as madmen, that was.

"Are there more citrus samples?" Mizuki asked.

"There are more oranges, but..."

"Fantastic. Send one to Dr. Kitajima at Kyoto University and one to Dr. Kaminuma at the National Institute of Genetics. Ask each of them to run an analysis."

"Sir?"

"And tell them to run tests with at least two separate staff members."

"I'll get on it right away."

"Needless to say, do not tell them about our results or the purpose of the analysis."

"Understood."

If they were going to be dismissed as madmen, at least they were going to have company.

Washington, D.C.

"*The WDA is proclaiming independence?*" United States President Albert Handler, seated at his desk in the Oval Office, raised an eyebrow. He exchanged glances with his chief of staff, Nick Mulberry.

"*Our analysis points to the possibility*," answered CIA Director Jean Casper.

Handler switched to a more casual speaking style.

"*Jean, this is all way too sudden.*"

"*Albert,*" she replied,"*the WDA was granted total jurisdiction over dungeons because of international agreement over the need for fast decisions. It was a temporary compromise.*"

"*Yes...?*"

"*There isn't the same kind of tumult now, and yet they keep plowing forward. And recently they found that safe area in Yoyogi. It all points to a certain conclusion...*"

Mulberry looked back and forth between the parties.

"*Hold on*," he interjected. "'*Independence'? The WDA is already independent of any national government. It's like a second United Nations. Who would they even claim 'independence' from?*"

"*Damn organization's a constant drain on American resources, and what do we get in return?*" Handler spat.

"*Albert, time and place.*" Casper turned to Mulberry. "*Forgive my initial phrasing. It may be more accurate to say the WDA appears poised to proclaim statehood.*"

"*Becoming its own* country*?*"

Casper nodded.

"*We think it's sowing the seeds for such a move.*"

"*Wait, wait,*" Mulberry protested. "*Let's say they have the land—*

the space inside all dungeons. What about a populace? Don't tell me they're going to try to count monsters as citize—" Nick stopped himself mid-sentence. "*The safe area.*"

Casper nodded once again.

"*But even if they declare statehood, who's going to recognize it?*"

Handler leaned back in his chair.

"*Nick, the general stance now is that statehood doesn't require recognition. We can't turn our backs on the Montevideo Convention.*"

"*Damn...*"

The Montevideo Convention outlined four requirements for statehood: a permanent population, defined territory, government, and the capacity to enter into relations with other states. Thanks to the safe area, the WDA could obtain a permanent population. The defined territory would be any space inside a dungeon. A government of sorts was already in place, in the form of current WDA power structures and regulations. As far as outside relations...

"*What about defensive capabilities?*" Mulberry asked.

"*Nothing to sneeze at,* if *they have a contingent of top explorers inside dungeons as citizens,*" Casper responded.

No one could easily move heavy artillery into dungeons. The only offense the WDA would need was defense. It wouldn't even take much in the way of resources, with genuine spell-slingers on their side.

Casper looked at the president and chief of staff and smiled with a mix of fear and amusement. Serious as the report was, it did have the air of a clichéd fantasy novel.

"*Still*," she continued, "*be all that as it may, declaring statehood would have been an uphill battle up until just a few days ago.*"

"*What's changed?*" Handler asked. "*They have the safe area, and a defensible position, but the way I see it they're too easily cut off from resources to be sustainable. All it would take to cripple them would be a blockade on the outside.*"

There was nearly no food in the dungeons, and only limited quantities of necessary construction materials, at least until the advent of Mining users.

Or, there *had been* nearly no food.

"*We received a rather chilling report just a few days ago,*" Casper responded.

"*Chilling?*"

"*Well, some would see it that way.*" She filled the other two in on the patent application for a certain agricultural system that had recently arrived at the WDA's Patent Office.

"*Is this some kind of joke?*" Handler read over the report. The question had crossed his lips before he even realized it.

"*I'm afraid not. The lead researcher of the WDA's Department of Food Administration requested an urgent trip to Tokyo after seeing it. That lends this some credence.*"

"*If this is true...*" Handler trailed off.

Casper finished his thought.

"*The WDA will have overcome every hurdle to proclaiming statehood.*"

"*But what about water?*"

"*Present enough in dungeons. Plus, they have Water Magic.*"

Water Magic had been among the first orbs sold at those preposterous auctions in Japan. Judging from the quantity sold so far, the WDA might have a steady supply of the orbs at their disposal.

"*Unlimited drops and construction resources, unlimited grains. Plus an army of trained magic users, and now a safe location for citizens to live in. I can see it. There's nothing stopping them from becoming a nation-state at this point, is that your point?*" Handler asked.

"*They have just about everything except a sustainable source of energy.*"

"*Those magic crystals...*" Handler mused.

"*Exactly. We'll have to keep an eye out. If an energy-extraction method is the next patent to go through...*"

"*Cut it out...*" Handler pleaded.

It was starting to seem more and more plausible. Whether claiming sovereignty would be worth the trouble for the WDA, Albert couldn't say, but certainly they were on the threshold of being able to do so if they wanted.

"*Now I'll note that an additional wrinkle is that nearly all these developments seem to be coming out of Yoyogi,*" Casper said.

"*From what the DSF tells me, it's more like one* party *in Yoyogi. Is that right*?" Handler asked.

"*The same ones who sold us that overpriced bauble,*" Mulberry grumbled angrily.

"*A necessary expense for maintaining security. Even if that 'Interpreter' or whoever popped up right afterward...*"

Nevertheless, whether the anonymous translator was a front for the Russian government or a private citizen, the effect of validating the US government's translations was the same.

"*They were behind the orb auctions, the announcement of Appraisal and a stat-measuring device, and now this dungeon farming patent, all in just three months,*" Casper recounted.

"*Almost like you can't even be surprised when they surprise you,*" Handler joked.

"*The more we learn, the more plausible the rumors seem,*" Casper mused.

"*Rumors?*" Handler asked.

Casper looked at him.

"*Rumors that Japan has made contact with the other side.*"

"*We have statements from Japan's government to the contrary.*"

"*I didn't say it was their* government *that did so.*" She slid Handler a photo.

The picture showed someone standing happily in front of some wine shop's shelves—a young woman better known by her online moniker, "Wiseman."

She was holding a bottle with a look of pure satisfaction. The label—simple, unassuming—did not escape Handler, a wine connoisseur himself. The photo had been taken in stunning clarity for a surveillance shot. The wine in question was unremarkable—some might even say unpretentious—compared to the offerings around it. He brought the photo closer to his eyes to confirm, then nodded.

"*Colgin.*" He set the photo back on the table. Colgin was one of the top wine sellers of Napa Valley. "*She a fan of Napa Valley?*"

Handler asked.

"*According to our intel, she's a fan of* all *wines,*" Casper answered. "*Fanatical, one might say.*"

"*Fanatical?*" Handler asked.

"*Take a closer look at the bottle. It's a 1999 Cariad.*"

"*And?*" The president shrugged.

"*There's an '05 and '07 on the shelf in front of her. Why choose the '99?*"

The 2005 and 2007 Colgin Cariads had received perfect Parker scores—a rare feat for any California cult wines. Yet the Wiseman had overlooked them in favor of the 1999, a vintage without any particular merits.

"*What? Is there something wrong with the '99?*" asked Mulberry. Not knowing much about wines, he felt somewhat lost.

"*The '99 only received ninety-one points from Parker on first review*[(8)]," Casper answered.

"*So that's it,*" Mulberry responded, satisfied. "*The rating was different, so the price was probably different too. I mean, she's probably just being frugal. If it were me, that's what I'd do.*"

"*What does 'frugal' even mean to someone with her money? The only wines she couldn't get her hands on at this point are rare vintages whose owners would never sell them for any price.*"

That...was true. Her cut from the Otherworldly Language Comprehension sale alone would have ensured she could have just about any pricey wine she wanted. Faced with two vintages of the same wine, what hobbyist connoisseur with nearly unlimited means wouldn't choose the more renowned one?

"*Now why,*" Casper prompted the two men, "*with these other options before her, would she go for a relatively uncelebrated vintage? Furthermore, one that had already nearly peaked in terms of drinking age?*"

"*Why don't you fill us in?*" Handler knew his CIA director would have an answer ready. She and her staff prided themselves on their profiling skills.

She smiled.

"*As it happens, 1999 was the year Helen Turley was replaced as the wine consultant at Colgin Cellars by Napa Valley prince Peter Auburn.*"

"*That's all? Couldn't that just be a coincidence?*"

"*The agent investigating said there was no mistake. Now do you get what I mean when I say 'fanatical'?*"

The president leaned back in his chair and stared up at the ceiling, looking defeated.

"*Think we could buy her with a case of '97 Screaming Eagle?*"

"*Albert, you have a* case *of Screaming Eagle?!*" All of a sudden, Casper was once again in awe of the powers of the Oval Office. That wine had been difficult to get even in limited quantities the year it was made—let alone a whole case a full two decades later. She collected herself. "*I, um, actually think there's a distinct possibility.*"

Handler nodded.

"*Worth trying, then.*"

"*Are you sure about this, Mr. President?*" Mulberry asked. "*Say we can buy her...with rare wine. What exactly would we be asking for?*"

"*I don't know... How about we start with an autograph for my little girl?*"

"*Mr. President...*"

Handler straightened up and folded his hands in front of him on his desk.

"*I'll be straight. I've gotten some very interesting reports from Lieutenant Gershwin in the DSF.*"

"*Ah. Simon...*" Casper furrowed her brow. "*You know, my staff have reported that he's a bit* too *friendly with D-Powers. The other day, he was seen heading into their office, and shortly after, Russian explorer Dmitrij Nelnikov stopped by. Unfortunately we don't have audio of their conversation inside, but Dmitrij left first and seemed to be in quite a good mood.*"

"*I've already gotten a report about that from the DSF,*" the president answered. "*Along with details on their visit.*"

The report had come from Simon, of course, but who else *could* it have come from?

Casper shrugged sheepishly.

"*Not the CIA's finest hour.*"

"*Not any intelligence agency's finest hour with this party, from what I hear,*" Mulberry interjected. "*Apparently D-Powers keeps getting foreign agents extradited one after the other.*"

Casper shrugged.

"*Even ours?*" Handler asked, looking worried.

"*Regrettably,*" she answered. "*So, what was their conversation? Top secret?*"

"*Apparently, it was 'a light chat and toast over craft beer and Russian vodka.' Also, the party in question served their guests dungeon-grown oranges, which Simon was rather panicked over.*"

"*Dungeon-grown oranges?!*"

"*I don't have any more details, other than understanding it was a world-first. Simon predicted more details will come out from the JDA in the near future, so keep an eye out for them.*"

Regardless of the content of their conversation, an American superstar and Russian hero meeting behind closed doors at the office of the world's most conspicuous party would do nothing to ease suspicions the WDA was making a bid for statehood. If anything, it could easily be interpreted as a meeting to discuss potential defections.

"*Now, that's all just according to Simon,*" Handler concluded. "*But if true, it's another world-first that party will soon be trotting out. I think it's in our best interest to...*" He seemed to hesitate over his next words, then committed to them. "*Befriend them.*"

Mulberry threw up his hands.

"*Sir, that's a rather flimsy defense policy, don't you think?*"

Casper thought for a moment.

"*No, it might just work,*" she replied.

Diplomacy was defense policy too. It was the political process in action. In an election, you would schmooze those who held political, social, or financial influence. That would spill over to the masses too. Most wouldn't care what policies they were voting for when they stepped up to the ballot box—only that they were casting their ballot for a familiar face. It was exactly why door-to-door canvassing still worked.

"*The Japanese are typically rather susceptible to personal advances. She isn't likely to say no to a direct proposal of friendship.*"

"*An offer of personal friendship from the United States of America? Operation Tomodachi*[(9)] *indeed,*" Mulberry joked.

"*The target is the Dungeon Celebrity of the Year. No. Maybe we should call her the Goodwill Ambassador to the Other Side,*" Handler responded.

"*Goodwill Ambassador* for *the Other Side,*" Mulberry corrected him.

Either way, Handler figured, it would be easier to deal with the whims of one wine fanatic than an entire WDA nation-state.

February 1, 2019 (Friday)

Fujimoto, Tsukuba City, Ibaraki Prefecture

It was shortly before lunch at the NARO Institute of Fruit Tree and Tea Science, or NIFTS, when Sayama came running up to Mizuki's desk with the results of the analyses he'd requested. Thanks to the "urgent" preference on the requests, the researchers at the other institutions had sent in their findings right away.

"Dr. Kitajima tested the oranges with two personnel. All results came back Setoka," Sayama announced.

"I see," Mizuki responded.

"Dr. Kitajima was wondering why we'd even requested the tests. What should I tell him?"

"We'll worry about that later. What about Kaminuma?"

"The first two staff who tested it both reported findings consistent with the citrus hybrid Kyomi."

"So we're the only ones who got different results depending on the researchers?" This wasn't looking good. Anyone would just assume their equipment had been defective or dirty. *Wait...* "Did you say 'first two'?"

“That’s correct. Afterward, they had a student who had dropped by the lab run a third analysis, and...the result was Setoka.”

Shocked, the first researcher had run his analysis again and, sure enough, gotten Kiyomi. He’d then had the student perform the analysis once more, this time under supervision. Like before, the student’s results came back...

“Setoka,” Mizuki surmised.

Sayama nodded, and gulped.

“The researcher thought the student was pranking them, but apparently the student had no idea what was going on.” One thorough equipment-cleaning later, they’d called in a third colleague. That third colleague’s tests came back... “Amakusa.”

Sayama slid the report silently across Mizuki’s desk.

“What do you make of this?” Mizuki asked.

“A hardware failure,” Sayama quickly answered. “That, or we’re all going mad.”

When asked to explain the unexplainable, there were usually only three tacks: doubt the equipment, doubt the methodology, or doubt one’s own sanity.

Even if it were none of the above, there had to be some kind of rule that would explain the observed phenomenon—that was the mantra of natural sciences.

“Sayama.”

“Sir?”

“I want you to make a trip to Yoyogi.”

“Yoyogi?”

“Come on. It’s a breeze compared to going all the way to Okitsu.”

NARO maintained a prestigious citrus research center, opened in 2006, in Okitsu, Shizuoka Prefecture.

“Ah, Okitsu!” Sayama responded. “It certainly is nice. Lots of colorful restaurants there. That’s right! Last time I went...”

He recounted how he’d helped a colleague’s wife who was leaving the hospital, and how right across the street from the obstetrics unit there’d been this restaurant with its name taken straight from a certain children’s TV show.(10)

"Sayama."

He had then entered the establishment and ordered a sliced-pork curry. To his surprise, it came out on a plate with the restaurant's logo placed next to a likeness of the mouse from a certain world where dreams come true. While famous, said rodent had no connection whatsoever to the show from which the restaurant had taken its name. The whole thing was a copyright disaster just waiting to happen, he declaimed fervently.

"Sayama!"

Sayama's brilliant plan—to filibuster with talk about Okitsu until his lunch break started and then dart out of the room—had been easily quashed.

"Yes, sir," he relented. "Yoyogi is much easier than going to Okitsu. I hesitate to even ask, sir, but I assume this is to do with..."

"I asked the JDA. The oranges we're dealing with grow on the twenty-first floor of the dungeon."

"So they *were* dungeon-grown. I've never heard of any fruits growing naturally in dungeons before."

"It's a first, apparently. A brand-new discovery."

"So...what exactly would *I* be doing?"

"It's right around scion-cutting season, isn't it?"

The term "scion" referred to the upper part of a plant in horticulture grafting, wherein two plants' tissues were merged to help with propagation and hybridization. The "understock" was the grafting recipient—the trunk and roots to which the "scion" was grafted. Scion materials were usually cut one to two months before grafting, and grafting season for citrus fruits was in April.

"Do dungeon fruit trees even have dormancy?" Sayama asked, thinking about horticultural cycles.

"Only one way to find out," Mizuki answered, with what seemed to Sayama like ominous foreshadowing, though he dared not give the thought breath. Still...

"Sir, are you sure dungeon plants are really safe to use as scions in the outside world?"

"It's not illegal," Mizuki argued. "Besides, I'll clear it with the JDA first, and we'll be raising the trees in an enclosed environment."

They were researchers after all, he added.

Sayama couldn't help but worry about what would happen if an errant breeze or bee carried off some dungeon pollen from their "enclosed" grove. Dungeon fruit trees propagating in the outside world didn't seem like a concern to take lightly. But before that...

"How am I even supposed to get to the twenty-first floor?" Sayama asked.

"I've arranged for a meeting with the team who brought back the oranges. Apparently they got an untrained gemologist all the way past floor twenty-one. They can probably get you down there unscathed."

"'Probably'?"

Sayama's mind flashed to those early, brave biologists traveling the Himalayas and Amazon in the quest to obtain new foundation strains. Whoever would have imagined a similar opportunity would visit him in the present?

"I'm actually jealous," Mizuki said. "If I could, I'd take your place."

Yeah, right, Sayama responded mentally. However, verbally he merely let out a vague, "Hrm..." After a pause, he made one request.

"I'd like to have accident insurance."

"We aren't anticipating any accidents, but... Okay, just in case. I'll draw up the forms. Now stop worrying. Instead, think about what a rare chance this is. Opportunities like this don't knock twice in a lifetime. Oh, by the way, bring back some other dungeon plant life while you're at it."

"I'll do my best."

Opportunities like this don't knock twice because they kill you *the first time,* Sayama couldn't help thinking.

However, a part of him was genuinely getting excited. Perhaps he had that explorer's blood in him after all.

"Do you have an explorer card?" Mizuki asked.

"Why would I?"

"You'll need one. Sign up for the first JDA crash course if you can."

"Yes, sir."

With their conversation seeming to have reached a natural conclusion, Mizuki gave Sayama a pat on the shoulder.

"I'll nail down the travel plans with the JDA. Just be ready to go." With that, he started to walk toward the office door for lunch. "Ah, by the way," he added, turning around. "Someone from the Institute of Crop Science has some questions. Swing by there this afternoon."

Crop science now too? Was Sayama just imagining things? Alone now in the office, he gazed out the window up at the dull winter sky.

"Yoyogi..." he mumbled to himself.

NIFTS's offices were pretty far from any station. The Tsukuba, Expo '70 Commemorative Park, Midori, Arakawaoki, and Hitachinoushiku stations were all about the same distance, along with Kenkyugakuen and Ushiku—viewed generously. Just hearing how many stations surrounded it might give someone the mistaken impression that it was in the middle of an urban center, but nothing could have been further from the truth. In reality, long, empty roads and industrial developments stretched out in all directions from the campus. It was enough to make one wonder if the rows of trees and foliage weren't just trying to mask how empty the area was.

Most NIFTS employees commuted by car, but Sayama didn't necessarily want to drive into downtown Tokyo.

"It's just a little over an hour from Midorino, taking the Tsukuba Express..."

He could get to Ichigaya from Akihabara on one train via the Chuo-Sobu Line. And if he booked it through Akihabara Station to catch the first transfer he could, he could even cut the trip down to less than an hour.

"I know our budget's tight, but they *will* at least comp travel, right?" With that, he looked at the clock. It was just noon. The hallways would be swarming right now.

"What do I do for lunch?"

Fujimoto, where NIFTS was located, along with its predecessor the NARO Fruit Tree Research Lab, was some distance from the main NARO HQ. Other than some offices belonging to NARO's National Institute of Vegetable and Floriculture Science (NIVFS), there was nothing else around. In fact, national census data put the residential

numbers of Fujimoto at a staggering zero, even though it was ostensibly part of Tsukuba City.

As one might expect, it was slim pickings for restaurants.

There was a ramen shop with a drill-sergeant-like owner across the road, and next to that there was a love hotel. That was it. He'd heard from more...socially capable coworkers that the love hotel offered room service, but depending on the room theme you picked, it might be a little...overstimulating(11) for lunch.

"If I have to go by NICS anyway...I guess maybe Marubell Cafeteria?"

The Marubell Cafeteria, located in the Agriculture, Forestry, and Fisheries Research Council's Tsukuba University-Industry Collaboration Support Center, was open to the public for lunch. It was cheap, ordinary office-worker cafeteria food. However, it would put him directly across the street from NICS.

Damn. He might be dead on the twenty-first floor of a dungeon this time next week. This was no time for business trips and dreary cafeteria food. This was a time for loving! He would have to find a partner he could try the room service at that nearby hotel with. And if his own assessment of his survival chances was accurate, he would have to do so quickly.

February 3, 2019 (Sunday)

Yoyogi-Hachiman, Office

After a warm first day and a half of February, near the end of the second—maybe due to radiative cooling—the temperature finally dipped below freezing, and the following morning did nothing to dispel the chill.

Stepping out of the shower, feet sopping wet, I stepped over to the window, looked out at the cloudless sky, and cracked it open. I was greeted by a cold gust and the outline of my own breath.

"Yeeep. Winter," I said, resigning myself to my fate.

I shut the window, quickly did my hair, and got dressed, then headed down to the office, where Miyoshi was already sitting at the dining room table staring at a tablet with a face like she'd just swallowed a bug.

"Up and at 'em early?" I asked.

"The DNA results for the oranges came back."

"Over the weekend? Damn, hope everyone got paid. So, what's the deal?" I grabbed some water from the fridge and poured myself a glass.

"Brace yourself," she responded. "It's, like, particle-physics weird."

"Huh?" I put the water pitcher back in the fridge, took a sip from my glass, then came and sat down across from Miyoshi.

"Assuming their equipment isn't broken, what do you make of this?" Miyoshi passed me the tablet.

I took a look at its contents, then looked up at Miyoshi.

"Is this serious?"

"Kei, this is the *National* Institute of Fruit Tree and Tea Science. They're supposed to be very prestigious."

"You're the one saying 'supposed to be.'" I downed the last of my water, switching to serious mode. "Then, assuming this is all correct, it seems like lazy evaluation."

"Lazy evaluation" was a programming strategy which avoided setting details for a variable until they were called upon. If utilized efficiently, the computational resources used to call in a new variable could be reduced nearly down to zero.

Thinking of it that way, when we smelled or bit into the oranges, the D-Factors would determine the appropriate fragrance and taste. Doing anything more would be a waste of resources. They wouldn't fix DNA results until mandated by, say, by running an analysis test. Observation became creation.

Based on our previous experiences, it was likely the oranges that registered as Setoka had probably been analyzed by researchers thinking of that hybrid, and the same for the Kiyomis.

"In other words, dungeon science...is *weird*," Miyoshi declared.

Maybe... But advanced mathematics, while nonsense to a preschooler, still has its own rules. Maybe dungeon science was

similar. We might have lacked the capacity to fully understand it, but that didn't mean it was truly weird or irrational—if it was even explainable via science at all, that was.

"But hold on," I said. "This does make me a little nervous about eating dungeon-grown produce."

More than side effects, it made me nervous about whether dungeon-grown food would have any nutritional value.

"If your theory is correct," Miyoshi responded, "wouldn't it just determine the nutritional value once the body started digesting it?"

"Would that work for people without D-Cards?"

Only D-Card holders could use skill orbs, for example, probably because their bodies had already been exposed to D-Factors.

"There's some orc meat on the open market, but all I know for sure is that it's been reported not to have any adverse side effects," Miyoshi answered. "I don't think I've heard about any detailed tests on its nutritional value."

There were rumors it raised stats, but that was a different matter from whether you could live on it. At the very least, it didn't seem like there were any reports on, say, what happened to a lab animal on a strict diet of it.

"Do you think the orange DNA tests were run by D-Card holders?" Miyoshi asked. "National research institute staff tend to be indoor types."

"Hm... In terms of age, too," I responded, "there are probably a lot of people working in research jobs who have never even been inside a dungeon."

"Right? These aren't recent graduates. Not at a national institute. But if they caused the lazy evaluation results, then they should be able to cause the oranges to determine nutritional value too, right?"

"Either way, we'll probably have to do some lab-rat testing with wheat," I responded. "We'd have our answer just by tracking fluctuations in or maintenance of body weight."

"Thin rats equals no nutritional value for non D-Card holders."

"Yep. Although one problem with that setup..." I put my hand to my chin. "How would we know *we* weren't setting the nutritional value just by interacting with the wheat?"

"Dang. And there's no way to run detailed tests on the wheat without *definitely* setting it."

"I'm starting to hate particle physics." I laughed.

Hitting observer-interference issues with something that wasn't even microscopic, let alone subatomic? Couldn't be me.

Oh well. The DFA would be running experiments too. We'd just have to put our faith in the pros.

Ending the conversation with a shrug, Miyoshi got up, moved to the sofa, and turned on the TV.

"Anything interesting on?"

"Today's Fuwa's race."

Oh, right! I had completely forgotten that today was the Beppu-Oita Marathon.

Nishigaoka, Kita City, Tokyo, Japan Institute of Sports Sciences

The A1 exit at Motohasunuma Station, by the Mita Line, let out onto Hasunuma Athlete Road. It didn't get its name from athletes running on it. No, turning right and heading down the road a bit would reveal its true namesake: the Nishigaoka Soccer Stadium, better known as Ajinomoto Field Nishigaoka (not to be confused with Ajinomoto Stadium in Chofu).

Next to the soccer field sat the Japan Institute of Sports Sciences, or JISS. On this day, within one of its meeting rooms, the Japan Anti-Doping Agency—JADA for short—was currently convening an emergency meeting.

"We have word that Ms. Serina Takada, who as you all know recently broke records at the Osaka International Women's Marathon, had participated in a dungeon boot camp in Yoyogi just the day prior. The question is whether this constitutes doping."

"I think you're going to have a hard time arguing that it does," replied a relatively young committee member—a former sprinter. "Under current policy, dungeon training would be in the same category as altitude training, correct? Both produce physiological

changes, but neither one involves any outside substances. Takada's bloodwork was clean, right?"

"As a whistle. And she has consistently clean Athlete Biological Passport checks."

The man nodded, seeming satisfied, then leaned back and fiddled with his pen.

"There's no practical way to ban anyone who's done dungeon training from the Olympics, right?" another member spoke up.

"Even if we could..."

"I think everyone in this room can understand serious athletes doing whatever's necessary to compete."

"Setting aside the Olympics, I don't see us being able to pass any bans on dungeon training now."

"Why not?"

"Look at the results Takada and that archer—Saito, I think her name was—achieved. Then there was Nagai at the Hakone Ekiden. If we ban the training now, anyone who hasn't already done it will never be able to catch up to those who have."

"Hmm. Right. Plus, we can't just ban anyone who's ever been in a dungeon from major competitions. The constitution forbids ex post facto criminal charges. We may just be talking about JADA rules instead of legislation, but we're still a national organization. We're not going to win any lawsuits defending a rule that could be attacked as being, in spirit, unconstitutional."

"Dungeon use doesn't show up in blood or urine testing either. We know that from Takada's example. How would we even identify athletes who had been in a dungeon anyway? No one's going to voluntarily turn themselves in for dungeon-training doping."

To that point, the anti-dungeon-training faction of the committee had no response.

"I heard the JDA has some sort of method for detecting ownership of D-Cards. They used it for the National Center Exams."

"Okay, say we can pinpoint D-Card holders. What exactly would we do with that information?"

Would there be special rules just for orb-users? Was D-Card possession protected information? Too many people had cards now,

especially among the younger generations—in part thanks to the recent telepathy boom.

"If we say D-Card ownership is tantamount to doping, we'll be cutting several percentage points out of the Japanese population. And given the average ages of dungeon explorers, the nation's talent pool of athletes would take an outsized hit. It may be better to start thinking of establishing separate categories for explorers to compete in."

If they weren't going to impose a universal ban, the next conversation was where cutoff lines would be drawn.

"*If* we keep allowing dungeon-training abusers to compete, with this kind of difference in ability, how can we claim there's a clean and fair competitive environment?"

"Once again, altitude training. Everyone has a chance to do it. Our biggest worry would probably be coaches sending telepathic messages from the sidelines in tennis or soccer matches."

Several younger members nodded.

"Dr. Levine, one of the more prominent researchers of altitude training, offered his own assessment that it was just a natural process of body acclimatization. As long as the acclimation process was natural, there was no ground for labeling it illegal or unethical."

"And is dungeon training 'natural'?"

"Can we get away with saying it's not?"

Sensing the debate was deadlocked, the chairperson moved to close the meeting.

"Let's wait for Masato Fuwa's results from Oita," the chairperson proclaimed. "Also, we'll need info on the physical capabilities of top-level dungeon explorers."

"A suggestion—why not ask the JDA to introduce us to a high-level explorer team for a little unofficial track meet?"

"Not bad. Without more data, we can't come to a decision anyway."

Experts in their fields though they were, they currently had too little to go on.

"No statements regarding dungeon training for the time being," the chairperson concluded. "I'll get in contact with the JDA right

away to set up an unofficial meet. Any objections?”

There were none.

“Then that brings this meeting to a close. Thank you all for your time.”

Every member present had been a phenom in their own sport and remained influential within their various athletic organizations. Takada’s results had made blood doping and EPO look like nothing. Their hearts ached for the athletes who had been told to stay off of doping while the much more effective dungeon-training lay on the table.

It likely wouldn’t just be heartache that awaited young athletes either. Coaches across the country were probably scurrying to get their athletes into dungeons while they could.

Yoyogi-Hachiman, Office

“Just like Takada said it would go.” Miyoshi sat in front of the TV, beaming. It had been three hours since she’d turned it on, and an interviewer now prepared to speak to Fuwa, the winner of the race.

He hadn’t just *broken* the record. He had chewed on it, spit it out, and stomped on it.

“Mr. Fuwa, congratulations on the race!”

“Th-Thank you.”

“But my, what an impressive time! Two hours and forty-three seconds. That beats the previous world record by five minutes! And your personal best before this was only two hours, eight minutes, twenty-one seconds. You took your own time down by nearly eight minutes!”

The interviewer drove home her shock with an exaggerated face that wouldn’t have been out of place in an online video thumbnail, then hardened her expression to dive into what seemed to be the main topic.

“Now, last week you were spotted in Tokyo with Takada, who dominated the Osaka International last week. She also brought down her personal best by eight minutes. Is there any connection

between your Tokyo activities and your records?”

“Hey, ask about me first!” Fuwa joked.

“Ah, I’m terribly sorry!” The interviewer hastily corrected herself. “You’ve earned a ticket to the grand championship with this. Is your final goal next year’s Olympics?”

“Ah, well, the Olympics are definitely one goal. But there are a lot of other things I’d like to try my hand at too.”

“Huh?”

You could practically see a question mark appear above the interviewer’s head. It sounded like this twenty-one-year-old runner who had just crushed a world record was announcing his retirement from marathons.

Noticing, Fuwa scrambled to explain. “N-No! Not like that. I just mean, I have two more years until I graduate, and I want to keep challenging myself. I’m just trying to think of things to say.”

“Phew! I thought you were going to announce you were stepping away from running.”

Fuwa laughed.

Trying to get the conversation back on track, the interviewer pivoted to gossip.

“Now, there are rumors swirling about you and Takada. Any truth?”

“Takada’s just a friend and upperclassman—a strict one, when it comes to running. But I guess you could say we’re...training partners?”

“Oh! And any special training you’ve done?”

“You could say so.”

“Whatever could that mean?”

“Let’s just keep it a secret for now.” Fuwa gave the camera a playful wink.

“I suppose that’s as much as you can ask for with training that lets you break records like this!” The interviewer smiled.

In the background, you could just about see an AD making a rotating motion with his hands, urging the interviewer to wrap it up.

“Any final comments for our audience?” She offered Fuwa the mic.

Fuwa took one step toward the camera, stuck out his fist, then shouted something.

"Sergeant Cathy! We did it!"

"What? Huh?" The interviewer looked befuddled.

The image cut back to the studio.

"It looks like we lost the feed. And that was the on-the-scene news from the Beppu-Oita Marathon. Fuwa sure looked happy."

The station switched to a commercial.

"I didn't realize Fuwa was...like that," I commented.

"I can't believe he gave Cathy a shout-out live on TV..."

"Plus, doing a boot camp literally one day before a huge marathon. These athletes are nu—nothing to sneeze at."

Miyoshi grinned at my obvious pivot.

"But he won," she pointed out. "While setting another world record."

"Think we can really count on him for dungeon help?"

"Who knows. Probably not on the front lines."

Come to think of it, we had to be careful about being on the front lines ourselves now, thanks to Mining. Who would have thought the world's currently most sought-after orb would become a kind of shackle?

In addition, as the JDA's Mining user, Rokujo would probably be tasked with setting and grinding for drops on the floors surrounding our base for a while to rack up building materials for construction in the safe area. I wasn't sure when we could have her back on the front lines. In the meantime, we couldn't risk plowing forward and setting any useless drops.

"We're going to have to figure something out..." I remarked.

"About how to have our enrollees help out at Yoyogi?" Miyoshi asked.

"No. For going down to floors where the Mining drops aren't set."

"Ah. That is a problem. We already wasted the thirty-first on an iron drop too..."

We could keep trying to set drops with the atomic-mass method, but we weren't even sure what minerals would be most useful. We'd also have to be extra careful to consider the safe area's needs.

We had no idea, at that time, that an unexpected solution to our Mining problems was just a little ways off.

February 4, 2019 (Monday)

Yoyogi Dungeon Consultation Space

Shibu T emerged from their most recent trip to the eighteenth floor only to be called into a small meeting room by a JDA staffer at reception. Apparently someone from JADA—whatever that was—wanted a word with them.

"So the request comes from JADA itself. Would you be willing to hear it out?" the JDA Commercial Affairs staffer asked.

"That depends. They asked for us specifically?" Hayashida inquired.

"Not exactly. JADA simply put in a request for some high-level explorers. The JDA recommended Shibu T."

"Humph. And break it down for me—what exactly *is* JADA?"

"The Japan Anti-Doping Agency. A sports regulatory organization. Its main task is what its name implies."

"An anti-doping agency? Why'd they request us?" Kiyan asked, as if he hadn't been listening.

"They want to hold an unofficial track meet."

"A...track meet? What for?"

"They'd like to measure the abilities of some top explorers."

"Hey, hey! This could be cool!" Kiyan put a hand on Hayashida's shoulder and leaned in, whispering. "We could probably pick up some new fans."

"What's it pay?" Hayashida asked.

As it turned out, while the reward for the job might have been eye-popping for the average part-time worker, it was unimpressive compared to a day's earnings in the dungeon for a high-ranking team.

"A little stingy." Azuma scrunched his brow.

“Azzy,” Kiyan cooed. “Come on. Aren’t you curious to see how we’ll do? Heck, we might even make a team for next year!”

“‘Make a team’? You mean like for the Olympics?”

“They haven’t officially announced the athletes yet!”

“They haven’t, but... Come on.”

Azuma, a self-described realist, couldn’t help but respond skeptically to Kiyan’s excitement.

“Daiken, what’s your opinion?” Hayashida asked.

“I’m good either way. Neither super interested nor opposed.”

“That just leaves you, Dennis.” Hayashida turned toward the team’s remaining member.

“Count me in with Daiken. I’m good either way too. What about you, boss?”

“Good question.” Hayashida put his hand to his chin. “We have three ambivalent, one in favor. I guess, if it only takes a day, let’s give it a go.”

“Yahoo!” Kiyan shouted.

“Thank you. In that case, here are the details.” The Commercial Affairs staffer handed Hayashida a single sheet of paper.

“Shoe size?” Hayashida looked up, gesturing to a spot on the form.

“JADA will provide running shoes.”

“That’s great. Hold on. There’s a range for the dates.”

“I’m told you may pick any day from the provided options.”

“Then let’s go with the earliest one. I want to get back to the dungeon grind as soon as possible.”

“I’ll let them know. Just head to the Japan Institute of Sports Sciences on the morning of the selected day.”

And so the day grew closer for Shibu T to emerge as modern sports heroes of Japan...

Possibly.

February 5, 2019 (Tuesday)

Chelsea, Lower Manhattan, New York City

Fashion Week's women's events were set to kick off on the seventh with a Ralph Lauren show. The men's shows had just started, with events popping up all over town.

"*You're too present. You're drowning out the clothes,*" Haruka's director had told her. She was sitting outside the studio, reflecting on his words. "*No good. The only outfits that can stand up to you are the centerpiece coutures.*"

There was no way those outfits would get passed off to a fledgling model. Haruka smiled. The very aura she'd started dungeon diving to achieve was now getting in her way. Life could be funny that way...

Each day in New York had felt like a dream, but each day had also shown her just how much she didn't know.

For example, there were the protests—anti-Fashion Week demonstrations. Apparently two years ago they'd been quite disruptive, but had tapered off in scale thanks to the British Fashion Council's banning of fur and investing in more sustainable production methods and materials.

Due to that, this year fur was out and feathers were in among the luxury brands. Haruka wasn't sure what separated fowl from other fauna, but it wasn't her problem.

She was a technician—her job was simply to show off the outfits and make them look stunning. Then again, perhaps her lack of prior thought regarding materials was preventing her from reaching her full potential.

In the meantime, she focused on how she could erase her own presence in her movement—to create the illusion that the clothes were moving on their own. The direction of creases and wrinkles. The angle and distance that would best show off the contours and drape. Where to speed up and where to slow down, all to hold the audience's eyes, not on her, but on the design she was wearing. She sunk deeper and deeper into a sea of meditative thought.

When she came to, she noticed she was being leered at by a

rather strange Buddha statue not far from one of the benches outside Pier59 Studios, one of the main venues for the week's events.

"Something bothering you too?" she asked, addressing the silent statue.

She took out her phone and snapped a picture to send to Ryoko. "Weird Buddha statue," the message read.

Come to think of it, she'd have to get something to send Yoshimura and Miyoshi too. Valentine's Day was just around the corner. She took her phone back out and started searching for New York chocolatiers.

JDA Headquarters, Ichigaya

"I-I'm Sayama. Pleased to meet you."

A slightly gaunt, perennially sunlight-starved scientist greeted us. He hastily shoved his glasses back up his nose. If there were a better textbook image of your average lab worker, I hadn't seen it. And I'd been around plenty of other candidates.

"A pleasure to meet you too. I'm Yoshimura, and this is one of our other party members, Miyoshi."

Today we were scheduled to meet with a NARO researcher who had requested our service as a protection detail for an upcoming dungeon dive. I hadn't heard much more than that.

Usually bodyguard jobs went to larger parties. But in this case, the security detail was only for one person, and his destination was the orange-tree grove we'd discovered. It only seemed natural that the JDA would bring the request to us.

He makes Komugi look like explorer of the year, I telepathied to Miyoshi.

Right, but Naruse knows about Storage and the Arthurs.

Ah, I guess she'd be confident we could handle it even as a small team.

"First, a review of the request," Naruse announced.

The JDA handled the first phase of job requests, including a set

fee calculated from the accepting party's earnings. However, in cases where those fees proved prohibitive, the JDA could facilitate face-to-face meetings to negotiate a price. That was what had brought us in.

"The request is for safe transport of one researcher to the twenty-first floor, further protection during work duties performed on said floor, then transport back to the surface. In addition, the accepting party shall provide basic food and shelter. Is that all correct?" Naruse asked Sayama.

"It is."

"What kind of 'duties'?" I asked.

"My main task is to retrieve some branches from the citrus trees whose fruits we recently analyzed at the JDA's request..."

"Branches?"

"Yes. The fruits displayed anomalous properties. We'd like to try grafting some cuttings from the trees..."

I looked at Naruse. Would the JDA really allow that? She gave me a slight nod. Apparently they would.

"Okay. Well, just don't expect the Ritz and we should get along fine!"

I tried cracking a joke to break the tension, but apparently Sayama took me seriously. He pushed his glasses up once again and nodded.

"Of course."

These kinds of "escort missions," as they were colloquially called, usually came with prohibitions on interfering with the escorted personnel's work. Apparently that had been a bit of a gray area at first, which had led to professional and legal problems with botched research, payroll issues, the works. Now the policy was clear—hands off except for protection, unless there were specific provisions in the paperwork stipulating otherwise.

"In that case, could we get you to sign this?" I passed Sayama some papers Miyoshi had handed me.

"What is it?" he asked. He seemed surprised to be handed anything else to sign at this point.

"A nondisclosure agreement. You may see some things during our

dungeon exploration that require confidentiality.”

“Such as?”

“Like if she uses certain kinds of magic,” I replied, gesturing to Miyoshi with an open palm.

“Magic skills?”

“Indeed. If you witness such a thing, you’re not permitted to tell anyone else what you’ve seen.”

Professional explorers kept their skills and tactics close to the chest. No one wanted to reveal their trump cards while their livelihoods depended on them.

“And the penalties?” Sayama asked.

“A fine equivalent to the previous year of our earnings, to compensate for potential damages.”

“A-A whole year?!”

“That’s right. I know it sounds harsh, but think about all the trouble for us going forward if anything gets leaked. I mean, we don’t really want to calculate what the potential lifelong losses would be—plus that doesn’t seem reasonable—but we’d ask for a year.”

“And in the event that I discuss something that is already a known skill?”

“Well, her use of Appraisal is public knowledge, so that wouldn’t be in the scope of the NDA. Though if you found out something specific about the use of Appraisal and leaked it...”

“Understood.” Sayama nodded.

I didn’t assume he had any intention of violating the agreement; the tough talk was just a matter of due diligence. A year’s worth of earnings was enough to worry anyone over unintentional slipups, but hey—that was the goal. Sayama reluctantly signed the paper, sporting a thousand-yard stare.

Of course, he probably never imagined he had just agreed to pay the equivalent of the annual public revenue of Berlin if anything went wrong.

The NDA officially signed, we passed the floor back to Naruse.

“Now, the fee...” she began.

“I heard from Commercial Affairs that there was a standard calculation,” Sayama butted in.

"I assume they told you it was calculated off of the daily average earnings for the party based on their last year of profits."

"That's right."

"However, in cases where the standard rate proves problematic, the applicant and accepting party may meet to settle on a mutually agreeable alternative."

"Problematic?" Sayama asked. "Is there some additional fee?" Sayama looked back over his request form. Sure, he was a first-time explorer going down to the twenty-first floor. There might be some additional charges given the dangers involved.

Naruse shook her head.

"D-Powers' daily rate, calculated as a percentage of their earnings last year, would come out to around 1.2 or 1.3 *billion* yen."

"B-B-B—" Sayama sputtered. Had he heard that right? A *daily* rate of 1.2 billion yen? Not the Iraqi dinar, or the Somali shilling, or the rapidly plummeting Venezuelan bolivar? Not that he could pay that much even if the fee *were* in bolivar. Wait, if that were true, then the NDA he'd just signed... "H-Hold on. Then my fine for an NDA violation..."

"Would come to 450 billion yen. And some change."

"O— Oh." Sayama blinked.

"There's nothing to worry about so long as you don't violate the contract." Naruse smiled.

Sayama nodded vigorously.

"H-How much would the rate generally be for parties who take on this kind of request?" he asked after a moment.

"It depends on the party, but the cheapest tend to run about two hundred thousand."

Working twenty days a month, that would put a party's monthly earnings at around four million yen. That might have seemed hefty at a glance, but divided between six or so party members, it only amounted to around 660,000 per person. Not bad, but considering the danger involved... For the kinds of parties venturing past the twentieth floor, the individual compensation would definitely need to be higher.

Damn, Sayama thought. He had been hoping against hope that

the request could be fulfilled for a million yen. The odds of that being possible now seemed vanishingly thin. And either way, the party he'd been set up with had a daily rate of *1.2 billion*. In terms of earnings, they had to be in the upper echelons nationally. He couldn't help but wonder if he'd been handed a luxury model when the basic package would do.

"May I have a minute to discuss the budget with my superior?" Sayama asked.

"Of course. There's no reception in these meeting rooms, but you're free to use the lobby."

"Thank you."

With that, one nervously sweating Sayama departed.

"Naruse, is he going to be diving in street clothes?" I asked. "We should at least get him set up with a starter kit and a little gear and basic training first."

"You're one to talk." She smirked.

Oof. Okay, fair. She was probably thinking back to when we'd first met—my days walking in and out of the dungeon in civvies. But hold on, in my case I had barely known a thing about the dungeons, so you could forgive my ignorance! Plus, I had only been visiting the first floor.

Still, going past the second floor ill-equipped tended to draw the eyes of nosy veteran explorers. We'd been on the receiving end of unsolicited advice several times. And for this job, we'd be going down to the twenty-first floor. We were definitely going to stand out.

"The protection request doesn't include any gear purchases," Naruse explained. "Any costs on that front will have to be borne by the individual."

"Stingy."

"Maybe. But a degree of personal liability is important."

I guess that tracked. If you exited the vehicle during a safari and got mauled by a lion, you couldn't blame the driver. If you requested escort through the dungeon without even the most basic preparation or gear...

Just then, I noticed the sound of someone running down the hallway outside.

"Is that Sayama back already?" Miyoshi asked. "He really gets budget talks done quick."

But instead, the door swung open to reveal a man with slightly unkempt red hair.

"*Fantastic! We made it in time!*" he shouted in English.

"Robin...Williams?" Miyoshi took one look at his face and those were the first words out of her mouth. Certainly, there was a passing resemblance, but no...

"Hold on," I protested. "He looks more like..."

"Who? Ah!"

"Gauss!" we both shouted at the same time.

Yep. This dude was a dead ringer for Christian Albrecht Jensen's portrait of the eighteenth century German mathematician, astronomer, and physical scientist Johann Carl Friedrich Gauss.

"*Gauss?*" he asked, confused. "*Like the Planet Monster from* Ultraman*?*"

"*Planet Monster?*"

"*I was giving it a spin on Crunchyroll. They had a bunch of series on there up until last year. Tokusatsu stuff is pretty much media canon in Japan, right?*"

A foreign researcher—that was only my guess, since he hadn't properly introduced himself—checking out old tokusatsu on Crunchyroll... Yeah. Yeah, it tracked. Oh, these modern times.

"*We were actually talking about the mathematician*."

"*Oh, an honor, then. I guess I do kind of look like him!*"

He framed his jaw with his hand, tucking his chin down and smirking confidently.

"*Mr. Argyle, what on earth are you doing? Introduce yourself!*"

A sharply—and monochromatically—dressed young woman popped up behind him.





"*Oh, right! Name is Nathan Argyle. Call me Nathan. Is this the meeting room D-Powers is using?*"

"Nathan Argyle..." Naruse repeated with a look of surprise, standing up and trotting over to our guests. "*My apologies,*" she said, switching to English. "*Nathan Argyle with the DFA?*"

"*Last I checked. And you are?*"

"*Miharu Naruse, JDA. I'm also D-Powers' dedicated supervisor. I'd heard you were coming to Japan, but what brings you to this room?*"

Ordinarily the JDA's International Cooperations Section handled the visits of WDA guests. A sister section to the Dungeon Management Section, under the same Dungeon Management Department, it handled almost all WDA contact.

"*I can lead you to International Cooperations if you're lost.*"

"*Not lost,*" Nathan responded. "*We're just where we want to be. We heard from Demir that D-Powers would be here.*"

"Demir?" I looked at Naruse.

"Demir Anderson. Chief of the International Cooperations Section," she curtly explained.

She turned back to Nathan and resumed speaking English.

"*Understood. But what business might you—*"

"*That's simple,*" Argyle responded. "*We're here to piggyback off their research!*"

"*Eh?*"

"Hey, Miyoshi, did you hear that?" I asked in Japanese. "Something about 'piggybacking'?"

"I heard it..."

"*Dr. Argyle, if we could perhaps request just a moment.*" Naruse looked concerned. "*We're in the middle of some job request negotiations. Perhaps any discussions about D-Powers' research can —*"

"*Ah, come on. I only need a little bit of time. Just a skosh.*" He held up his thumb and pointer finger in a pinching motion while winking and smiling.

"This guy's pretty loosey-goosey for a WDA scientist," I commented to Miyoshi in Japanese.

"Amazing he landed the job. From what I hear, the WDA is pretty

stodgy."

"*He's normally more put together,*" his companion responded apologetically in English. "*Your project just has him excited.*"

Uh-oh!

"*You speak Japanese?*" we both asked in English.

"*A little.*"

Guess it figured that WDA workers would have some foreign language skills. I'd been surprised with Asha too, but it seemed like more and more people globally were picking up at least a little Japanese.

We were going to have to watch our tongues.

"*Apologies,*" I responded in English. "*I'm Keigo Yoshimura with D-Powers. This is Azusa Miyoshi. Also known as Wiseman.*"

"*Ah! An honor. My name is Silkie Subway. I'm Mis—Dr. Argyle's assistant. Please, feel free to call me Silkie.*"

An honor? The Wiseman name must have carried more clout than I'd thought if even folks at the WDA had heard her online moniker.

Naruse and Dr. Argyle were arguing frantically in the corner. Silkie filled us in on the reason for their visit.

"*So you're here because of our report?*" I asked when she was done.

"*Yes. To tell the truth, we thought it was...*" she paused, searching for the right word. "*The work of madmen, at first!*"

I could only fight back a laugh. I'd probably have thought the same thing.

"*Up until we actually got the wheat to respawn, we thought we might be crazy too. Anyway, okay, you read our report, but what brings you all the way out here?*"

"*Well, you see...*"

"*Ms. Subway, I'll take it from here,*" Nathan interjected, weaving around the feverishly gesturing Naruse to get closer to us. "*As you might guess, that patent application you submitted on dungeonizing is making waves. Labs all over the world are scrambling to reproduce the results. But that isn't what brings us here. What we're really here to discuss is that attached thesis of yours...*"

"*Ah...*"

The Respawning of Intra-Dungeon Agricultural Crops and the Status Change of Outra-Dungeon Agricultural Crops, to use its full English name.

"*Ol' Boz in the Food and Agriculture Organization won't stop fussing over it.*"

"*Ol'...Boss?*" I asked.

"*Ambrose Magus, a researcher in the FAO Agriculture and Consumer Protection Department.*" Noticing that I'd probably misheard, Silkie cut in to explain.

Ah, now I get it! Ambrose... Brose... Boz.

"*He's absolutely adamant we approve the wheat because of that Ukemochi System of yours.*"

"*Wow, no pushback?*" I responded. "*We were worried it may wreak havoc on futures markets and things like that. Does everything seem okay?*"

"*To quote Boz: 'Who cares about speculative markets driven by the bourgeoisie whispering in each other's ears? Anything that can stave off world poverty—or at least world hunger—is a measure to invest in.'*"

"*Seriously? Then...no complaints?*"

Was an anarchist running a major FAO department?

Most futures traders were hedgers, but there were likely many speculators trying to make a profit on the grain industry given its current high prices. If the value suddenly fell out from under grains... I wouldn't have wanted to be answering to any wealthy speculators.

"*For hedgers, there really isn't much of an impact whether prices rise or fall—they're just trying to mitigate risk. It's in the name: risk hedging, right?*"

That was true. For those not engaging in careless speculation, the worst outcome would be having overinsured their crops. If anything, a sudden downturn was better than a sudden uptick, in terms of opportunity cost.

"*Though I can't speak to how* speculators *will feel.*" *Their* grudges might just be accompanied by some real consequence too. "*Even so, Boz feels it's worth pursuing. The Earth currently produces enough*

grains to feed just about everyone. The problem is distribution. Have you read the FAO's annual report?"

"*I'm afraid I'm not really up on my agricultural distribution reading.*"

"*No problem. It's not the kind of thing most ordinary people would read.*"

According to Nathan, its report went like this: With the rising global population and rising income levels in developing countries, there would be increased demand for not only food and water, but also biofuel materials. Demand overtaking supply would naturally lead to an increase in the prices of food. Although food production was also expected to increase in turn, it would still undershoot the rise of consumption in Asia, Africa, and the Middle East.

"*Food imports into Asia, Africa, and the Middle East will increase, leading to further regional stratification of food availability and production. Which brings us to some very relevant dungeon observations.*"

He took a folded piece of paper Silkie handed him, plopped it on the table, and opened it.

"*What is this?*"

We were looking at a large world map, dotted here and there with red and blue Xs.

"*The red Xs mark first-generation dungeons,*" he explained.

Most of the world's dungeons had arrived together, all of them opening up on the same day. Those were commonly called first-generation dungeons. Those that had opened up later—a few per year—were known as second-generation dungeons.

Looking at the map, first-generation dungeons mostly ran along the 35th parallel north, circling the globe at relatively consistent latitude. What was strange was how they seemed to entirely avoid unpopulated areas.

Of course that could just have been because dungeons in unpopulated areas weren't as easily found, but investigations along the 35th parallel conducted after people noticed the pattern had yet to discover any new dungeons.

"*Additionally, there are several dungeons in Japan—far more than*

one would expect given a random distribution. Strange, right?" He ran his finger along the 35th parallel, tracing it across the ocean to Japan. "*It's almost like something placing the dungeons hits Japan, stops, then splits north and south along the country*."

Now he traced downward along Japan, toward the south, and upward, toward northeast Asia. Reaching the mainland, he circled his finger over the region of Asia surrounding the 35th parallel to emphasize how few dungeons were on the continent.

"*Now, those blue Xs are second-generation dungeons. Their distribution is strange as well. They mostly appear either near especially large first-generation dungeons, or...*" He pointed to the Sahel region in Africa—containing a total of four blue Xs, including Burkina Faso's Darkoye Dungeon. "*Or regions struggling for food and resources,*" he concluded.

I took a look around the rest of the map. Sure enough, many of the blue Xs appeared in impoverished areas.

"*Almost like something* wants *us to find these dungeons,*" he added, with a tone that indicated it was a joke.

"*This is all very interesting,*" Naruse said, cutting in. "*But how does it pertain to your work? Why the personal trip?*"

She had a point. The FAO's interest in the Ukemochi system didn't really affect the WDA, nor did it require sending a WDA researcher over to Japan—regardless of his acquaintance with this "Boz" fellow. Plus, normally the only people who would come here to talk to us about our patent would be folks directly involved in its approval. This was all a little far afield of Nathan's research.

"*Before I can get into that, we need to talk about a little problem.*"

"*A problem?*" Naruse asked.

Uh-oh. That definitely means they found an issue with the wheat. That would certainly fall under the DFA's purview. And if it brought a head researcher out here, it must be something serious*.*

Nathan leaned in close to Naruse, speaking in almost a whisper.

"*Is this room equipped with any countersurveillance measures?*"

"*Countersurveillance?*" Naruse blinked. "*Um, it's soundproof?*" And it didn't get good cell phone reception, she added.

Nathan shrugged. He turned toward Miyoshi and me, crouching down to meet us at eye level. "*Have you two eaten any?*" he asked in the same whispered tone.

"*Um, yeah, we've tried some. Just in case,*" I answered.

"*Did you observe any...changes?*"

I was starting to sweat. Had our wheat produced some kind of crazy mutation?

"*We didn't even have indigestion,*" I replied. "*What should we be worried about?*"

"*Neither of you suddenly developed scales, or grew a tail?*"

"*What?!*"

He leaned back, a sick grin on his face.

"*Oh,* I *see.*" I frowned. "*No tails, but I can see it might give you horns.*" I made a little devil-horns with my hands above my head.

"*Forgive the joke.*" His face suddenly grew seriously. "*The truth is...*"

What he told us(12) was in some senses more shocking than if the wheat *had* produced scales or extra appendages.

"So our wheat gives you..."

"D-Cards?!" Miyoshi exclaimed, finishing my sentence.

We looked at each other. What a major blind spot! We knew so few people who didn't have D-Cards yet that we hadn't noticed. We'd never even thought to check.

"It kind of makes sense, Kei," Miyoshi said in Japanese, "in light of our theory that dungeon-grown foods could affect stats."

That did track, given that people without D-Cards didn't appear to have stats—or at least not ones we'd been able to measure. Maybe consuming the wheat added enough D-Factors to the body to pass a certain threshold—manifesting as stat increases for cardholders, or as a card itself for people who hadn't previously gone dungeon diving.

"*That is shocking,*" Miyoshi replied, "*but it still doesn't explain why you needed to come here in person.*"

"*That's just the first part of the story—the background, if you will. The second part is the implications of this discovery.*"

Early on, the reason many people had first obtained D-Cards was for the chance to get skill orbs. If you wanted to play the lottery, first you had to buy a ticket. But this particular metaphorical ticket purchase came with the risk of physical harm, so many people had forgone it. But if all you had to do was eat a bowl of oatmeal or a pancake...

One bite and you get a D-Card! That could certainly be a huge boon for promotion of dungeon-grown foods. On the other hand...

"*One bite and you give up your humanity. Doesn't exactly have a great ring to it,*" Miyoshi concluded.

"*Exactly,*" Nathan agreed. "*We should expect to see people pushing that narrative.*"

A blessing or an invasion of foreign entities into the body... It all depended on what agenda you had.

"*But there are more people in favor of utilizing dungeons than opposed to it,*" Miyoshi added.

That was definitely true now. There had been more controversy early on, especially with early deaths of brash, underequipped explorers, but we'd reached a relatively stable relationship with the dungeons. People were likely to accept any new advantage they could provide. Pro dungeon explorer had even become a profitable and desirable career. We probably weren't far off from days of it being one of the top childhood dream jobs.

"*True...*" Nathan responded hesitantly.

"*So then...?*" I asked.

Nathan held up one hand, reached into his bag, and pulled out a notebook. He opened it to check something.

"*Your Ukemochi System is something special. If it goes well, it could just solve one of the world's greatest problems.*" Given the yield of a single setup, just a few might deliver impoverished regions across the globe from food shortage issues. Though that initial setup would of course come with its own hurdles. "*Plus, people dealing with real hunger aren't going to be put off by any reluctance to get D-Cards.*"

If you were dying of thirst, you'd drink even the muddiest water, provided it wouldn't kill you. Tomorrow's stomachache was today's

survival.

"*And that's especially true as dungeon-grown food doesn't appear to have any other side effects,*" he added.

Plus, there was the scramble to reach five hundred million explorers. If anything, lots of countries would be actively pushing their populaces to eat dungeon crops.

"*All that is true,*" Nathan continued, "*but I'm afraid there are people who will put their own profits over the common good—who view others' lives as disposable commodities. And I'm afraid your report might have drawn their attention.*"

"*Whowha?!*" Miyoshi yelped.

"*There's a mysterious anti-dungeon-grown food movement...ahem, cropping up.*"

"*How? Not many people should even be aware of our discovery at this point.*"

All potentially edible items recovered from the dungeons—even potions at first—were sent to the DFA for analysis. But without the contents of our report being widely known, if you said "dungeon-grown food" to most people, it would point to...orc meat drops? And that hit public markets in such small amounts it didn't seem likely to cause a stir.

Nathan shook his head. "*If this were outcry over social inequality brought about by dungeons, Marxist theory or collective behavior theory might provide some sort of insight, but... Well, look at resource mobilization theory. The resources to mobilize just shouldn't be there at this point. And yet...*"

"*So you think someone's running a smear campaign, dressed up as public outcry?*"

"*Most likely. Given the circumstances,* any *side effects of dungeon-grown foods are going to prove ripe for anti-DGF propaganda.*"

Prior messaging had a powerful impact on how one interpreted new data. If someone had already primed the public to reject dungeon foods...

It wouldn't matter how many tests proving their safety the WDA conducted. The damage would have been done; we'd face an uphill

battle getting Ukemochi off the ground.

To that end, Nathan had apparently purposefully used up the wheat samples he had, trying to buy time by requiring a second batch before the WDA could move on to animal testing. That would give related departments time to come up with their own spin campaigns before any further information had to be released to the public.

"What do you make of all this?" I asked Miyoshi in Japanese.

"My first thought is that, really, protests don't do *us* much harm."

True. Even major backlash against dungeon-grown food wouldn't hurt us personally. At worst, we'd lose out on the time and money we'd invested into research and coming up with the agricultural system. The real losers would be the people who could have benefited from it. Though of course, in another sense, given that our system hadn't been publicly unveiled, they'd never know what they were missing...

"On the other hand..." Miyoshi continued.

"On the other?"

"If this *is* an astroturf campaign, I can see it having unintended consequences."

"How so?"

"Nathan mentioned resource mobilization theory. This is a niche and largely unknown issue, so opponents shouldn't have enough resources to mobilize a real social movement yet."

"And?"

"The resources we're talking about would be money, people, and networking systems. What's the only one of those that could kick off a movement on its own?"

"Money?"

Networking systems wouldn't do anything if no one cared about the issue in the first place. But money could make people "care." And not just money used to pay individual rabble-rousers, but money aimed at mass communication—talking heads and demagogic guests, all pushing a shared anti-DGF narrative.

"Bingo. And Kei, if they aren't careful, this anti-dungeon-grown food movement may just crystallize into the anti-explorer movement

you've been dreading."

"What?!"

I reflexively shot to my feet. How was outcry over food going to translate into outcry against explorers? That was way too much of a leap. Plus, come on... There might have been suspicion over food like orc meat raising stats, but it's not like it produced any substantial changes otherwise. And even then, the stat-raising was just speculation. I didn't see how food was going to lead to anti-explorer prejudice.

"*What's wrong?*" Nathan asked, seeing me rise from my seat. I gave a brief summary of what Miyoshi had just said.

"*Listen, Kei,*" she continued in English. "*America may be the land of the frontier spirit, but it's not the land of dungeon explorers. After early dungeon deaths, most people opted to stay away.*"

Right... Hearing about enough curious hobbyists heading into dungeons and never coming back would put all but the most reckless daredevils off, especially if diving wasn't necessary for financial security.

"*American explorer numbers were so low that they even made a special green card framework for seasoned explorers to incentivize divers to immigrate. Using the explorer framework, you can get legal residence in two months.*"

Given US President Handler's hard-line stance on illegal immigration, his one concession—the explorer green card system—was an attractive option to anyone hoping to move to America. The Diversity Immigrant Visa System, colloquially known as the green card lottery, could take years. But just by obtaining a WDA card in their home country and submitting an application, people could now have permanent residence within two months. There were probably a huge number of applicants.

"*So areas with dungeons right now are seeing a major influx of refugees and immigrants,*" Miyoshi informed me.

"*I'm guessing that makes New York, with Breezy Point Tip Dungeon, particularly popular.*"

"*Yep. Especially since New York is already a melting pot and a Democratic stronghold where people tend to be pretty liberal.*"

"*Okay, but what does this have to do with anti-dungeon food or anti-explorer movements?*"

"*Kei, who do you think does most seasonal work on US farms?*"

The answer was apparently immigrants, and often undocumented ones, especially in California and Florida. President Handler's new immigration plan had led to further drain of seasonal hands from those states.

"*In addition, all these people suddenly switching over to dungeon visas has coincided with an uptick in unemployment rates among citizens.*"

"*I see...*" I responded.

Diving regularly for as little as a year would give you high enough stats to have a noticeable impact on daily life. That would give you a leg up in hiring opportunities, especially for blue-collar positions. Unless they were an ultranationalist, what employer *wouldn't* pick the more capable applicant if they could be had for the same wages? The difference in unemployment rates for explorers and nonexplorers was steadily growing. The notion that "foreign dungeon divers are stealing our jobs" seemed ready-made for nationalists to exploit.

"*So they could latch on to existing cultural and economic fears pertaining to dungeons in order to stir up new fears over dungeon-grown foods,*" I concluded.

"*That's the usual song and dance,*" Miyoshi replied. "*Tie it to anti-immigration hysteria and you might have exactly the resources necessary to whip up some major moral panic.*"

"*If whoever's behind this anti-DGF rhetoric were pouring money into that kind of messaging... Yeah, I can see it.*"

"*Then you see how a movement against dungeon-grown food could quickly become an anti-explorer movement writ large.*"

I could. Something intended just to target dungeon-grown foods could quickly spin out of control.

"*That's not all,*" Nathan, who had been silently listening to Miyoshi, jumped in at this point. "*Say top athletes across every sport in the Big Four are revealed to be dungeon-divers. You're going to have a lot of people who start harboring inferiority complexes... I'm*

not sure who's behind this, but if they aren't careful, they're going to start a wildfire."

If we had a full-blown moral panic on our hands, so much as breathing the words "dungeon-grown food" could be enough to get you labeled the enemy. Plus, once you ate the crops a single time, or killed your first dungeon monster, you would have a D-Card; no takesies-backsies. It sounded troublingly similar to classic monster apocalypse scenarios like zombies or vampires. One bite, and you become *one of them*. It was like a literal version of all those forbidden-fruit tales peppering various religions, myths, and folklore. Like Izanami and Persephone—one nibble dooming you to another world forever. That kind of comparison would make frothing up anti-DGF fervor even easier.

"*So who's the most likely culprit?*" Miyoshi asked.

"*Thinking about who your system could make enemies of, it's probably some major agricorp,*" Nathan responded.

The Ukemochi System taking off would take a bite out of their profits—especially seed companies. But would they really be willing to make bedfellows with the same kinds of people who had lambasted them for GMO production before?

"*Doesn't seem like they'd be very willing to support that kind of movement,*" I pointed out.

"*Yesterday's enemy is today's friend,*" Miyoshi countered.

Uh, I'm pretty sure they'd still be enemies.

"*If anything, being the target of smear campaigns for so many years might have given them good insight into which groups to rile up. They probably figure that if all goes well, they could even use the opportunity to deflect some of the scrutiny away from GMOs,*" she added.

"*Um, excuse me.*" Naruse, who had been seated and listening, suddenly stood up. She addressed Nathan and Silkie. "*In conclusion, you're here to speak to D-Powers about their patent and obtain some new wheat samples for testing.*"

"*Well, yes. That's the official explanation.*"

"*So although this conversation is terribly interesting, it's beside the point relative to your official business.*"

"*You're not wrong, but...*"

"*Then let's table this for now. We are in the middle of a contract negotiation.*" She tossed her gaze over to the door. Following it, we saw one very put-out looking Sayama standing in the doorway.

"*Who's he?*" Nathan asked.

"*That would be the guy who came to negotiate a contract with us,*" Miyoshi responded.

"Um... Am I interrupting something?" Sayama asked.

"No. You're our main business for right now. If anything, these two are in the way. Please sit down." Naruse smiled.

"I talked things over with my boss..." Sayama began, walking over to the table.

"And?"

"All we can spare is a hundred thousand yen per day."

It was close to the end of the fiscal year. Budgets were probably tight.

"I... I understand if there's no way to get me down to the twenty-first floor for that price, but..."

"I see. Well, that's understandable. In the meantime, it's unorthodox, but given the research, I can temporarily spot the rest using personal finance—" Naruse began.

"*Lucky, lucky, lucky! Man, we came at just the right time!*" Nathan suddenly cut in, having heard Silkie's translation of the discussion.

Naruse creased her brow.

"*Dr. Argyle, please...*"

"*Now don't be such a spoilsport, Miharu. I just got the gist. This...this guy here... What's your name?*"

"*Me?*" Sayama responded in English. "*Sh-Shigeru S-Sayama,*" he stuttered.

"*Great! So, Sayama. My name's Nathan Argyle. I'm looking forward to* our *trip, buddy!*"

"*T-Trip? Buddy?*"

"*You're hard up for funds, right? Let's make this a joint venture. I've heard explorers who can go down to sub-twenty floors usually run around thirty-five hundred to four thousand American dollars a day.*"

Whoa, that was around double what the bottom rates in Japan were here. Though maybe he was just basing his math off the assumption that we'd be escorting three people.

"*Th-That would help. But are you sure? Is there a catch?*"

"*No catch. We'd just want to make a brief stop on the second floor on the way down.*"

"*The second floor? But surely you can do that more cheaply.*"

"*Nah. Trust me, there's only one party we can hire for what we're after. We need D-Powers there.*"

"*Ah...er, hrm.*" Sayama nodded noncommittally, seeming flustered but grateful.

"*Speaking of sub-twenty floors... Do you have any dungeon-diving experience?*" I asked Nathan.

He puffed out his chest with pride.

"*Why, I'm a leading WDA researcher! Of course I—*"

"*None. According to the records, his deepest expedition is to the first floor of BPTD.*" Silkie grinned.

"*Uh?*"

"*He analyzes dungeon materials, performs safety checks, and provides official advisories regarding health concerns and sociological impact. He doesn't need to set foot in a dungeon for any of that.*"

"Taking *three* rank amateurs down to the twenty-first floor?" I whispered to Miyoshi in Japanese.

"We can't turn them down. Better resign yourself to your fate and get ready." Miyoshi sighed and pulled out two NDAs written in English.

"Um, this is *highly* irregular. You absolutely could turn them down," Naruse responded.

Meanwhile, Nathan was already buddying up with Sayama, talking about their upcoming expedition like the ink was dry.

"If we turn him down here, he's just going to use some kind of WDA leverage to push his way into an expedition anyway." I smiled. "Just think of this as us doing a favor for the JDA."

"Shouldn't we call it paying back a debt to the JDA?" Miyoshi asked.

Recently we'd been lobbing tons of bombs at them. It was only fair we take some work off their hands instead of adding to their burden for a change. Although...

"I'm not exactly sure how much debt this makes up."

"Right. I guess it doesn't affect their day-to-day workload much."

Shrugging, Miyoshi passed the NDAs to Nathan, who signed his without looking, and Silkie, who diligently read hers over. She asked about the penalty fee for violating the agreement, her eyes growing wide when she heard our answer.

"*Mr. Argyle! You mustn't breathe a word of anything you see to even our coworkers*! *You'd ruin us financially! Not even our entire annual budget could pay that debt off!*"

Seeing the normally collected Silkie lose her cool, Nathan could only recoil and nervously nod.

Yoyogi Dungeon, Second Floor

Once our contract with Sayama was settled, we decided to head to the second floor with Nathan and Silkie while Sayama got his harvesting tools ready. The wheat field had basically been absorbed back into the dungeon surroundings, but the few sprigs of wheat that had dungeonized were still there happily popping out of the ground, looking exactly as Miyoshi had last seen them, swaying like golden feathers in the breeze.

"*Wow!*"

Nathan had chopped a few off at the stem with a small sickle and watched them respawn moments later.

"'*Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit'... But in this case it has 'eternal life' from the start.*" He was crouching on the ground inspecting the wheat, speaking with the exuberance of a child. "*A true Eleusinian Mystery.*"

Eleusinian Mystery? I asked Miyoshi via telepathy.

Remember, we talked about it the other day—how Demeter brought agriculture, or wheat, to people in ancient Greek

mythology?

Yeah.

The place she's said to have imparted that information is Eleusis.

Huh.

The "Mysteries" were essentially religious ceremonies based on the practices of old agricultural cults. Demeter recognized Eleusinian King Keleos's worship by granting his son Triptolemus a flying chariot in the shape of a dragon and tasking him with spreading knowledge of wheat cultivation across the world. More work? Not a great reward if you asked me.

Nathan stood up with a groan and stretched out his back while Silkie kept taking pictures. Suddenly he turned toward us.

"*So what are your plans for the field moving forward?*"

"*Good question...*"

So far as we knew, this was the world's only dungeon agricultural project, and the birthplace of dungeonizing, but as far as anyone could tell just by looking, it was an ordinary patch of dungeon vegetation. That said, word about our wheat experiments was already getting out. I put my hand to my chin. *The field might start getting visitors before long...*

Then again, even though the respawning vegetation might draw visitors, it was still tucked away in the middle of nowhere on the sprawling second floor—not that easy to find. But regardless, the dungeonizing experiments we'd been using it for had already been largely completed.

"Miyoshi, what do you think about giving the land back to the JDA? Doesn't seem like it's worth keeping ownership at this point," I suggested in Japanese.

"Really?"

"I mean, hey, it's currently the site of the world's only dungeonized wheat."

"And?"

"So they'd be happy to have it back, right?"

Miyoshi thought for a moment.

"Management would probably fall under the Dungeon Management Section? I feel like they already have their hands full

with the SMD and safe area preparations..."

"We're just two people. They're a whole organization. They're at least a *little* more equipped to deal with it than we are."

"A *little* more? Well, as long as we maintain priority rights on the wheat, I don't really mind."

"Okay. Then it's decided."

"I figured you'd want to get rid of it eventually. You don't really have any interest in being a public figure, do you? Triptolemus would've taken that wheat field and proselytized about it to every government he could, you know."

"Ah, my protégé," I responded. "You know me too well."

A role in the limelight? I'd pass every time. I couldn't imagine any good coming of it. We'd already contributed enough to society by filing our patents.

"*What are you two talking about?*" Nathan asked.

"*We'll probably give the rights to the land back to the JDA,*" I responded.

"*What?! Don't you think there's a fortune to be made by maintaining it?!*"

Maybe, I thought. But then there was that talk of the anti-DGF movement he'd shared with us earlier to consider. Better to pass further on-the-ground involvement with the Ukemochi System off to those even more invested in popularizing it than we were. We had neither the will nor the manpower to face a tidal wave of popular hostility.

"*Can't say I'm interested in fortune that has too much trouble attached.*"

"*I guess as the party behind those auctions, you two have the financial leeway... Ah, if only I had the same luxuries...*"

Just then, maybe seeing an opening, his face grew serious and he asked if we'd consider a donation to his research.

I was at a loss for how to answer before remembering that, actually, given D-Powers LLC's corporate articles, donating to dungeon research would be perfectly in our purview. We could justify it under the same logic we'd used to establish the boot camp.

"*We'll consider it,*" I answered.

"*Really? That's great news!*" He grinned, seemingly glad to have worked up the courage to ask. "*Then, if you don't mind some unsolicited advice, I wouldn't go giving this plot back.*"

"*Why?*" I asked.

What he suggested instead was passing management off to another party while maintaining the rights—a third party like, say, the FAO.

"*You'll want someone with influence on your side.*"

The JDA might have taken administrative duties off our hands, but they didn't have the clout or means to combat outside resistance that an organization like the FAO did. Ties to an influential organization would provide a powerful shield for any problems moving forward.

"*Plus,*" he pointed out, "*if this land opened up, you can guarantee there'd be a scramble for it. Best to maintain it for now.*"

"Kei!" Miyoshi, who had been listening, flagged my attention in Japanese. "In that case why don't we auction it off?"

"Auctioning off *rented* land?" I asked. "Where is your head at?"

"Tch. Dang. Then let's at least try to strike while the iron's hot. Something like selling cookies made with the wheat. 'Get your D-Card with D-licious D-sserts—' Shit!"

"What?"

"The D-Parture Kit! I just realized! We're not going to be able to sell it!"

"That's your big concern right now...?"

"*What's the hubbub?*" Nathan asked, seeing Miyoshi's agitation.

"*Nothing important,*" I replied. "*Anyway, we'll think about the field. Right now, let's just head back up. Sayama's waiting.*"

"*Sounds good. We got the wheat along with some samples of surrounding vegetation, so we're all good. Nothing left now but sightseeing!*"

Silkie let out a sigh.

"*Mr. Argyle. You have a mountain of work waiting back in New York.*"

"*Consider taking a guided bus tour,*" I suggested. If they didn't have much time, they could at least take a ride around the city. They

had come all the way out to Tokyo, after all. "*A lot of them take half a day, but you get to see a lot of places.*"

"*Bus tour?*" Nathan asked. "*Are you driving?*"

"*What?*"

"*We already paid our fare for one tour—a trip down to the twenty-first floor.*"

"*Okay, but it's not exactly a vacation destina—*"

"*No more talk of this. The way I see it, we lucked into a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. When I first saw that patent application of yours, I wanted to jump on a plane to Tokyo right away, but I had 'work' to do first, and some better heads than mine wouldn't just let me slip away.*" He shot a meaningful glance over his shoulder to Silkie.

"*So imagine when I finally get into Narita, noting that it's—somehow—still three in the afternoon, and call the JDA jetlagged and weary only to learn you're planning on taking someone down into the dungeon to, what, basically snag a sacred branch from the shores of Lake Nemi the next day—er, today. How could I pass that up? My mission was clear: Abuse my work privileges and tag along.*"

"*Er, 'abuse'?*"

Silkie shook her head.

"*Mr. Argyle can be overly forthcoming sometimes.*"

"*Still, that Lake Nemi comparison... Just to set the record straight, we're not escaped slaves setting out to kill some forest king or anything.*"

"*Don't spoil the mood. There's no point in adventuring if you're not indulging in a sense of mystery.*" Nathan gave me a wink as if he was sharing a secret. "*First wheat, now oranges... One almost senses the hand of something divine at work...*"

Yoyogi Dungeon, Eighth Floor

We went back up topside from the wheat patch, met with Sayama—who had completed his preparations—then headed back down, eventually arriving on the eighth floor.

"*Here. It's just a pork skewer, so don't expect too much.*"

I'd asked before we headed down whether anyone had dietary restrictions for allergic or religious reasons, just in case. No one had raised any issues, so we'd stopped at the meat-skewer stand for a snack. If you were sightseeing in Yoyogi Dungeon, this was one spot you couldn't pass up.

Though, to tell the truth, I'd become suspicious recently that the skewer stand was actually run by the JSDF as part of its communications network. Was that just my overactive imagination? I found it hard to believe it could really turn a profit without being some sort of front for another organization.

"*A little overcooked,*" Nathan commented.

"*I mean...it* is *just a hunk of pork,*" Silkie responded. The two of them tore chunks off the skewers with some difficulty, masticating exaggeratedly. "*That said, Mr. Argyle, aren't you Jewish?*"

Nathan laughed.

"*I'm a little spiritual, but I'm not really much for the whole organized religion thing. You could put my practiced faith down as 'secular.' I won't say no to a pork skewer.*"

According to Nathan, some argued the Jewish pork taboo stemmed from cultural biases directed against Egyptian agrarians back when the Hebrew people were still nomadic, on the basis of assumed cleanliness.

He continued extolling the virtues of pork's balance of amino acids, it being rich in vitamin B1, and other features that led to him not caring at all for the taboo.

"*So I'm not exactly kosher,*" he concluded.

I turned to Miyoshi.

"Did we screw up?" I asked in Japanese. I'd asked about food restrictions, but it was still on the host to be aware of guests' dietary needs.

"Kei, I've got a Jewish acquaintance whose favorite food is Chef Igarashi's boudin noir at Le Manoir d'Hastings in Ginza."

"What?! But that's doubly sinful!" I protested.

Boudin noir was sausage made with pork blood and fat, often served with sautéed apples or applesauce. Neither blood nor pork

was kosher. Then again, Japan had all kinds of Buddhist sects... *No, wait, is that even the same?*

"I guess Judaism just has as many lax practitioners as Hinduism," I observed. I was thinking of Asha's papa, a Hindu on paper but with lax dietary practices.

All these major religions had so many different sects and levels of practice that it was hard for an outsider to keep track.

"This...isn't orc meat, right?" Sayama asked with some concern.

Ah, you probably would think that at first. I'd expected the same thing.

"Orc meat fetches too much of a profit. There's more money to be had selling it topside. Plus, a lot of explorers who get drops just eat it on the spot," I explained.

"Hm." He gave the skewer a nibble. "Now that you mention it, this is just an ordinary pork skewer, huh?"

"Emphasis on *ordinary.*" I grinned.

The group must have been running on first-timers' adrenaline, because there wasn't a tired face among us, even though we'd already trudged through seven levels. Then again, we'd taken care of most of the monsters before they'd even gotten close, and made sure to stay on the main paths, so up to this point it probably hadn't felt much different from your average woodland hike.

"How much further do you think we should try to go?" I asked Miyoshi, casting my gaze to the staircase down to the ninth floor.

"Good question. We set out late and it's almost evening. Maybe we should call it here for now."

"Lots of other explorers around too," I noted, surveying the area. There was safety in numbers.

"Given we have three newbies, we should probably aim for the eighteenth floor tomorrow, then the twenty-first the day after," Miyoshi advised.

***

"What'd Mitsurugi say?"

I'd noticed a reply to a message I'd sent earlier wishing her luck

at Fashion Week, but not until we'd already set up our tents. I'd been too busy with the day's commotion and travel to catch it before. Miyoshi, naturally, wasted no time in asking what it was about. The week's activities were already in full swing, though women's events started tomorrow, on the seventh.

The message was written entirely in English. Apparently she was renting a phone that didn't have a Japanese keyboard, and she wasn't sure how to add one, so she was trying to make do.

"Super busy, apparently. New York's super intense. Can't even tell right from left most days. But if all goes well, she might be invited to continue on to London after this."

"That'd be like her career shooting up three levels overnight," Miyoshi responded.

Levels nothing. That'd be a floor warp.

"She says the imposter syndrome's mighty fierce too."

"Everyone feels like that when they're in a new environment." She shrugged. "Coffee please?"

I reached into my giant camper bag and feigned pulling out a thermos, then poured Miyoshi a mug. I also got out a small folding table.

"Well said," I belatedly responded.

Miyoshi blew on her coffee with a rather smug expression.

"Don't forget, I was a student not that long ago," she replied.

"Ah, right. I guess it'd feel a little bit like entering the workforce for the first time. That takes me back."

"And until fairly recently, I was gainfully employed," she added. "So now I've had to get used to the unemployed life too."

"That didn't take you any getting used to at all," I responded.

"Speak for yourself! I was a dutiful worker! I still have plans to be a normal and productive citizen! I'm not cut out for your outlaw life."

"A little late for that." I creased my brow, turning to Glas for backup.

"Ruff!" he barked happily.

"There, see?"

"Ruff! Ruff!"

"Kei, you learned Glassian?"

"Not a lick."

"Ruff? Grrr..."

"W-Wait!"

"Grraow!"

"Wh-Whoa! Can't you get this guy a chew toy?"

I thrust out my arm to Miyoshi, with the little hellpup dangling from it. He'd gotten to be a real biter recently.

"Your fault for teasing him."

She stuck out her arms toward him, and he let go of my forearm, nuzzling his face into Miyoshi's chest. He glanced at me with a smug look that let me know he'd won.

Won what? We weren't even competing, were we? Won a chance to nuzzle up to something that's barely even t—

"Kei, were you thinking something weird just now?"

"Of course not."

Around us, more and more explorers who planned on waiting out the night had filed into the camp area.

As we goofed off, Sayama—now guarded by Drudwyn, lurking in his shadow—was scurrying about checking patches of surrounding vegetation like a man possessed.

"What's he doing?" Miyoshi asked.

"Dunno. Just scoping out the eighth-floor flora, I guess."

Nathan, meanwhile, was walking around the campsite with Silkie, hands folded professorially behind his back, watching other parties arrive with great interest. We had deployed Aethlem to watch over them.

Meanwhile, Glas, uncharacteristically out in the open, hung out with us. We asked him playfully if he'd be team captain for the night, to which he haughtily flared his nostrils and puffed out his chest. Apparently he'd take on the job. A sense of duty to protect their summoner bordering on the obsessive seemed to come naturally to all dungeon familiars.

Glessic was stationed at the office, and Gleisad with Cathy. Cavall remained in Miyoshi's shadow, as usual.

"Isn't Flora the name of that ghostly girl who makes some kind of crazy new rose bloom at the New York Botanical Gardens?" she

asked.

"At that point in the story she's still known as Fiorina. Hey, have you been rummaging through the manga at our old office again?"

"I head over to clean it sometimes. Someone has to," she responded. "You certainly won't."

"Fair..."

I said "old office," but it was really my former apartment, which I was still renting. Miyoshi had the spare key.

"You have to show a home the proper love. They get sad when people don't live in them anymore."

"And your true motive?"

"The kotatsu there's super cozy. Hey, why don't we get a kotatsu for the spare room at the new place too?"

"So you're the reason I've been running up this weirdly high electric bill on a property I don't use... And here I was worried about wiring problems or electricity theft."

"Well, there you go. No more worries!" she responded.

She poured herself another cup of coffee, ignoring my obvious displeasure.

"What? Come on," she finally scoffed at my unchanging disgruntled expression. "You're a kotatsu kind of guy, aren't you?"

"Kotatsus are great. Kotatsus are nice. I don't know that anyone doesn't like them. But..."

"'But...'? Kei, you're not going to tell me the kotatsu you left at your old apartment is haunted or something, are you?!"

"Dummy. No. I was just going to say they're a dangerous demotivator."

"Seriously?!"

"I'm just saying, if you put one in the same building you work in, you'll probably never get work done again. Are *you* confident you'd ever come out from under it?"

"Hrrrm..."

"We already don't have to actually go to work. Would we have the power to resist the kotatsu's siren song?"

"All we'd have to do is order groceries and other necessities online... It's true. We'd never have to leave it."

“I can see it now.” I nodded. “All the home necessities slowly accumulating closer and closer to the kotatsu, our world shrinking in turn. At night we’d toast over the kotatsu, then fall asleep drunk and happy, and our transformation into total layabouts would be, regrettably, complete.”

“I won’t have you bad-mouthing a glass of wine with dinner,” Miyoshi protested.

“But a glass of wine at a kotatsu is never just a glass. It’s never just an aperitif. No, a glass of any booze at a kotatsu means a night on the floor. It’s a law. It’s the natural order of things.”

My word portrait seemed not to be getting through to Miyoshi, who was practically salivating at whatever culinary scene she was now envisioning.

“We could do a nabe pot too! And just a bit of sake! How nice!”

“You know, I’ve thought about this a time or two, but your hobbies are basically those of an old man. You sure you’re a twenty-something girl?”

“A kotatsu makes an old man out of even the most poised and dignified. That’s the power of the Japanese kotatsu.”

“Do you even know anyone ‘poised and dignified’?” I asked. “But... Eating nabe under a kotatsu doesn’t sound bad, I’ll admit. Okay. There’s no way around it! As soon as we get back, we buy one!”

“Yay!” She raised up her arms in triumph, then lowered them. “Hold on. Don’t say things like that. It’s like foreshadowing we might not make it back.”

“We’re not getting into much danger this time.”

No sooner had I said that than something dashed in front of my vision. A certain botanical scientist was moving around about three times faster than normal. Were we sure he wasn’t wearing a red mobile-suit pilot uniform?

“Doesn’t that guy know the meaning of ‘downtime’?” I asked.

“Midori is always saying that STEM guys are like racehorses with blinkers and shadow rolls.”

“In other words, they don’t pay attention to anything else around them?”

Yeah, you almost had to wonder how most STEM guys had even gotten through college with their lack of social skills.

"Nakajima is like the textbook example of that archetype," I noted, thinking of his and Midori's apparent relationship.

"Maybe she meant it in a good way."

"There's no accounting for taste, huh?"

"You said it."

I closed my eyes and shook my head. I was cut from a different cloth. I'd run out of things to do other than prep dinner, so I'd just been kicking back checking phone messages from earlier in the day. Speaking of...

"Hey, about Mitsurugi's message," Miyoshi said. "It hasn't been long since we all went out with Asha. Mitsurugi could barely speak English. Seems like she picked it up pretty fast. Think INT had something to do with it?"

"I'd *like* to chalk it up to her hard work, but..." I thought for a moment. "The pace is too unnatural. Stat-based influence seems hard to deny. Maybe she's picking it up at an unnatural rate just via exposure."

"Yikes, yikes, yikes! Absorbing everything you come in contact with?! Even if it's just intellectual concepts, I don't want to end up in Daijiro Morohoshi's 'Bio City'!"(13)

"It's a hard life facing Hiroaki by the end of that manga. He's going to have to go his whole life resisting the call of technology to avoid merging with it."

"You'd almost want to give in when the going got rough..." Miyoshi lamented.

All one would have to do in that well-known comic, set on an Earth in which humans merged with machines by touching them, was to place their hand on any piece of tech to make everything "easier." As a cautionary tale, it might have been ahead of its time. It was written in the seventies, long before social media feeds or online games were only a mouse-click away in the midst of onerous computer work. Who could resist the call? Not I.

"*Seems like an interesting conversation going on here. Mind if I*

join?" Nathan popped in out of nowhere, apparently having noticed our excited chatter. He was wearing a good-natured grin, looking way too chill for someone who'd just barged into someone else's conversation. *What a difference between when he's worked up about something and when he's just relaxing...*

Silkie hung back a bit behind him.

"*We were just talking about a manga,*" I replied.

"*Now manga, that is interesting. I'm a fan of a few myself. But I was wondering if we could go back to that bit about dungeon stats maybe having an influence on intelligence. By the way, could I snag a coffee?*"

What?! We'd been talking in Japanese. How had he picked that up?! He didn't seem set on doing us any harm, so the Arthurs naturally weren't on guard, but he just might have been our most dangerous companion yet. I should have figured a top WDA researcher might be too sharp for us. We'd have to be extra careful if we wanted to finish the trip with any of our secrets intact.

I took two more mugs out of my pack and filled them with coffee, handing one each to Nathan and his assistant.

"*If that's true,*" he pointed out, "*it's not just going to be athletes raring to incorporate dungeon-diving regimens. You might start seeing an academic dungeon-diver arms race. Sugar?*"

I took out a small container of sugar, watching Sayama—who was still inspecting this plant and that—in the distance with a strained smile on my face.

"*I mean, I don't think that's why* he's *here, but...*" Nathan added, following my gaze.

No, Sayama was just busy taking samples, notes, and pictures of various weeds and grasses. I couldn't tell if he was having the time of his life...or dying of stress.

As if his mental switch had been flipped back to work mode by the coffee, Nathan held up the spoon he'd been using to stir his sugar in and began talking at a faster clip.

"*Now, the earliest adopters will probably be mathematicians. Especially theoretical ones.*"

"*How do you figure?*" I asked.

"*Because the only ones in that field are the rare geniuses and the foolish*[(14)]*. The former would do anything to expand their knowledge, and the latter are reckless enough to try anything.*"

"*Kei's in the latter group,*" Miyoshi offered. "*A real Don Quixote*[(15)] *type.*"

"*Who are you to talk?*" I asked.

"*I'm more like the Knight of the White Moon trying to prompt my insane former senior coworker to return to the village,*" she responded.

"*Some say Don Quixote was happier mad,*" Nathan pointed out.

"*Oh! A Quixote supporter! But don't worry. Kei's ailments are all grounded. He's not falling into flights of fantasy. He's looking straight at the harsh realities in front of him and* still *approaching them with undue confidence.*" She then crossed her arms, closed her eyes, and mumbled to herself in Japanese, in a way that seemed intended for me to hear. "Yes, if he didn't have me to point him back toward the village..."

Uh, wasn't it you *who forced me to fight monsters in* Phantom of the Opera *cosplay?*

"*Sounds tough.*" Nathan grinned.

Sayama came running up breathlessly.

"These...dungeons...are...great!"

It was all I could do to manage a weak smile in response.

February 7, 2019 (Thursday)

Yoyogi Dungeon, Eighteenth Floor

After an evening playing normal adventurers on the eighth floor, we made our way down to the eighteenth.

"*It's like I stepped into a* Nat Geo[(16)] *Himalaya spread.*"

"*Truly,*" Silkie responded.

At Nathan's urging, we—including Sayama, much to his chagrin—took a group photo in front of the prayer flags. For someone who

was supposed to be along for a quick trip to visit a wheat field, Nathan spared no effort in directing Sayama's poses to get juuust the right shot. *Come to think of it, why do he and his assistant even still need to be here?*

"They paid the tour fee," Miyoshi noted, picking up on my concern. "They probably figure they may as well get the whole ride."

"I don't think there's such a thing as 'tours' on deep dungeon floors."

This was the eighteenth floor of Yoyogi, not a sightseeing spot.

But honestly, Miyoshi and I were probably more floored by our surroundings than our guests. We'd only been gone a short time, but the atmosphere of the eighteenth floor had changed considerably from our last visit. The colorful prayer flags, strewn across the mountainside entrance area like it was ready for a Puja ceremony, were the same as ever, but the explorer camp—

"What is this, some kind of industry exhibition?" Miyoshi asked, eyes wide.

"No showgirls though," I commented.

"Looks like they have the machine blowing kisses," she replied.

The area had been turned into an onsite exhibition for porters from Falcon Industries and other manufacturers.

One of the porters was...standing, I guess...in front of a crowd of awed onlookers waggling its front...um, legs...in a cutesy waving motion. Less cute was what was on its back.

"*What the heck? Is that a mounted M2 machine gun? Are we supposed to be packing heavy weapons from here out?*" Nathan had finished taking pictures and come running up behind us.

"*Who knows? Even 7.62-millimeter rounds are useless against thirty-first floor monsters.*"

Though teams involved in that incident also hadn't had much ammo to fire, I thought to myself, having secretly seen said encounters.

"*You been down there?*"

"*Not personally. But Miyoshi got stuck down there for a while after an incident.*"

"*Wow. S-Rank explorers sure are something.*"

"The JDA's planning on building in the safe area. There won't be enough space if too many of those are running around," Miyoshi commented in Japanese.

"Yeah..."

There were just too many explorers in Yoyogi. Even if porters sold for the price of luxury foreign sports cars, there could be hundreds of them in the dungeon within the first week of sales. Maybe thousands. And with their mounted weapons, you couldn't exactly pilot them down Japanese streets. Even if you had some kind of special porter-carrying trucks... *No, that would still cause too many problems with moving weapons around.* They'd have to store them in the dungeon itself.

"*And you guys don't have one of those?*" Nathan asked.

"*Us? No. We're not exactly frontline explorers. We're more...self-preservationists.*"

"*That doesn't match up with what I've heard.*"

"From whom?" I wanted to ask. But I merely raised an eyebrow instead. I'd pretend I hadn't heard for now.

***

"*Isn't that Azusa?*"

Natalie, who had just returned from farming duty on the twenty-second floor, pointed toward the area by the staircase up to the seventeenth floor.

"*Hmm? It is!*" Simon responded. "*What's she doing here?*"

"*Sir, I'll go drop these noble metals off back at camp,*" a young man with platinum blond, near-silver hair announced.

"*Huh? Oh, Morgan! Y-Yeah, please. Good work out there.*"

The young man—Morgan Lucas, the DSF's chosen Mining user—gave Simon a sharp salute and headed off.

"*At least one person on this team has some manners,*" Natalie uttered with a sigh, watching Morgan walk away.

"*Come on, Nats. Put away the fangs. It's too ear—ly!*"

It was all Joshua could do to block the elbow that came flying toward his left flank.

"*Did you say something, Joshua?*" Natalie asked.

"M-Me? N-Nothing. Just a little dry English humor... Ah ha ha..."

"*Since when are you an Englishman? Argh, this team is filled with* boys."

"*Men of passion.*" Simon corrected her, disapprovingly clicking his tongue. He recalled the instructions they'd been given last time they were on the surface. "*Ah, shit. Well, since we saw her, I guess we have no choice. Orders are orders.*"

"*That insane mission? I don't think it's a bad approach, but who's going to just...become friends...with the US president? Talk about different worlds,*" Natalie said hopelessly.

Simon nodded, fully in agreement that the task before them was preposterous, but also aware that he couldn't escape his share of responsibility for it. After all, he was the one who had first suggested cozying up to Miyoshi. This was a hell of his own making.

"*Yeah, well. When they say 'jump' we say 'how high?' That's the life of a serviceman.*"

Joshua pinched his nose in response to Simon's comment, waving his hand to bat away an imaginary stink. "*Phew! How long you been saving that rotten old line? Weren't you the one who ignored orders and came to Japan when we were supposed to be looking for Otherworldly Language Comprehension?*"

"*Y-Yeah, well! We work directly for the president, okay? And he didn't say anything about not taking vacations. Plus it all worked out for the... Well, I don't know about 'best,' but close enough!*" Simon crossed his arms, looking satisfied.

"'*The ends justify the means'? All right. Anyway, who thought of this cockamamie plan? I can't believe it was the CIA.*"

"*Sometimes, and especially with* them," Simon answered, gesturing toward Yoshimura and Miyoshi, "*you gotta fight crazy with crazy.*"

So it was your idea then, Joshua thought to himself, tossing Simon a knowing look.

"*I'm just getting bored with metal-farming bodyguard missions. Morgan's gotten used to things. He and his team can handle them at this point,*" Mason said. "*I want to get back down to the thirty-first*

floor."

Team Simon had been tasked with escorting Morgan on Mining runs, working in shifts down to the twenty-first floor, until he got the hang of things. They'd been promised that once they were no longer needed to support Morgan, they could run weapons tests using porters down on the thirty-first floor, grinding out fifth-ranked potions at the same time.

"*What's the status on his team and the backup members, by the way?*" Mason asked.

"*Half are waiting for boot camp. Cathy's putting them through some kind of gruntwork before they actually enroll. They're all going on about 'world peace.*"

"'*World peace'?*" Mason scrunched his brow. He couldn't imagine what world peace had to do with shoving motherboards into plastic food containers.

"*Who knows? Anyway, I'll go give our 'crazy' plan a shot,*" Simon responded. "*Go ahead and start breakfast without me.*"

"*Roger. Don't be surprised if there's nothing but beans left when you get back,*" Joshua replied.

"*Ha, yeah? Maybe leave me some finger food,*" Simon shot back with a laugh, holding up his hand to show Joshua exactly which finger he meant.

***

"*Yoshimura! Been a while.*"

I turned around to see Simon approaching, smiling broadly and waving.

"*Ah. Hey there. How's the mineral-farming?*"

"*About that...*" He trailed off.

"*What?*" I asked. "*Something wrong?*"

"*More a porter problem than a Mining one.*" Apparently his team had brought porters down to the twenty-second floor for their first Mining tests, killing two birds with one stone. "*It wasn't clear whose kill it was.*"

"*Huh?*"

Nothing had dropped after their first battle on the twenty-second floor. Some had worried for a moment that the JDA had provided false info on Mining. However, they'd quickly discovered that if the monster were defeated by a porter, it didn't seem to be recognized as the Mining user's kill.

"*Apparently when the Mining user was touching the porter, they got drops, but with remote activation—nada,*" he explained.

They weren't sure whether the deciding factor was distance or if some other factor was at play—and they weren't sure whether no one got credit for porter kills, or credit was assigned to someone at random in the party. Or if it *did* count as the Mining user's kill but just didn't produce drop items... There were too many variables.

"*Um...is it really okay to tell me this?*" I asked. "*I mean, won't that affect porter sales?*"

"*Nah. Treasure hunters will probably be more interested in using porters as loot haulers than as weapons.*"

In addition, as I might have surmised given their bulky turrets, apparently the porters weren't really suited for combat against fast-moving targets.

"*Taking out crowds or plugging holes in big baddies is going to be about as much as we can hope for. Their real advantage is going to be what their name implies: transport.*"

"*Seems like they may be useful against genomos or big, slow sub-bosses,*" I said.

"*We'll see how that goes on the thirty-first floor,*" he responded. He paused, then suddenly blurted out, "*Hey, actually, I got a favor to ask.*"

"*A favor?*"

"Kei, This is new. I feel like he's actually about to bring up serious work talk," Miyoshi commented in Japanese.

"Work talk? From Simon?!"

It bordered on the unthinkable. Was I prepared for a whole-new him?! I sized him up, trying to see whatever Miyoshi did. But nope, he just seemed like his usual smug, self-consciously cool self.

"Sorry, I've got my doubts," I declared.

"*Hey! English, please!*"

"*Miyoshi here seemed to think you're about to bring up serious work talk so I should be on my guard.*"

"*Kei, you can't tell* him *that!*"

Simon grinned sheepishly and scratched the back of his head.

"*Actually, there's some cargo we want you to bring down to the thirty-second floor.*" He took out an envelope-like package and tore open the top.

"*Bring down?*"

"*You know, since you two have Storage or whatever.*"

My heart skipped a beat. Only the JDA was supposed to know about Miyoshi having Storage. Even then, while I wouldn't have been surprised if word had spread within the organization on a need-to-know basis, as far as we knew, that information was limited to Naruse and her boss. I didn't figure either of them for leakers.

"*What...makes you say that?*" I asked.

"*Come on. You can't hide things from an explorer with* my *powers of observation.*"

"*Oh my. Kei. I'm afraid we may have to close the café.*" Miyoshi shot Simon a sharp look. A threat to close Café Miyoshi must have struck like a knife through his heart.

"*W-Wait! Just a joke. Actually—*" Apparently the JDA had been in secret talks with NASA. It was all hypothetical, at this stage, but the subject of conversation had been so outrageous that a report had been delivered straight to the president's desk.

If even Simon knew at this point, I wanted to ask what about the talks was "secret," but I supposed that considering he worked directly for the president, it wasn't that odd. "Secret" didn't hold the same weight it once had.

"*Apparently whatever skill they were talking about meant not having to worry about time, so I thought of your orb storage service,*" he explained.

Officially, our orb service worked by using up the "stored" orbs, then providing a replacement—which was the same reason the JDA was in on Miyoshi having Storage, but...

Sensing it was time to throw in the towel, Miyoshi stepped forward. Her body language implied there would be no arguing.

"*Sorry, but. We. Are. Not. Taking. Requests.*"

"*Now, hold on,*" Simon shot back. "*You haven't even heard who this is from. It's not my request. It's directly from President Handler.*"

From the president?! Of the United States of America? Theoretically beholden to the will of constituents but still the most powerful person on Earth?

"*Wha— Wait, hold on. We're Japanese. Even if it's a presidential request, we're not obligated to, uh...*"

A request from the US president...

Seeming to figure that maybe we as Japanese citizens would be more amenable to something with the whiff of a formal request—our culture loving formal requests and all—Simon took something that looked like a letter out of his envelope and silently scanned over it. He then let out an audible groan.

"*What the hell is this payment?*" he asked himself out loud.

"*It's not a matter of pay. If we take on this one job, the requests will never end.*"

Simon brought his face up from the letter and looked Miyoshi in the eyes.

"*It says your payment is a case of Screaming Eagle '97.*"(17)

Miyoshi went rigid. Instantly, she brought her hand up to her forehead, giving an American salute.

"*Sir, yes sir!*"



"Miyoshi...?" I facepalmed then—trying to get her to return to her senses—took the same hand and slapped her hard on the back.

"Wah! Er, what? Ah, ummm... Kei, this is a case of Screaming Eagle. The '97! And it's from the president's personal collection, so you know it's the real thing, *and* that it's been properly preserved! I'll never get another chance like this!"

Miyoshi frantically ruffled her hair, lost in that valley between temptation and principle. Truly, how worldly desires turn us from the righteous path...

"In terms of sheer value, the price is too low for a four-day round trip. But... No, this is worth more than money..."

There were some things money couldn't buy. Usually when people said that, they were talking about love, but the truth was that money could buy that, to a certain extent. No, if there were any realm in which that phrase still had weight, it was in hobbies.

With unlimited funds you could search far and wide for the item you wanted and lavishly reward anyone willing to sell it, but that still didn't guarantee you would ever be able to connect with someone who for sure had the genuine article. The more lucrative the bounty you promised, the more offers you'd get from people selling fakes.

"Go for it," I responded begrudgingly. "But save me a sip too."

"Kei!" Miyoshi's eyes lit up. She was pumping her fists and up and down in front of her chest, practically squealing with delight.

"We've never bothered sticking to our own rules before. Why start now?"

"Speak for yourself. You may always follow your flights of fancy, but I'm a paragon of consistency."

Hello?! Who was agonizing over whether to bend our policy for a case of wine just a moment ago?!

"*Looks like that's a yes?*" Simon asked. "*Now, the cargo we want you to take is at Yokota Air Base... Apparently it's— Wh-Whaaat?!*"

"*What's wrong?*"

"*This request... It's for...an entire gas-powered electric turbine facility? I don't care what kind of skill you've got. There's no way you can carry a whole power station...right?*"

We had him show us the list. The facility was centered around an

electric turbine similar to the portable type dispatched to disaster areas. Living quarters were included (written almost as an afterthought). A turbine-based power plant...plus worker dorms.

It was pretty big, but as far as we knew Storage should still be able to handle it. But the turbine was gas-powered. What were they going to do for fuel?

"*I think we can manage it,*" Miyoshi responded.

"*Wild,*" was all Simon could manage.

"*But what are you going to do for the gas?*" I asked. "*Heavy fuel oil? You're going to need tons of it.*"

"*There's actually a second transport request here dealing specifically with fuel, if you want to see the list, but...*"

Miyoshi's lips curled into a grin.

"*Oh? That would require a second round trip, right? Nearly a week's worth of time. I'll pass. You can just haul the fuel with porters.*"

Simon's face went pale. I wasn't sure how much fuel they could bring down on each porter, but no matter what, escorting porters to and from the safe floor was bound to make for even duller work than babysitting Mining user farming drops.

"*Do you have any idea how many supply runs* that *would require?*" he asked.

"*Treat it as a demonstration of the porters. Send down a whole caravan of them,*" Miyoshi responded flippantly.

"*And then we request escorts from the adventurers' guild to protect our supply trains from monster attacks? I swear, every day the world's becoming more like some clichéd RPG. Ah!*" Simon's face lit up. "*The order says here that the payment for the second invoice would be 'DRC.'*"(18)

Miyoshi remained unpersuaded. The DRC produced as few bottles of wine per year per vineyard as Screaming Eagle. However, the varieties produced by each vineyard were more numerous, and bottles were expensive to start, which had prevented the same kind of explosive aftermarket as Screaming Eagle's. In other words, if she wanted to get DRC bottles, she could—given her bank account.

"*I'm all right.*"

Simon frantically flipped through his materials.

"*What about Domaine Leflaive Montrachet, procured straight from the maker? A dozen bottles across different vintages.*"

Miyoshi froze. *Uh-oh...*

"*This offer is coming from the United States president,*" she mumbled. "*Might those vintages include...2016?*" she asked hopefully.

"*Uh, let's see. The first is '91, but they aren't continuous. Hold on... Yeah, it's in here. There's a note that it's on preorder and due to be shipped in May, but...*"

Miyoshi gave another salute, with even more gusto than before.

"*Anything! Your wish is my command, sir!!!*"

"*Wh-Whoa!*" Simon recoiled.

Only Miyoshi could make one of the world's strongest men flinch with pure weirdo energy alone. Too bad she only used her powers to satisfy her own appetites.

"*Super! Le président des États-Unis est super!*" she cried breathily, grabbing my shoulders and shaking me back and forth.

Why French...? Oh, right. Leflaive Montrachet.

"Kei, Burgundy was hit by an unusually late frost in April 2016 that damaged vineyards from Meursault to Chassagne. The Montrachet grand cru estate saw almost its entire harvest wiped out due to its high latitude," she explained.

"So...why was there a vintage that year?"

"Because there *were* good surviving grapes, and this is Montrachet we're talking about. But none of the seven individual domaines on the estate had enough to make a single barrel of their own wine, so they pooled their resources, aging one collective Montrachet wine at Leflaive. They probably only made two barrels—about six hundred bottles."(19)

"Huh?"

"They even set up a special onetime label, '*L'Exceptionnelle Vendange Des Sept Domaines*'—'An Exceptional Harvest from the Seven Domaines'—to commemorate the occasion."

"And you had to miss out on preorders due to being an ordinary company worker at the time."

"Right, right! Even now, I can't just go order a bottle. We're talking rarer than rare! I... I never dreamed...!"

"Well, keep dreaming, because you haven't actually said yes yet."

"Haven't said yes?! Who the hell is going to say no?! Kei, I can buy DRC Montrachet, but I can't buy all those Leflaives."

The Montrachet vineyard Domaine Leflaive had purchased from Domaine Fleurot in 1991 had been a measly two acres. The amount of grapes grown was only enough for one barrel, and half of each vintage was kept barreled to age at the estate, only sold in limited quantities to special guests. The rare specimens that showed up on international wine auction sites were always suspected of being fakes. And here was a whole case straight from their official vendor. Some people really *could* get anything they wanted!

That was all according to Miyoshi, who was talking so breathlessly she seemed at risk of turning grape-colored herself. She'd stop for a second, catch her breath, then start speaking rapturously again.

I knew when I was beaten. There'd be no talking her down now. The second round-trip delivery was as good as done.

"You're not worried about more requests like this pouring in from across the globe?" I asked.

"Don't worry. Not many governments could make an offer like *this*. And private collectors care more about their own bottles than influencing the fate of the world."

I wanted to protest, but that was what made collectors...collectors.

"Not even France?"

"Hmm... There is that wine collection running back to 1947 in the Élysée Palace," she said, referring to the French president's residence. "They had something like twelve thousand different bottles cataloged recently..."

"See?"

"But President Hollande made the decision to start auctioning off the highest-end wines to reduce spending and generate revenue, investing proceeds back into state funds and purchasing from

smaller, up-and-coming, more reasonably priced vineyards to provide drinks at state dinners."

"Then the most tempting bottles would be..."

"They only let about ten percent of the collection go, but that included most of the ones I'd take as payment."

"Well, that's good to know."

If word got out that Miyoshi's services could be purchased with alcohol, there was no telling who would come crawling out of the woodwork brandishing bodaciously bourgeois bottles of booze. Thankfully, based on her last comments, it seemed like most groups would have to resort to fakes, and Miyoshi being a known Appraisal user would probably discourage any attempts to fool her.

"Although, there might be some truly incredible specimens lurking within famous domaine and château stocks, or deep within giant Moldovan wine cellars..."

"Like that pre-1900s Lafite that sold at auction?"

"Though I'm more of a drinker than a collector, so cultural artifacts are a little less enticing... Probably."

So even Miyoshi has wines she wouldn't open? Yeah, I wouldn't be able to work up the nerve to do it either.

"*Okay, what's the scoop?*" Simon asked. "*Can I tell them you'll take the job?*" He seemed to sense that the conversation had reached a lull.

"*Absolutely,*" Miyoshi replied. "*I have to say, I really underestimated the White House sommelier's chops.*"

"*These are from President Handler's private collection,*" Simon responded.

"*What? And he's really okay letting these go? That's probably a hundred grand there in wine...*"

Since the wines he was offering hardly ever went up for sale, they didn't have real prices, but there was still a sense of general market value—if only so high-end hotels and restaurants could quote something to guests.

American presidents received a yearly salary of four hundred thousand dollars, plus an additional fifty thousand, nontaxable, for expenses. On top of that, President Handler had been so

independently wealthy that he'd run on the slogan that he'd "do it for a dollar." He probably wouldn't even notice a hundred thousand dollars going missing...

"*He could probably chalk it up to national expenses... But either way, I doubt he'll feel the sting,*" Simon responded. "*If anything, he might just ask you to call him over for a glass whenever you open it.*"

"*Deal.*"

"*Really?*"

"*Sure. The 2016 Leflaive is a once-in-a-lifetime find. Not even a US president would want to part with it without having a sip.*"

Simon blinked. Had he...just cleared Operation Tomodachi? However, he felt like he should check one thing...

"*When...about would that be?*" he asked cautiously.

Miyoshi put her finger to her cheek.

"*Probably 2030...at the earliest. He should hold on that long, right? Tell him to stay healthy, okay?*"

"*Huh?*" Simon blinked. She was teasing him, right? More than a *decade* from now?

Presidents could only serve two terms of four years each. Even if Handler left after his first term, waited eight years, and then tried running again, at his age, prospects he'd win reelection were grim. Becoming friends with Miyoshi after leaving office might have been all well and good, but that wasn't the mission!

"*It's Leflaive Montrachet. You know Burgundy whites are best aged for at least ten years. If you open them too early, the flavors get all rigid—tight. Too sour and stiff tasting. You'd get a feel for the weight of the wine, but that's it. You have to let them bloom.*"

"*I-Is that so?*"

"*It is. And as a connoisseur himself, the president should understand that.*"

"*U-Understood.*" Simon nodded, face betraying that he didn't understand at all.

"*Now, for the transport, our schedule's pretty full, so I don't think I can do it right away...*"

"*That's fine,*" Simon responded, still looking flummoxed. "*We'll*

get in touch when preparations are complete. You just let us know when works best. Of course, we'll send the 'payment' on ahead."

"*Advance payment? The president really is generous.*"

Simon didn't miss a beat.

"*If we don't lock you guys in, there's no way you'd keep up your end of the bargain. But there's no backing out after drinking the reward, right?*"

"*I never drink payment before the job is done.*"

"*Well, either way, the president would be more comfortable sending the reward in advance. By the way, whenever you crack open the first bottle, if you could maybe give me a call too...*"

"*Sure, sure. You're on board the wine train.*"

"*All right! From what I hear, we're losing one member after another to Cathy running some sort of 'world-saving' business.*" He grinned, not unlike some sort of hungry predator, lobbing a huge "you owe us" bomb at us.

So that's it! Here I was wondering how she was getting the verifiers put together so quickly...

"*Ooooh, right!*" Miyoshi responded, voice dripping with amusement. "*Think of it like a pre-boot camp compatibility screening.*"

"*'Like' a screening?*"

Was it my imagination, or were "doomdoomdoomdoomdoom" characters rising up from the ground as they stared each other down?

"*Um, we have our own work, so if you don't mind...*" I butted in, trying to defuse the explosive that had just been lit in front of me.

"*Work? You two?*"

"*We have to get down to the twenty-second floor.*"

"*With them?*" Simon gestured with his thumb to the trio of Nathan, Silkie, and Sayama going about their morning behind us, concern written all over his face. "*Well, it's you guys. They should be all right.*"

"*Thanks for the vote of confidence, but how do you figure?*" I asked, noticing that something like a light bulb had gone off above Simon's head.

He thought for a moment before responding, then stepped toward me, speaking at a hushed volume.

"*We got up from the eighteenth floor pretty fast last time, right?*"

It had only taken Team Simon a scant nine hours to get back up. "Fast" was the understatement of the year.

"*Well, you are one of the world's top teams,*" I responded.

"*We had some help. You see, it seems like when you get strong enough, lower-level monsters start trying to run away from you.*"

"*Huh?*"

As far as I was aware, all dungeon monsters would try to attack any explorers they saw. At the very least, we'd never noticed any monsters fleeing in our presence.

"*Or maybe not running away, but...actively trying to avoid us. It seemed like monsters were staying out of our path.*"

Monsters trying to avoid a fight?

"*I've never heard of anything like that.*"

"*Probably because too few people have gotten strong enough to notice it. Plus, it's not like I can prove it. Just a hunch.*"

Still, that would help explain why top explorers seemed able to reach lower floors more and more easily. With fewer monsters in their way, they'd naturally start cutting down their time and resource usage.

It would also help explain why the Wandering Manor hadn't manifested in any of the prior three years until our tenth-floor zombie farming. Top explorers weren't encountering enough low-ranking monsters per day.

"*But the zombies on the tenth floor and the genomos here seem to attack everyone.*"

"*Probably just because they have nowhere to run.*"

"*Ah...*" I put my hand to my chin. "*That could be.*"

Their numbers were so dense, and the areas they inhabited so confined by mazelike gravestones and cliff faces, they might have lacked the "flight" half of the "fight or flight" options.

"*Plus maybe they don't measure their chances of survival in terms of one-on-one tactics, but instead as a group,*" he pointed out.

"'*The strength of the wolf is the pack.*"

"*Exactly.*"

Having been lost in thought over Simon's theory, I finally came back to my senses.

"*Of course that doesn't affect us much right now. But hopefully one day we'll be strong enough to experience that ourselves!*" I crossed my arms, nodding.

Simon cocked an eyebrow.

"*A-Anyway! We've got to get these two down to a little peaceful orange grove, with a little sacred lake, rolling hills like in a snapshot straight from Aricia...so if you don't mind...*"

"*Oh, the oranges! And speaking of 'sacred lakes' and odd trees, there are still those golden boughs to explore down on the thirty-second floor.*"

"*Golden boughs?*"

Nathan, who had apparently been listening, suddenly popped in behind us.

"*Yeah,*" Simon replied. "*Like great oaks hanging with mistletoe.*"

"*On the safe floor? Hrrrmmm...*"

Nathan folded his arms, looking this way and that. Was he waiting for attention? *What are you, a child?!*

"*We're not going,*" I said.

"*Hm, right, but you see...*"

"*No. Any change of plans is going to make the JDA panic. Put in another request and we'll look at our schedules.*"

"*You'd take another request? Really?!*" Nathan opened both his arms in front of him like he was going in for a hug.

Behind him, I spotted Sayama, who had also apparently been listening, squatting down mumbling to himself.

"*Golden boughs? Sacred trees...?*"

Oh, shoot. He's actually a botanist...

"*Mr. Argyle. You can't keep ignoring your office work. You didn't even properly file everything before you took off on* this *trip,*" Silkie scolded him.

Even this time, their work was only supposed to have involved a quick run to the second floor. They were already behind schedule.

"*Then I can just go back, file the rest of my work, and pop back*

over to Japan!" he proclaimed.

"*Try it, and watch that work to file just keep piling up,*" she cautioned.

"*Nnnnrgh... Damn you, life of a government employee! I'm young! I should be living free, strumming out three-chord songs on my guitar!*"

"*You're not that young anymore, though.*"

"*Nooooo!*" He fell to his knees, clutching at his head and shouting up at the sky. "*Wait! I've got it!*" He stood up, seemingly recovered, beaming bright as the sun. "*Why don't we set up a division here?*"

"*What?!*" I couldn't help but shout.

Was there such a thing as living too *free?*

February 8, 2019 (Friday)

Yoyogi Dungeon, Twenty-First Floor

We arrived at the marshlands of the twenty-first floor in the morning, having set out early from the eighteenth. I'd expected the snowy regions along the way to give us trouble, but—probably as part of efforts to secure the route to the safe area—there were many more JSDF members present and the main route was better marked than I'd expected.

With the Arthurs picking off enemies out of sight, Miyoshi started getting drops as soon as we crossed the threshold down from the twentieth. She discreetly moved them into Storage as soon as they appeared. Apparently if you practiced enough with the skill, you could transfer objects into Storage without even touching them. Miyoshi had been getting plenty of practice using the skill to launch iron balls, and had apparently just gotten the feeling that this was something she could do. Scary. It was only a matter of time before the Queen of the Merchants turned into the Queen of the Phantom Thieves.

"Oh my goodness! It's like a mid-spring moor!" Sayama

exclaimed, running forward toward the shrubbery near the edge of the water in front of us. Glas ran after, biting his collar to pull him back.

"Bweeech!" Suddenly a monster that looked like a tiny dragon parted the same shrubbery Sayama had been running toward, darting out with a screech that sounded like a squished frog. Glas took one swipe at it with his claws, and the monster dispersed into globs of black light.

Glas landed with enviable aplomb, then puffed out his chest and looked back at us—entirely too proud of himself—but at least he wasn't neglecting his duty as head of security.

"Look out," I warned. "It's dangerous around here. Don't go running off without warning us."

"S-Sorry. We haven't had much trouble up until now, so I guess I got ahead of myself." Having said that, he looked around at our surroundings. "This *is* the twenty-first floor of a major dungeon, right?"

These would have been the front lines of Yoyogi Dungeon exploration up until just recently—a place crawling with man-eating monsters, more dangerous and wild than the deepest depths of a tropical rainforest or the most remote plains of the savanna. And yet, thanks to us spreading the Arthurs out far and wide around us to clear the path for our three guests, we'd hardly had any encounters, even this far down.

This is going better than I expected, I signaled to Miyoshi via telepathy.

We just need to hire a guide and give them Darkness Magic VI to start running tours to the thirty-second floor.

And just let anyone in? It's going to be like "Co-Op Goes to the Moon."[(20)] *Forget it.*

Ah, right... Never mind. We're not cut out for the kinds of problems that'd bring us. Better to stay away from complicated issues. Far away.

Since when has that been your modus operandi?

"*I know just how you feel, Mr. Sayama,*" Nathan chimed in. "*I*

mean, it's literally been like a walk in the park. It's wild."

"*Right? Good food, great scenery. It's barely been different from a family camping trip. If you could get everyone down to the safe zone like this, you'd be overrun by requests.*"

"*Yeah!*" Nathan was getting more animated. "*Hey, maybe we should put in some word-of-mouth?*" He looked our way.

"*Mr. Argyle. If you'll remember the matter of the NDA...*" Silkie, our savior, interjected with clenched fists. Sharing anything pertaining to the trip's safety or services and the treatment during it would be a violation.

Nathan just continued smiling.

"He's...not actually going to tell anyone after getting read the riot act like that, right?" Miyoshi asked hesitantly.

"How naive. You know there are people who seem reasonable on the surface but will break rules without a second thought, right?"

Those who fancied themselves rugged individualists, who would buck societal norms if it meant achieving the outcome they thought best... The most dangerous loose cannons among us...!

"Speaking from experience?" she asked.

"What are you talking about?!" I snapped. "I'm a law-abiding citizen."

"Don't pat yourself on the back for limboing under the highest bar..."

We moved as a group to an area of rolling hills just off the main path, where the springtime moor gave way to more varied vegetation. It was exactly the kind of marshy foliage you might expect to see horseflies and bees buzzing above, but there wasn't an insect to be seen. Instead, snakes several meters long slithered through the muck and shallow water where flowers grew, leaping frog-like dragons darted here and there, and razor-winged giant dragonflies flitted through the air.

The Arthurs began making quick work of the rhabdophis pythons and water leapers, but the witch needles evaded their grasps. Instead, I tracked the dragonfly-like monsters' movements using Life Detection, discreetly picking them off from a distance using water lances.

"*You know,*" Sayama commented, surveying the scenery, "*with floors like this, you almost get the sense that horses would be the ideal means of transport and travel. They'd be way cheaper than those porters on the eighteenth floor, right?*"

Avoiding high-tech solutions where low-tech ones would do? There was that famous myth about America spending millions to develop space pens, "meanwhile, Russia used pencils."

"*The States tried it, early on. But it didn't last long,*" Nathan said, filling us in on early American ventures into using animal transport in dungeons.

It hadn't been worth the effort. Riding horses required surplus stock of feed and water. If there were a way to acquire either in the dungeon, it might have been a different story, but up until now teams had been forced to carry whatever they'd need from the start.

In addition, the quantities they required were even larger than I'd expected. Big horse breeds like Thoroughbreds and Arabians could go through thirty liters of water and fifteen kilos of food each day. Loading up on supplies for the animal that was supposed to help you carry them was putting the cart before the horse—so to speak.

Even so, some had still held out hope—the space taken up by feed and water consumed on the way down could at least be used for hauling loot on the way back up. But even those expectations had been betrayed. Horses were unexpectedly cowardly animals—not the kind to sit around during monster attacks. They were prone to panicking, and if they sustained any injuries, there would be no choice but to put them down. It wasn't like teams could carry them back to the surface. With all those factors, it wasn't long before people wondered what the point of even bringing horses into dungeons was, and the practice had fallen out of favor.

As a final note, even a covered-wagon approach had proven onerous due to the staircases between floors. The world had quickly moved on from the romantic image of traveling through otherworldly labyrinths on horseback. Too many drawbacks, not enough benefits.

"*I see,*" Sayama responded. "*I suppose it was out of the question to have them eat local vegetation?*"

"*The water was more of a problem than the feed. Maybe you*

could manage it with the kinds of maps we have now, but back when dungeons were completely uncharted? You'd have no way of knowing when you'd hit the next stream or find vegetation."

"*So is it due for a revisit?*"

"*Maybe with predetermined routes... Though defense against monster attacks remains an issue.*" A pretty fatal one at that. "*Plus, you couldn't bring them here anyway.*"

"*Why not?*" Sayama asked.

"*Horses aren't allowed at the sacred grove of Aricia,*" Nathan responded with a bit of a laugh, referring to the city that had abutted Lake Nemi in the time of ancient Rome, where the first cult of Diana had formed. Virbius, the oldest priest of Diana at Aricia, had supposedly been killed by a horse, leading to their being banned at the site.

Though Nathan had seemingly intended for his words to have some profound effect, Sayama merely gave him a flustered look.

"The orange grove is over that hill," I explained in Japanese, turning to Sayama and changing the subject, getting our mission back on track.

Cavall and Aethlem were currently clearing the way. Every few moments, the death rattle of some monster or other could be heard, followed by Miyoshi making a nearly imperceptible movement.

Nathan and Sayama both looked up to the top of a hill, where a strange, cylindrical, and clearly artificial object stood.

Nathan scrunched his brow, then turned to Miyoshi.

"*Azusa, what is that?*"

"*Our hotel for tonight.*"

"*I must be hearing things. Sorry—I thought you just said 'hotel.'*"

"*Fair enough.*" She smiled. "*It's more like our base of operations.*"

Nathan's eyes grew steadily wider as Miyoshi explained that the very building he was looking at was ground zero for practical testing of a slime countermeasure method for which we had just submitted a WDA patent application. Since its contents didn't touch the DFA, he hadn't heard of it.

"*What? If that pans out, you wouldn't even need to limit development to the safe zone!*"

"*Slimes could still spawn indoors. Best to keep any large-scale construction to the safe floor.*"

Miyoshi had left out part of the story—namely that, while the walls might have been coated in our patent-pending anti-slime concoction (ordinary benzethonium chloride), there was always at least one of the Usturas lurking in the shadows by the building and picking off gooey goobers who happened to slip by the perimeter defenses. If anything, we already knew that benzethonium chloride alone would be insufficient, based on our failure to protect our second-floor wheat shield. But we'd still patent the wall-coating method and leave figuring out the most practical application to someone else.

"*So you're saying one wrong spawn could lead to the end of the whole town?*" Nathan asked.

"*There'd always be a certain possibility,*" Miyoshi responded, with phrasing designed to give us maximum leeway as the future patent holders of anti-slime technology, should anyone ever try to take us to court.

"Um, do you mind if I go look at the oranges?" Sayama was getting impatient.

"They're right along the main path, so that should be okay. I'll send Drudwyn with you. If any dragonflies come your way, get down."

"Got it!"

Sayama swung the cooler box he was going to use to collect samples over his back and started heading up over the hill with a spring in his step.

It was one hour until lunch.

"Come back to the base here as soon as you're done!" I shouted.

He didn't even look back—just waved with one hand.

"Gooot it!"

With only Glas left as our guard, we couldn't let Nathan and Silkie wander around on their own. It would be best to all wait in the Igloo together.

Kei, wait outside for a minute, Miyoshi instructed me over telepathy. *I need to swap out some batteries and do a little prep.*

Okay. Let me know when you're ready.

"*Why don't we go over there for a minute?*" I suggested, gesturing toward the lake. I pulled two small fishing rods out of my backpack. "*Last time we were here, we were pretty sure we spotted fish in that lake. I thought we'd go check it out.*"

"*Fish?*" Nathan asked. "*I mean, there have been a number of fishlike monsters discovered...*"

"*Well, why not see for ourselves?*" I handed him one of the rods.

"*If we find a fish in a dungeon...in Japan...*" A grin started spreading across his face. "*And everyone was surprised by it, do you think they'd go 'GYO!'?*" he asked, conflating one of the Japanese words for "surprise" with a reading for "fish." His smile broadened, reflecting how satisfied he was with his pun.

I-Ignoring that, I'd done a bit of research since we'd last been here, but couldn't find any recorded sightings of nonmonster fish inside dungeons. If there were fish in the lake, and if they respawned on top of that, we would have discovered the world's first infinite fishing hole... Not that it would do people much good without Storage, being on the twenty-first floor and all.

"*Miyoshi. We're borrowing Glas.*"

"*Okay. I have Lailaps here, so I should be all right.*"

I asked Glas to handle our protection, and he nodded as if such work was beneath him before dashing toward the lake. *Hey! How are you going to protect us if you're running off ahead!*

Ah well... Other than his small stature, he was about as capable as any of the other Arthurs, so I could let it slide, but sometimes his stuck-up personality led to blind spots. Then again, it was interesting how different all the hellhounds' personalities were in the first place—just like real pets.

We walked to the edge of the lake and dangled our fishing poles over the water. There was no real food chain that had ever been observed in the dungeons, so supposing fish *were* in the lake, what bait would they eat...? If they didn't feed on the kinds of smaller fish they normally would, lures made to resemble those fish might not hold any interest for them. So I'd bought a bunch of fishing spoons just in case. Without missing a beat, Nathan took a slide spoon from

the tacklebox.

"*Do you do a lot of fishing?*" I asked.

"*There's a public service program in New York that teaches kids how to fish.*"

"*Really?*"

"*Of course.*"

From what he described, it would be like Tokyo spending public money to gather kids from across all its wards and cities for fishing lessons. *Nice going, New York!*

"*And then as soon as the season kicks off around May each year, I head out to the Peconic Bay*[(21)] *or Gardiners for fluke fishing.*"

"*Fluke?*"

"*You know.*" He gestured with his hands. "*Flat.*"

Ah... Kind of like some type of flounder. We had certain species of flatfish in Japan too.

"*Though I've never landed a doormat,*" he added sadly.

"*Doormat?*"

Apparently that was the name for the largest fluke catches—more than a meter across. The even larger halibut[(22)] only lived in frigid waters but...maybe something about warm ones was just that conducive to fluke growth?

"*I'll go with this,*" I announced, extracting a Toby spoon lure.

Toby was one of the legends of the lure industry, so I'd learned. The choice was, in the words of Shakespeare, "Toby or not Toby."[(23)]

"*Well then.*" Nathan deftly threaded his lure then cast his line out with gusto. It landed with a small plop in the water. With keen awareness toward the movements of his slide-style lure, he began reeling the line in.

The best-practice approach was to cast from a small creek leading into the body of water, but we hadn't seen any creeks like that around, and no half-sunken trees or submerged foliage that would have made for good casting targets either. Instead, we were left to cast, reel in, and recast, hoping the movement would catch piscine attention.

Suddenly, there was a tug on my line! It took me a moment to

come to my senses, but the line was clearly being yanked to the side.

"Whoa! I landed something!" I shouted in Japanese without thinking.

I'd brought telescoping rods to save space, but due to that, they weren't very sturdy. I eyed the rod nervously as it bent like a bow, at risk of suddenly snapping. I started adjusting the drag. Before I knew it, Nathan had set down his own rod and extended a net over the water, ready to catch what might come in.

"*That line's tugging like you hooked one wallop of a rainbow trout!*" he shouted.

"*Let's just hope it's not a monster!*" I yelled back.

Before long, I started reeling in the line, bringing whatever it had hooked back toward us.

Naturally, I started worrying about what we would do if it actually were a monster—what to do if it suddenly attacked us with some kind of water-spitting attack like a banded archerfish would—but judging from Glas's nonreaction, it seemed like I could rest assured it wasn't a monster after all.

No, instead, what my catch revealed was a slender fish with glistening silver scales and hints of pink. It was a big boy too—too large for the net Nathan had proffered, but he managed to scoop it in a way that let it sit in the net with half its body sticking out. He tossed it all back toward the grass as soon as it was secure.

"*It's a steelhead, a rainbow trout after all!*" he proclaimed, examining our spoils. "*Thirty inches.*"

Steelhead?

"*Hold on. Aren't steelhead supposed to live in salt water and Pacific coastal tributaries?*"

"*Yeah.*"

"*Do you see any coastal tributaries here?*" I looked around. As far as I could see, we were entirely landlocked.

"*Now that is weird...*" Nathan looked up and surveyed our environment too, then returned his gaze to the fish. "*Though maybe no weirder than the idea of dungeon fish in the first place. Who knows?*"

Who knows? I mean, there was the process of smoltification, by which fish adapted from fresh water to salt water, but... No, that wouldn't explain anything here.

"*Let's think about it as a dungeon though. What would a saltwater fish that mainly lives in the Pacific Ocean and American coastal tributaries be doing in an environment that looks straight out of a European moor?*"

Assuming the area had been based on Komugi's and Mishiro's imaginations, it might not necessarily have come stocked with indigenous fish not commonly known in Japan, like Atlantic salmon or northern pike, but you would at least expect something like Japanese silver salmon, or other things closer to home. If Ms. Maker had been probing Miyoshi's mind, the waters might have had cherry trout. Why? Because they were tasty, of course. But were steelhead more common in the States?

"*I mean, sometimes there are steelhead in Engla—*" Nathan started to say, then stopped. "*Do you think I triggered this?*"

He got a twinkle in his eyes like he had just stumbled across some great idea. Our theory about dungeons creating environments to match the expectations of explorers wasn't common knowledge yet, but it seemed like Nathan might have been on track to reach the same conclusion.

"*So what do we do now?*" I asked, gesturing toward the fish. It was flopping around violently on the grass.

Our current theories depended too heavily not only on our own experiences, but also on information we weren't yet ready to divulge that we'd gleaned via use of Making. It would be best to hold off on explaining them for now. Nathan's flash of inspiration had only been a personal suspicion—it wasn't like he'd be rushing to publish any journal articles about it the next day.

"*Eat it, of course,*" he responded, looking perplexed that I'd even asked.

Whoa, whoa, whoa—you're the head researcher at the DFA and you're telling us to just eat some weird fish we found in the dungeon without testing it first?!

"*What if it's dangerous?*" I asked.

"*Hey, the knowledge of the things we should eat is built on the sacrifices of those who tried things we shouldn't. Besides*"—he looked up toward Igloo 1—"*we have her here, right?*"

"*Ah...*"

Appraisal. Plus, unbeknownst to the general world, Miyoshi had leveled it up recently to be able to glean even more information. If it had worked on the oranges, it should be able to conduct a fish edibility check too.

"*Then it looks like tonight's menu is steelhead sauté,*" I proclaimed.

"*Looking forward to it. What an honor to get to be one of the first people to sample dungeon fish.*" He rubbed his hands together expectantly. "*But I have to ask...*"

"*What?*"

"*She'd be a real asset to the DFA, saving us a ton of time on testing. Has she ever thought about...*"

Hold on. Miyoshi's thoughts on employment were one thing, but more importantly...

"*Wouldn't it be a little shortsighted to pin all the agency's testing on the testimony of one person?*" I unhooked the fish, boxed it, and started folding up the rods.

What would happen if she suddenly died? If all the testing systems depended on her, we'd suddenly be back in the dark ages when it came to testing dungeon food safety. There was no way Nathan couldn't see that.

"*Damn. I was just fantasizing about all the free time I'd have if we poached her.*"

Who was this guy? One minute he was an accomplished scientist, the next some kind of little kid. I could only grin as I packed up the last of the equipment and headed back up to Igloo 1. *Poach fish, not business partners,* I thought.

Akabane, Kita City, Tokyo, National Training Center, Track and Field Area

“Hate to say it, but I kind of expected...more...from a major training center this close to a station in Tokyo, you know?”

“Jeez. We sure we’re still in Tokyo?”

The members of Shibu T had disembarked at Motohasunuma Station a little before 10 a.m., looking around their rather deserted and industrial surroundings.

“Whatever. At least the weather’s nice. Come on. We’re gonna be late.” Hayashida yawned, then stepped forward, and the other team members followed him. They made their way to the Japan Institute for Sports Sciences—JISS—where they were quickly guided to the track.

“So this is where the big boys train...” Hayashida surveyed the rather large, albeit otherwise ordinary, field. “You can rest easy, men. Don’t think we need to worry about any monster attacks today.”

There still wasn’t any training center for explorers, come to think of it. Then again, it wasn’t as if simulated combat could provide a real test of explorers’ abilities either, so maybe there was just no point.

“Hm. Covered,” Hayashida added, looking up at the ceiling over the track.

“Just one part. Wonder what keeps it from blowing off.”

A number of people had already gathered, awaiting Shibu T’s arrival. A woman named Mizuka and a man named Yoshida bowed as the team approached. Quite a few others, mixed men and women, seemed to be watching with interest from a distance.

“Who’re they?” Hayashida asked.

“Various prominent figures in the world of track and field. They have a great interest in your performances today.”

“Huh. And the camera?”

“MBS will be covering the exhibition. They have this year’s IAAF(24) broadcasting rights, so... Will that be all right?” Mizuka asked hesitantly.

Kiyan turned toward one of the cameras, waving his hands and smiled.

"Not a problem at all!" he said, turning back. "Right, Hayashida?"

"As long as you don't do anything too embarrassing..."

"Nice! Thanks, buddy!"

"Let's just get this over with," Daiken interjected, eyeing the spectators warily.

He'd thought this was just supposed to be a series of tests. He didn't do well with crowds. Indeed, the only one actively pleased about the audience seemed to be Kiyan.

"So, what? We just start with a little run?" Hayashida asked.

"A one-hundred-meter sprint," Mizuka responded.

"One hundred meters? Our best short-distance runner is probably...Dennis?" Hayashida confirmed.

"You rang?" Dennis stepped forward. "All right, I'll hit the field first." Dennis slipped on the running shoes the staff provided, lazily stretched his shoulders, then sauntered up to the starting block.

"Set!"

"Sorry, what does that mean?"

"Huh?"

Mizuka, looking flustered, hastily explained the basics of a crouching start.

"Ah, okay. Like 'ready, set, go.' Got it."

"On your marks" was the signal to be at the starting block, "set" was the indication to lower oneself into position, and last came a pistol shot that would announce the start of the race.

Now educated, Dennis assumed his position.

"Set!"

Dennis lowered into a crouch. Yoshida, the JISS staff member, couldn't help but notice what an amateurish posture he had. It was likely that explorer had never run track in his life.

The crouching start was everything in terms of determining starting speed—influencing the nature of the runner's first burst of speed, their ability to put strength into their first step. But it took practice to maintain proper posture—and without that posture, starting from a standing stance was often faster. Proper starting technique alone could make a difference of several seconds.

This is going to be embarrassing, Yoshida couldn't help but think,

suddenly regretting that so many spectators were present.

The starter pistol fired, and Dennis took off. His posture was even worse than Yoshida had been expecting. The longtime sports researcher lowered his head, unable to watch.

Moments later, he felt Mizuka elbow his stomach. He raised his head. Mizuka was standing in front of him, fingers shaking as she pointed to the standing clock the manufacturer had sent them specifically for the day's events.

"Y-Yoshida..." she mumbled.

A preposterous time was etched in an array of dot-shaped lights.

"N-Nine point four six seconds?"

Shocked murmurs rose up from the spectator seats.

"No way! H-He didn't even know what to do at the starting block! How?!"

The ultrasonic anemometer displayed a reading of −1.2.

"W-With a headwind?!"

"We recorded his split times at ten-meter intervals too, so we'll have more data to go through later..."

"R-Right..."

Back at the starting line, Azuma, who had seen Dennis's time, was waving happily to his teammate.

"Hey, not bad, Dennis!" He looked back at the clock. "Is that fast?"(25)

"Who knows? But I feel like I can beat it!" Kiyan piped up. "Hey, Hayashida, let me run next!"

Hayashida gave a put-out grin and nodded. Well, he hadn't expected any less.

"Sorry!" he called out to the staff. "But can you let one more of us run the hundred-meter dash? We've got a little team competition..."

Mizuka nodded feverishly.

Kiyan was beaming. "All right! This could be it, right? Super athlete hero time!"

Spinning his arm for a stretch, he walked up to the starting block.

Nishigaoka, Kita City, Tokyo, Japan Institute of Sports Sciences

Following the track meet, JADA—the Japan Anti-Doping Agency—convened a meeting of mixed academic and athletic members in a room within the Japan Institute of Sports Sciences, or JISS. Shocked comments resounded throughout the room here and there as members continued to trickle in.

"I still can't get over it. They weren't even trained athletes!"

The day had been unseasonably warm, with a high of twenty degrees Celsius. Perhaps the favorable conditions had led to better than average performances from Shibu T's amateur runners, but still...

"SMU's Dr. Weyand(26) *has* said we might soon see world records for the hundred-meter dash, two-hundred-meter, and marathon drastically reduced..." observed Sakagami, a soft-spoken academic, with no small hint of admiration.

Though the meet had forgone long-distance events due to time, Shibu T had set world-record times across all short-distance and field events.

"I understand the enthusiasm, Sakagami, but Weyand's assessment referred to the potential for physical improvement gained by careful consideration of recent nutritional, biomechanical, medical, and coaching advancements," a stony, bespectacled man answered. "Today's records were set by rank amateurs."

"But is 'amateurs' really the right term here? These are some of the world's top explorers—perhaps we could merely say they have different practice methods. Need I remind you of records set by those untrained in track running, but who had practiced naturally from living and running in high-altitude lands?"

"But the difference this time is too extreme. No one without dungeon experience could even hope to compete."

"This is it... This is it... Oh, all the athletes are going to protest..." Mizuki, who had been recording the times at the meet, couldn't help but mumble to herself while listening to the others' conversation.

Her thoughts were turning back to her own years on the field. How would all those who had practiced—poured their sweat and tears onto the track—for years feel about being surpassed by those who had spent at most three years doing the totally unrelated activity of dungeon diving? Collecting herself, Mizuki turned to the committee chair and held up a printed sheet displaying the day's times.

"The results are clear. In a competition between a sufficiently trained dungeon-diver and nondiver, the diver would win every time." She tossed the results onto her desk and continued. "The *only* reason we didn't catch this sooner is that top divers haven't been competing, and top athletes haven't made time for dungeon diving."

Urabe, a respected member of JADA's Athlete Committee who had been listening next to the chairman, opened his eyes, unfolded his arms and leaned forward.

"In other words, neither side was taking the crossover potential seriously up until now. This could just be the beginning."

"And these differences are with only three years," Mizuki added.

"Well, what about it? Any others like Takada and Fuwa at official meets yet? Is *anyone* here keeping an eye on this?" Urabe might have been getting on in years, but his imposing physical frame hadn't faded. There was considerable weight to his words.

"I-It's likely others like them, young athletes—dungeon natives, let's call them—are going to start cropping up."

Tanaka and Fuwa had both briefly dabbled in dungeon-diving early in their college careers. Some speculated they'd both noticed a correlation between diving and improvements in their times.

"There are plenty of teenage divers who are just now entering collegiate sports. We might be looking at a great dungeon-powered athletic boom."

Urabe raised an eyebrow at this.

"One thing bothers me. Notable though they might have been, both Takada and Fuwa were *relatively* average athletes up until just recently. How do we explain this jump in their performance?"

"Only one explanation comes to mind." Now it was Yoshida who answered, on Mizuki's behalf. He held up his own packet of meeting

material, pointing to a certain URL—a dungeon boot camp application site.

"But the boot camp's supposed to be for explorers."

"To take the company's word for it, it draws out 'latent potential.' Dungeons naturally strengthen a host of human abilities, but it's hard for the average diver to exert any kind of conscious control over how those enhancements manifest."

"But with the right training, you could draw out that potential and put it all in one area?"

"That's what the company claims. They offer a latent-potential, or more aptly stored-potential, allocation regimen."

"What is this, Kundalini yoga?" Sakagami laughed. These dungeon bonuses might not have been far off from the concept of Prana, viewed a certain way. "Any other ancient mysticism you'd like to throw around?"

A few snickers rose from the committee.

"In other words, if someone went in without enough of this...stored potential...the boot camp wouldn't benefit them?" Urabe asked.

"Yes, but the corollary is that any athlete with sufficient dungeon experience might be able to suddenly jump to the top, much like Takada and Fuwa," Yoshida answered.

The room fell silent—save for the nearly audible shivers running up the former athletes' spines.

"Fuwa and Takada made massive leaps in their personal bests after a single round of camp. If the SUB2(27) project catches wind..."

The cat was already out of the bag, though. It was a foregone conclusion that all the coaches in attendance at Shibu T's track meet would be scrambling to incorporate dungeon-training regimens.

In addition, everyone had already realized that just as pushes to categorize altitude training as doping had failed, the same would hold true for dungeon training. If there had been any remaining diehard skeptics at the beginning of the track meet, Shibu T's times had blown their doubts away. It was obvious that anyone who didn't ride the winds of change was about to be left in the dust—no matter

how long they'd spent leading the pack until now.

"This boot camp. How much does it cost?" A coach who looked to be somewhere in her thirties raised her hand and asked hesitantly.

"Fuwa and Takada paid thirty thousand yen apiece."

"Thirty thousand yen to set world records?!"

"But group applications run thirty thousand *dollars*."

"Th-Thirty... Why the huge difference?" another committee member asked.

"Even thirty thousand dollars is cheap, when you think about the results," Yoshida pointed out.

Several former athletes grimly nodded.

"That said," Yoshida added, "space is limited. There's no guarantee any particular application gets accepted."

Urabe sank into his chair. Apparently some members present didn't know how to leverage influence.

"You're telling me the Japan Association of Athletics Federations wouldn't be able to lock down slots?" he snapped. "What are members paying for?"

"Now hold on!" the chairperson intervened. "JAAF? Don't leave the JSF out of this, Urabe."

Urabe had originally belonged to the JAAF, while the chairperson's background lay in the JSF—the Japan Swimming Federation.

The world of Japanese sports federations was labyrinthine. In addition to each federation, there was the Japan Sports Association —JSPO—from which the Japan Olympic Committee (JOC), overseeing Olympic prep and scouting, had broken away in 1989. Now one needed to be a member of JSPO for national and pan-Asia competitions, but the JOC for Olympic candidacy. Plus, for international tournaments hosted by a specific sports federation, one could compete simply by being a member of that federation without registering with JSPO. No one but athletes and coaches could hope to keep track.

"All right. Never mind the JAAF or JSF. All the different federations submitting their own group applications is just going to reduce the chances of booking slots. We'd be better off having JSPO or the JOC apply."

"With more than fifty different member organizations between the two of them. How would they ensure equitable distribution of boot camp slots?"

The room erupted with chatter as various members began arguing for their own groups.

The academics grew sullen. But just when the meeting seemed destined to circle the drain for hours, Sakagami spoke up again.

"Everyone, please. First, we'll probably have to bring this to the Japan Sports Council via the Japan Sports Agency," he declared, invoking governmental sports regulation agencies. "We can talk about slot distribution after that."

This was only a JADA meeting—they could only go so far debating policy on their own.

"Handle it all with legislation?" another member suggested.

"The issue does affect all of Japan. The Diet can't deny its responsibility to act. In addition, there's the output of Olympic candidates to think of."

"Right, right! Someone will take up the case!"

No doubt every member of the committee was currently gripped by the same impossible delusion—that by turning the problem over to government regulation, they would somehow get exactly the boot camp slots for their own federation that they felt they deserved.

A delusion shared by all but one member, anyway—Kyoya Sugatani, thirty-four, looked on at the others with a mixture of pity and scorn. A bad boy athlete in his day, he had bounced around various positions after retiring from competitions, eventually winding up at JADA—at which he'd continued to be an outcast, smoldering silently during fruitless arguments and debates like this one.

Sakagami was right about one thing—this was only JADA, Japan's anti-doping body. Former athletes gave their perspective on new testing measures and anti-doping education from athletes' perspectives, while academic members presented new developments related to the same. But this wasn't doping, or anything else they could hope to weigh in on.

"Why are we even spending our time on this...?" he grumbled.

But it wasn't just that—the entire motivation of those now

squabbling over boot camp slots seemed strange to him. The topic had started with a track meet. Maybe for highly technical ball sports, it would be faster to run a trained athlete through a dungeon regimen than to teach an explorer to play ball, but for running? Certain technical aspects aside, anyone knew the basics of running, at least enough to be able to get meet results without technical coaching. The very track meet that had sparked this whole debate had been living proof of that. If one year of light diving had been enough to produce Takada's and Fuwa's results with the boot camp...

No, if Japan, if these coaches, really wanted results, there was no reason to be scrambling to provide dungeon training for current athletes. All you had to do, instead, was to register existing explorers at meets. The advantage might only hold for a time...but the notoriety would last longer.

Of course all the athletes here had their own connections, the coaches their own stables—those would be hard to shed.

Hard for all but one resident bad boy.

"Latent potential, huh?" Sugatani mumbled, gazing at Shibu T's record times on the material in front of him. He felt like he knew where to find plenty of that.

Meanwhile the committee members around him elected to pass the issue up to the legislature.

Yoyogi Dungeon, Twenty-First Floor

"*Scrumptious!*" A certain American scientist, downing his butter-sautéed steelhead in Igloo 1, crooned. "*Delightful!*"

The maple syrup glaze had taken me by surprise, but then I supposed a balsamic sauce had its sweetness too.

"*So how do you keep digs like this all the way down in a dungeon?*" he asked, gesturing around the room.

"*Mr. Argyle,*" Silkie hissed, "*ixnay on the estionsquay.*"

You couldn't break a nondisclosure clause if you hadn't learned any secrets in the first place.

"*I don't know; 3.8 bil seems like a pretty small price to learn how to make dungeon research facilities...*" he mumbled.

I turned to Miyoshi.

See? I asked over telepathy.

It's true! she responded.

A natural-born rule-breaker.

"*Please secure the budget necessary to actually cash checks like that before writing them with your mouth,*" Silkie quipped.

In other words, if they had the money, *she'd agree*?! Maybe she wasn't as straitlaced as she let on.

We decided to head down to the grove with Sayama after lunch. Earlier he'd come back running in all excited, telling us breathlessly about how he'd spotted the perfect tree to take a clipping from somewhere down by the lake. I hadn't seen him so excited since we'd met. Sure enough, there was no extinguishing a STEM guy's fire once lit. Bystanders beware.

"*What about you two?*" I asked Nathan and Silkie.

"*We'll go with, of course! When are we going to have a chance like this again?*"

What did he think this was, a tour? We were twenty-one floors down—deadly monsters lurked around every corner. Even as we started off down the hill, glittering trinkets dropped here and there around Miyoshi at a steady pace.

It generally took a brush with danger to fully comprehend it. Unfortunately, in dungeons, a first brush with unexpected danger could easily mean there wouldn't be a second. Our guests had yet to learn to sense the danger. Still, as long as they didn't go wandering off, they should be all right. The more I thought about it, the more I realized having Nathan and Silkie come along would be better for us too. Easier to keep them out of trouble.

We strolled through the orange grove, following the edges of the lake, until at last we reached the tree Sayama had been talking about. You couldn't miss it—it was nearly twice as big as the rest and had a kind of divine aura about it.

"*There!*" he shouted as we approached. "*That's it! Crazy, huh?*"

"*Orange trees only grow to around three meters under human*

cultivation..." Nathan mumbled, peering up at the tree. Certainly it did appear a little too grand to be an ordinary citrus spruce. Its top leaves rustled some ten meters off the ground.

"*If I'm going to pick one tree for the scion, may as well pick the best.*" Sayama took out a short Japanese woodcutting knife.

"Hmm?"

When Sayama raised the knife, a strong blip appeared on Life Detection. And as soon as he started to swing it down, the blip started...moving our way!

Miyoshi!

I've got it too!

"*What is it?*" Nathan asked, noticing our tense expressions.

"*We've got a big one coming. Hide.*"

Miyoshi gestured for Nathan and Silkie to back up, then summoned Aethlem and Drudwyn to protect them. Silkie let out a small gasp. They must have known *something* had been picking off monsters for them at a distance, but this was the first time they'd seen any of the hounds except Glas up close. Far from being scared, Nathan seemed ecstatic, but he stayed quiet—it looked like even he had a sense of the danger at hand.

I thought he was just kind of a crazy mad scientist type, but it looks like he's got some sense, I signaled telepathically to Miyoshi.

He's a head researcher at the WDA—one of humanity's bastions of defense against the unknown. You can't get that kind of position being too careless, you know?

Yeah... If you thought about it, his position investigating dungeon food safety made him kind of like someone on the front lines in a first-contact scenario. Whoever ran up to the aliens first would be heralded as a hero, after all. *They do say that crazy and genius are two sides of the same coin.*

Speaking of, Kei...

"W-Wait! Just a second!" Sayama was struggling with the tree branch. Rather than chopping one off, he'd lodged the woodcutting knife in it and was unable to pull it out.

Glas was at his feet, looking up with a mixture of pity and fear.

What do we do? I asked.

Between him, Nakajima, and Kiyomi, it seems like we're cursed to babysit mad scientists.

I let out a small laugh. Sure enough, it took an encounter with danger to really understand it. I guessed from one perspective, that was natural selection and all, but...

"Well, can't let him die today, huh?" I grinned nervously.

This was work. I still had my exploitative-company worker's pride. You had a responsibility to your projects.

I pulled up Making and set my stats to max. To the others, it would have looked like I was waving my hands around pointlessly in the air. If they asked about it later, I could say it was some kind of magic spell.

"Anything on Danger Sense?" I asked.

Miyoshi shook her head. "But that doesn't mean we can let our guards down. Remember the suicide leaftails?" Danger Sense hadn't gone off until they were already charging at us. Apparently it sometimes wouldn't trigger until it was already too late.

"Right. In that case, get back."

"You don't have to tell me twice."

The Life Detection blip, which had been steadily charging forward, suddenly stopped just a bit away. I heard a rustling in the trees, the sounds of parting grass and leaves.

Something emerged.

"A...person?"

Well, not quite. It stood over ten meters tall—a giant. It was wrapped in a robe and hood so dark green they almost looked black. A sprawling pattern in gold embroidery traced the surface of the fabric. A thick stole covered its face—only two glowing eyes peering out from the dark.

Big Bad, I presume...

A vine-like belt adorned its waist, to which was strapped a short blade. It clutched a thick, wooden staff with one hand.

"Don't let appearances deceive you," Miyoshi called. "Ngai looked human too."

"True." Not that we needed more indication, but the visible hate in its glowering eyes—focused squarely on our party—made it clear

this was no ordinary monster. Needless to say, it wasn't in any twenty-first floor bestiary either.

"A wandering unique like the Hound of Hecate?"

"Try area boss."

Ah, Appraisal.

"Area boss?"

"The King...of the Woods, apparently."

"Wait, so then this really is..."

Maitreya probably never came this far away from the Igloo while practicing. That would mean the person who had set the details for the area was Sayama. Maybe he'd been swayed by all of Nathan's talk about Nemi Lake and the Cult of Diana, and now we had a real rex Nemorensis on our hands.

According to the mythology, if a runaway slave managed to cut off a "golden bough" from a sacred tree by the shore of Lake Nemi in Italy, they would have the opportunity to fight the priest-king (the rex Nemorensis) of the grove to the death. If the runaway slave won, they would become the new priest-king and have to fend off future challengers in the same way.

Not good. A twenty-first floor boss, and a *king*?

"If he's got anything on Ngai, this is going to get ugly," I muttered. Even the Arthurs would probably be taken out in one blow—hardly even useful as shields. "If things get out of hand, we should retreat to Arthur Spa—"

Before I could finish, I heard a snap followed by something heavy dropping to the ground behind me. The king let out a roar so resounding you could hear it rustling the leaves. The king unsheathed his sword and darted forward. Sayama had gotten his bough.

Ngai had moved so fast Miyoshi hadn't even had time to register his attack. With my AGI at 200, I was at least able to track what was happening, but this was the twenty-first floor boss. There was no telling how strong he'd—

"Whaaa?!"

Miyoshi, who had been waiting behind me, had loosed a barrage of her largest iron balls at the boss. Whereas Ngai would have

flicked them away with one hand, the King of the Woods took them all to his upper torso and head, which...promptly exploded with a wet, mushy *plop*. His body tumbled backward, rolling along the ground several times like a log, and then was still.

"Don't tell me he's super weak!!!"

S-Sure, getting hit by one of Miyoshi's iron balls at this point would be less pistol and more cannon, but I couldn't help but feel this was a little...anticlimactic?

All we heard for several seconds after that was the rustle of wind through the trees. All eyes were on the unmoving boss carcass.

"Kei, it's not dissolving..." Miyoshi pointed out.

"That *was* a monster, right? If it was some poor cosplayer, you're going to be wanted for manslaughter *at least*." Given the circumstances, we could probably claim self-defense, but... No, even then, popping someone's head like a balloon was definitely overkill.

"Who knows. There *are* always humans who cooperate with alien invaders. Maybe that was the dungeon's first earthling underling."

"Give me a break." Facepalming, I took a few cautious steps toward the king's body, then stopped in my tracks. The body twitched. "Hey, you *did* blow his head off, right?"

There were trolls and undead monsters with powerful regeneration abilities, but even they went down if you took off their heads. The multiheaded cleaners could regenerate from scraps, but they didn't have traditional humanoid anatomy to begin with...

"Kei!"

The body lurched upright, now very clearly reheaded, let out another bellowing yell, and darted forward.

Miyoshi once again fired a barrage of iron balls. The boss once again tumbled backward—like an instant replay.

"What...is this guy?" I'd never been so confused about whether a monster was strong or weak. It actually kind of creeped me out.

"He might have some kind of special weakness," Miyoshi suggested with a shrug.

Immortal figures in mythology generally tended to have some vulnerability. Plus, we'd already defeated the thirty-first floor boss. It would be odd if there were an invincible monster ten floors up.

There had to be a way to defeat this guy.

"Like a leaf-shaped mark on his back?" I asked.

"Right! Or a heel the goddess grasped while dipping him in the river Styx, or a part of his body without a heart sutra written on it!"

"Does that last one really count?" Hoichi the Earless(28) wasn't exactly "immortal."

"Whatever. You know what seems most likely? That only the 'runaway slave' who cut the golden bough can kill him. It's supposed to be a fight to the death between the two of them after all."

"Argh, all because Nathan was talking about Lake Nemi? Then the only one who can beat him is..."

We both looked behind us, at Sayama, who was sitting up bewildered, ass on ground, near the branch he'd cut off.

"Uh..."

"Miyoshi, let's get out of here!"

This might not have been the world's strongest boss, but there was no way an unarmed amateur was taking down any special monster on the twenty-first floor.

I scooped up Sayama and ran. The Arthurs roused Nathan and Silkie with their snouts, and we took off along the edges of the lake, letting them take the lead.

Kei! It might be faster to let the Arthurs handle the transport.

We had an example of them transporting a full six-member assassin team, so three scientists shouldn't have been out of the question. As long as said scientists kept their cool, that was. However, there was one thing worrying me...

If it's an 'area boss,' then it probably can't leave a set range. We should figure out what that range is, for Maitreya's safety.

But this crew can't keep up with the boss chasing us the whole time.

We couldn't expect any of them to be in top athletic shape.

If it looks like they're at the end of their ropes, let's ask the Arthurs for a bailout, okay?

Suit yourself, Miyoshi responded. *Guess I'll at least buy us time.*

Miyoshi let loose another barrage of iron balls, and I heard

another wet *pop* behind me.

Now I know this seems like a classic case of curiosity killing the cat, but I had to figure out how far it could go, and the only way to do that was to have it keep chasing us—or rather, chasing Sayama—and have Miyoshi periodically put it down again to help us keep our distance.

In the end, it didn't give up until we'd crossed over the hill, clearing the borders of the grove.

February 10, 2019 (Sunday)

Yoyogi Dungeon Entrance

"Thank you! So much!" Sayama gave us a deep, deep bow by the dungeon entrance—almost as deep as the trouble his *bough* had gotten us into. Said bough was now stored safely in his cooler box.

Thankfully it hadn't dissolved when we'd left the dungeon or anything like that.

"But I have to say, you'll never catch me setting foot in a dungeon again." He gave us a weary smile.

Yeah, that figured.

After escaping the orange grove and making our way back up to the campsite on the eighteenth floor, we'd spent all of Sunday making a beeline for the entrance. Nathan, uncharacteristically quiet following the boss encounter, had seemed to have regained his composure by the time we hit the eighteenth floor. He had begun peppering Miyoshi with questions about the identity of the hellhounds—where she'd gotten them, things like that. It turned out he was a fan of big dogs. Surprisingly, both he and Silkie had managed to run the whole way out of the grove. True New Yorkers, apparently they never missed their morning jogs.

"Don't worry," I responded to Sayama. "Stuff like that doesn't happen very oft— Ah, well, I suppose this *was* our third time in six months." Ngai, Cimeies, and now the King of the Woods made three.

Did the ordinary person encounter boss monsters at this rate?

"Third?!"

"Never mind." I grinned. "Anyway, we're curious about what happens to dungeon plants on the surface too, so let us know the results."

"Of course. If you could just keep them to yourselves until the research is published..." he implored.

"Of course! If you could just keep everything you've seen to yourself too..." I smiled again. The air went still.

"P-Please! You know there aren't enough funds for that in our entire budget," he responded hastily, as if just remembering the NDA.

He bowed fervently and stepped into the taxi that had pulled up, bowing several more times from the rear window as it rounded the corner.

"Interesting guy," Miyoshi commented, watching him pull away. "More similar to Nathan than I thought. Real mad scientist types all around."

"I don't think anyone gets up to their positions without a bit of a mad scientist streak," I responded.

"I suppose not..." Miyoshi clapped her hands together. "But hey, what about that King of the Woods? Pretty crazy, right?"

He might have seemed like a pushover compared to the other bosses we'd encountered, but the whole immortality thing made up for it.

"Yeah. If the only one who can kill him is the one who cut the bough..."

I looked toward the street corner Sayama's cab had rounded. I definitely believed him when he said he wouldn't be back to the dungeon again.

"Maybe if someone else cuts a branch?" Miyoshi suggested.

"Who knows."

There were no Diana Nemorensis myths about a slave running away from combat with the current king after breaking off a bough. It was always either kill and become the new king, or be killed. Was it possible to switch the monster's target to another challenger? If

not, the monster would probably just lurk on the floor indefinitely. Fine for Sayama, bad news for anyone else passing through that area.

"At least there's the silver lining of it not leaving the orange grove though," I pointed out. "That way it's not an issue as long as you don't get too close."

Come to think of it, the same was true of Ngai, lurking atop Batian Peak. There was the trap within the mountain chambers bringing you up to the top, but all you had to do was not set foot in that room. Thank goodness. We'd be in real trouble if he were wandering the whole floor.

"I guess that's true of basically all strong monsters," I added. "They'll mind their own business as long as you stay off their turf."

There were wandering unique monsters like the Hound of Hecate, but all boss monsters that had been discovered up until now at least seemed to stay put. Those wandering uniques were a bit like natural disasters though.

"What do you think would happen if Sayama did kill it?" Miyoshi asked. "Would he become the new king?"

"It'd suck if you managed to beat the boss and then found out you couldn't leave the floor!"

You probably wouldn't be able to voluntarily quit the role—you'd just have to wait for the next "slave" to come kill you.

"Maybe he'd get some special powers, *Mei King* style. I mean, 'king' was in the monster's name after all," Miyoshi suggested.

"Wait, do you think...?"

She stretched her back and shrugged.

"But anyway, at least we all made it out alive, no worse for wear! Another successful adventure in the books!"

"No worse for wear? Aren't you forgetting a little job you took on?"

"Gack!"

Apparently I'd just jogged her memory about a small mission she'd agreed to do for none other than the president of the United States. In the cold light of day, it was probably just now hitting her what a substantial task that was. She'd been tasked with moving an

entire power station down for America, saving them months and months of work and logistics planning—not to mention cash. And then they'd wind up with a power source and porter base in the safe area—a massive advantage in further dungeon ventures.

"Let's just hope no bigwigs in Japan find out, if you want to keep your free time..." I looked innocently up at the sky.

The JDA already knew she had Storage. But they also knew we'd turn down any request for her to use it, and just tell them to decide on a user for their own copy of the orb. They wouldn't send any outside requests our way without good reason, although a "personal favor" for Naruse on behalf of the JDA wasn't out of the question.

No matter what, they'd know before long that we'd assisted the US—there'd be no way to hide that, based on what Miyoshi would be transporting. The bigger issue was someone finding out *what* she'd been bought with. Even though she was confident no one could offer a similar reward, we couldn't exactly turn down a similar request now while maintaining an air of political neutrality.

After all, this had been a direct request from the United States president. If we turned down a request from the Japanese government at this point, we'd be accused of being potential defectors. Miyoshi had Appraisal, after all. She could get an EB-1EA green card(29) in a snap. It didn't matter whether she actually wanted to—what mattered was the possibility.

"It's not like I took on the job for America. I don't even consider it a work request at all," she protested, trying out her justifications in advance.

"So you're saying it was like a favor for a friend, in exchange for a little wine?"

"Right, right!"

"That might fly with Naruse, but you expect higher-ups to believe that?"

"Urrgh... Yeah, well put. Hey, if you give me any more grief about this, no high-end US presidential wine for you!"

"What?! Come on, I have a right to at least a third!"

We argued back and forth for a bit. I could practically hear a

voice saying, “Um, that’s not the issue here. Shouldn’t we get back on track?” over my shoulder. I ignored it.

In the middle of our squabbling, Miyoshi’s phone vibrated. She took it out of her pocket.

“Naruse.”

She swiped the screen, accepting the call.

Dungeon Management Section, JDA Headquarters, Ichigaya

“You’re telling me there were steelhead on the twenty-first floor, and they fished them up and *ate* them?”

“That’s right, sir.”

A report had been delivered to Saiga via Miharu Naruse shortly after D-Powers had returned from their expedition. The details were so shocking, she’d decided she had to go straight to the JDA. Now her section manager sat slack-jawed at his desk, blinking in bewilderment.

“What was Dr. Argyle doing?”

“Eating with them, apparently. He gave it a rave review.”

Saiga slammed his hand down his desk, voice strained. “The...head...researcher...of the DFA?!”

“He trusted Miyoshi’s Appraisal, which said it was okay...”

Saiga roused himself, then continued banging both hands on the table.

“Finding. Scientific. Backing. For that. ‘Okay.’ Is. His. *Job!!!*”

Appraisal was an incredibly convenient skill, and the information it displayed probably *was* trustworthy. But what about information it *didn’t* display? The WDA couldn’t take any shortcuts when it came to safeguarding explorers and common citizens from the unknown. Dr. Argyle was a WDA VIP. They’d have an international incident on their hands if anything happened to him while he was under JDA care.

“You’ve been under a lot of stress,” Miharu offered politely, though she was slightly grimacing inside.

She couldn’t help but notice that recently, Saiga had been letting

his guard down like this more and more in front of her. He was still an exemplary boss, to be sure, but she couldn't help but feel that the stiff, rigid impression he had once borne in her mind had gradually had its edges sanded down.

That was only natural, she supposed. You couldn't deal with D-Powers for too long and keep an *entirely* level head.

"Do *you* want to think about the *nightmare* we'd be dealing with if he'd gotten sick, or died, or...turned into a freaky monster or something in the dungeon on our watch?!"

"A lot of people seem to have been becoming more than human recently..."

"I knew he was the free-spirited type," Saiga lamented, leaning back. "But to think he would take it that far..."

"His reputation within the WDA, as far as I've heard, is that he's a knowledgeable and diligent worker..."

"So it seems on the *surface*," Saiga huffed. But maybe he was getting ahead of himself. The real news was that there were nonmonster fish inside the dungeons at all. "What did he do afterward?"

"He rushed off for a 7:30 p.m. flight from Narita to JFK, at Ms. Subway's urging. Apparently he has a lot of work to do."

"I know the feeling." Saiga let himself breathe a sigh of relief. That was at least *one* headache taken care of.

"He said he'd be back as soon as he got caught up on his work in the States," Naruse added.

Saiga's eyes, which had just been starting to narrow in an expression of contented relaxation, shot open.

"Back? What for?"

"To...set up a local division."

"A what...?"

The DFA already had two divisions: its American office, commonly called "White Oak," which worked in conjunction with the US FDA, and its EU office, commonly called "Ducale," which worked with the EFSA. Both names were taken from the location where the office was based.

"White Oak and Ducale, I get, but why's he want a branch office

here? In Yoyogi? Japan doesn't have a singular food-safety agency..."

That responsibility was divided three ways based on specialty: the Ministry of Health, Labor, and Welfare; the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry, and Fisheries; and the Ministry of the Environment.

"There's the Food Safety Commission Secretariat in Akasaka, right?" he asked. "But they just oversee research, not conduct it..."

"Er..."

"What?"

"It's probably to keep working with Miyoshi et al., I figured. He was really interested in their wheat."

A momentary silence fell over Saiga.

"*That?*" he finally asked incredulously.

Sure, D-Powers' wheat field was ground zero for a movement that seemed posed to revolutionize food production. But the WDA's job was to ascertain safety for consumption—that was all. No reason to need to be close to the original plot or its growers.

"Before he was dragged off," Naruse explained, "apparently he was putting in word with the National Institute of Health Sciences, the National Agriculture and Food Research Organization, and the University of Tokyo's Graduate School of Agricultural and Life Sciences' Research Center for Food Safety." She looked up from reading the names off a memo.

"He's covered the gamut, then, with organizations under the Ministry of Health, Labor, and Welfare and also the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry, and Fisheries." Saiga leaned back. "He really did his research on Japan."

"His first priority is the wheat. To quote him, 'If Azusa says it's safe, it probably is. I've already gotten in touch with the UN Food and Agriculture Organization.' He's going to tap some of their members to manage the second-floor wheat plot."

"Already?" Saiga asked. He scanned over the materials he had on the Ukemochi System, or whatever ridiculous name D-Powers had given their infinite farming setup. The wheat's safety hadn't even been publicly announced yet. But what confused him more than that was—

“Why is the WDA’s Department of Food Administration even getting involved in world hunger issues anyway?”

“I have a guess...” Naruse responded.

“What?”

“Because they’re humans too.”

It was a simple answer, but it left Saiga flummoxed—and a bit red in the face. So that was it. The means to lift the world out of hunger stood before them, and they found themselves in a position to help deliver it to the world. But to rush into such risks, just for that—?!

Saiga glanced at Miharu again. She was blushing sheepishly herself, as if she’d just said something she shouldn’t have.

It was dangerous—that WDA researcher would really be going out on a limb with this move. As Saiga reflected on this, he couldn’t tell if he was feeling exasperation or reverence.

“I see...”

“C-Come on, sir! Don’t let not having thought of that get you down! I-I’m sure you’d have done the same thing.” She nervously fanned herself with her left hand, sticking out her right hand in front of her as if gesturing “stop.” It brushed against a stack of papers piled on Saiga’s desk, causing them to spill across it.

“Hey.”

“I-I’m sorry!” Miharu scrambled to pick up the scattered materials, her eyes landing on a certain title. “Yoyogi Development Plan #6?”

“Ah, that...”

The letterhead “Yoyogi Development Planning Desk” adorned the top of the page—its format typical of an average municipal government document. Saiga had mentioned there was a group that would probably be quite interested in finding out about D-Powers’ base on the twenty-first floor. This was probably them.

“What’s with the ominous plan name?” Miharu asked.

“Nothing ominous,” Saiga responded. “Just a little...aggressive. But the main idea seems to be finding ways to use dungeons more actively.”

“They’re just pushing this now? Er, wait...they’re up to plan number six already? I haven’t heard of any of this.”

"Right, well... They've submitted tons of plans, starting the year the dungeons first opened up, but all of them were rejected as being unrealistic. They couldn't even get funding for tests. The submissions were still kept on file as tentative initiatives. We hadn't heard from them in a year, but..."

"Yep, something about this *definitely* seems fishy," Miharu declared.

"N-Now, let's be more trusting," Saiga implored. "They're actually a Tokyo Metropolitan Government department. Let's not be too quick to point fingers."

"I'm guessing they want to use Yoyogi in a similar manner to BPTD?"

"That mainly gets practical use requests from individuals or companies. They want to set up public facilities. Everyone loves community center proposals." Because they made for easy budget approvals, Saiga added with a smile.

"Public facilities..." Miharu rifled through the packet.

It had been three years since the dungeons had appeared. It had been common knowledge that it was impossible to set up permanent structures within them...up until now. D-Powers' mysterious base threatened to turn conventional wisdom on its head.

"I don't know what kind of divine connections this Development Desk has," Saiga explained, "but the plan is signed by a veritable who's who. Even got some Diet members on board. It's not going to be so easy to ignore."

"Hrrrmm..." Miharu mumbled. "But what exactly prompted this to come up now?"

No new plans for a year... It was a miracle the department itself still existed.

"All thanks to that party you babysit," Saiga replied.

"Huh?"

"We just found the safe area, right?"

"Right..."

"If they can develop there, establishing a communications network up to the surface is going to be a top priority."

"Of course, but..."

“Right now there’s no way to lay cables. There’s been talk since the dungeons appeared of establishing wireless communications bases for general use on each floor, but...”

Originally, it was just empty posturing. With no way to prevent slime-based equipment dissolution besides twenty-four hour surveillance, setting up such outposts wouldn’t be worth the manpower. Maybe it could work on the upper floors, but down to the thirty-second and lower? And despite the number of explorers reaching those lowest levels being increasingly small, you’d still need the same number of observers stationed at every communications base. It wasn’t realistic at all.

“There aren’t enough staff to man them, of course,” Miharu concluded.

“But then you brought a certain product to the attention of Commercial Affairs. That liquid...”

“O-Oh...”

“And so”—he gestured to the planning document—“it was time to hear from our friends at Tokyo’s Development Desk again.”

“Miyoshi mentioned something about their first attempt at a benzethonium defense system having failed when they were monitoring their field,” Miharu pointed out.

“But the Development Desk still figures it can innovate. And if it found out about that little twenty-first base of D-Powers’ now... Look out. They’ve poked a beehive, and planning groups the world over are going to be swarming them.”

Saiga knew well enough by now that if the two members of D-Powers hadn’t unveiled the technology by now, there was a good chance that it was because they had nothing to gain by doing so—in other words, the technology wasn’t replicable, and so would be useless to anyone else. The odds of that were high. But for people more accustomed to the worlds of common sense and convention, their failure to publicize the tech would only register as trying to keep something useful under wraps.

“A frightful thought,” Miharu agreed.

“Indeed.”

Plus, Saiga knew well that if the backers of the Development

Desk got too pushy, they could set D-Powers off—and *no one* on any side of the issue wanted that.

Saiga took the packet from Miharu and returned it to the pile on his desk.

"We don't have the capacity to deal with the fallout here in the Dungeon Management Section. Sometimes you have to know when to pretend you *haven't* seen something."

In the meantime, they could suggest some safe-area space on which to build a public facility. Hopefully that would placate Tokyo for now.

NARO Institute of Fruit Tree and Tea Science, Fujimoto, Tsukuba City, Ibaraki Prefecture

"Sayama! How was the dungeon dive?"

It was still only Sunday, but Sayama's supervisor Mizuki had made the trip all the way in to the building to see him.

"Well, there was a moment when I thought I was going to die, but..."

"Say what?"

In a flashback, Sayama saw in vivid detail the monster that had pursued him, but then he remembered an even more frightening beast—D-Powers' NDA. There was no way he could go into detail without violating it. Certain a torrent of sweat must be pouring down his face, Sayama decided to keep the episode to himself.

"I-It was fun. There was so much fantastic flora there. A scientist in our field could go mad."

"Yeah?"

"Everyone should try going at least once. It really changes your perspective on the world." Sayama desperately tried to end the conversation with some vague platitudes like a tourist might give after a first trip abroad.

Mizuki, for his part, was surprised at how lively the ordinarily glum Sayama seemed.

"Really? It had that much of an impact on you?"

"Oh yes. Why, the twenty-first floor was like this fantastic English moor. There was even a lake with—get this—steelhead trout in it!"

"A lake? Inside the dungeon?"

"Like a caldera, I guess. There were no rivers feeding into it."

"Aren't steelheads saltwater fish?" It didn't seem like a dungeon lake could be connected to any *oceans.*

"I don't know. But anyway, I got the orange branch we were after, and plenty of other samples too. I'd like to try growing some of them... Where exactly were you planning to conduct the experiments?"

"I prepped the negative pressure greenhouse room while you were away. It should at least keep any pollen from blowing outside."

"Then why don't we get working?"

"Now? It's a *little* soon for that, don't you think?"

"The dungeon and outside-world environments are really different. Right now I'd like to try growing some cuttings in lower temperatures. There are others I'd like to wait to graft in-season."

Mizuki looked ready to say something, but thought better of it. Conventional knowledge definitely went out the window when dealing with dungeon vegetation.

"There are a few trees set aside for top grafting..." he responded.

"Thank you. There's so much I'm eager to try," Sayama replied.

"Send a report to Shizuoka too," Mizuki requested. NARO's citrus research branch was there.

"Of course." Sayama bowed, then headed to the greenhouse room.

Mizuki watched his employee go, vainly wishing Sayama would *at least* file his business trip report before getting wrapped up in tests.

***

His report to Shizuoka sent off, Sayama proceeded to the greenhouse and gazed at that special orange tree branch he'd recovered.

"Hmm..." He selected an unshu mikan tree in its second year as the grafting recipient and got to work.

The cutting grafted more readily onto the tree than he'd expected. His task finished, he gazed up at the tree.

"Get nice and big now," he said in a quiet voice. "If you grow fruit on the surface, we'll be about to turn this whole field on its head." He sent up a silent prayer.

February 11, 2019 (Monday)

Yoyogi Dungeon Entrance

"Pardon me."

Shibu T, whose members were just about to head in for a dive, turned around at the sound of someone's voice. It turned out to belong to a middle-aged man in a suit, completely out of place at the dungeon. Still, you could tell he'd been an athlete in his younger days. The shape of his muscles still showed under the cut of his clothes.

"A little old for one of our fans," Kiyan said cuttingly. "Sorry; we don't have time for old guys."

At this, Azuma quickly spoke up. Those "old guys" Kiyan was so quick to dismiss often held high status in society. That could be a blessing or a curse for Shibu T depending on how they treated this visitor now.

"Hey, Kiyan, cut it out," Azuma rebuked his teammate, then turned toward the man. "Apologies for my colleague. What is it you wanted?"

"Ah, I'm sorry," the man responded. "Let me introduce myself."

He pulled a business card out of his carrying case and handed it to Azuma.

"Kyoya...Sugatani?" Azuma asked. According to the card, he was a member of JADA. "Ah, from the track meet the other day? Something wrong? We were just about to head into the dungeon, so I'm afraid we don't have much time."

"Then I'll get right to the point. I've come to scout you."

"Scout?"

"Wait, what the heck? Like, for a movie?" Kiyan asked.

"Not for a movie, but I'm sure it'll make a sensational story."

"Huh?" Kiyan tilted his head. Was this old guy on the level?

Now Hayashida stepped forward.

"Scouting, and from JADA... So you mean as athletes?"

"*There's* the leader of the group! Right on the money."

"Oooh!" Kiyan raised his voice. The others knew exactly what he was thinking: "Hero time."

Hayashida raised a hand in front of Kiyan, urging him to stay calm.

"Listen...Mr. Sugatani, was it?" Hayashida said. "We're explorers."

"And?"

"Do you know how much we make? If you can't match it, we're not exactly throwing in the towel on the dungeon gig."

"If you keep setting world records like that..."

"Hold it. If you've got something to show us that could change our minds, why don't we head over to that café. We'll draw too many eyes here."

"Very well." Sugatani nodded, beginning to walk at a brisk pace toward YD Café.

All of Shibu T's members looked at one another, wondering what convincing material this aging coach might have. With collective shrugs, they followed after, Hayashida taking the lead.

***

The six crowded around an out-of-the-way table at the YD Café, placed their orders, and got down to brass tacks with Sugatani.

"Okay, so look, prize money for gold medals paid out by the JOC isn't all that much, but it did go up a bit after Rio."

"A bit?"

"Five million yen for gold, two million for silver, and a million for bronze."

"Huh? Look, becoming celebrities would be cool and all, but the payout's a little piddly," Kiyan complained. Hearing the numbers

caused even *his* excitement to waver.

Shibu T was still just a private party, but they were on the top end of Yoyogi pros. Their individual salaries were nothing to sneeze at.

A tournament entry every once in a while would be one thing, but add on training and prelims...it wouldn't be worth the opportunity cost, when they could just be exploring the dungeon instead.

"Hold on now. The JOC's rewards aren't everything. There are also rewards from the different sports leagues and from private sponsor companies. *Those* are where the money is."

"Sorry, but we'll pass on being tied to any companies."

"Then just look at the leagues! The JAAF pays out twenty million for gold, ten million for silver, and eight million for bronze. And a hundred million for setting a Japanese marathon record."

"Huh. Now that is a lot. You could score two hundred million for just ten gold medals... Not bad."

Where are you planning on winning ten gold medals?! Sugatani thought to himself, but kept his mouth shut. There were only twenty-five men's Olympic track events total, including the mixed relay, and you couldn't mix a schedule of long-and short-distance events together. Still, with most athletes not being ready to face dungeon-trained competition... Something close to that number might actually be possible.

"Can we enter ten competitions?" Hayashida asked.

"If you get through the qualifiers and the times don't overlap."

"Huh..." Kiyan now leaned forward, evidently intrigued again.

In comparison, Dennis was leaning back into his seat, calmly raising a latte to his lips.

"Kiyan, don't be so hasty," Dennis cautioned. "You ever hear of a little thing called 'taxes'?"

"Huh? Even on Olympic reward money? That's fraud."

Sugatani gave a cautious grin.

"I don't know about 'fraud.' Plus at least the JOC rewards are tax-free."

"Sounds less than promising," Azuma pointed out.

Sugatani scratched sheepishly at his head.

"Well, for the leagues, there's a portion that's set aside to be untaxed, and anything over that the maximum is subject to tax. There are rumors they're planning to raise the maximums for the untaxed portion, but right now anything over three million per gold, two million per silver, and one million for bronze would be taxed as miscellaneous income."

"What?! Damn, we could lose half," Azuma pointed out. The group of them were used to the much more lenient dungeon taxes. The miscellaneous income tax, especially together with residence taxes, could eat up as much as fifty percent of their earnings per year. It was no wonder they were balking. "Looking like less and less of a deal..." he added.

"But you'd win everything you entered! We've never had anything like that before. Do you have any idea how many sponsors you'd pull?" Sugatani was getting either more invested or more desperate. "Look at F1 or golf. Right now superstars in those sports rake in over a billion yen per year. You guys have a chance of surpassing them in celebrity, easy."

"Hmm... Superstars, huh? Think we'd get to date hot actresses and stuff?"

What are they talking about? Sugatani couldn't help but think, but he kept the smile plastered to his face.

"O-Of course. You'd have your choice of the field." Well, it *was* true that there were a lot of athletes with superstar actress wives...

"Cut it out. You don't need any big spenders like that for wives," Hayashida scolded his teammates. Despite his playboy looks, he was apparently the most levelheaded of the group.

"Who said anything about wives?" Kiyan shot back. "I'm talking about *social accessorizing.* And come on, even wives are just part of a balanced breakfast!" Kiyan chortled as if he'd just said something clever.

Azuma sighed.

"One day we're going to wake up to news reports about you getting stabbed by a girlfriend."

"Kiyan's going to be a gold digger's biggest dream," Dennis agreed, nodding and smiling.

“You think I’d grant their wishes so easily?”

“I don’t think there’s a single one you wouldn’t, for at least one night.”

“Whatever. We’re world-record holders, even if it was unofficial.”

“Don’t jump the gun. As explorers, we’re still just in the triple digits.”





In other words, there might be nearly a thousand explorers better equipped to set records than they were. They just hadn't turned their eyes to sports yet. Even if Shibu T had managed to set records the other day, they'd be left in the dust once even higher-ranking explorers took up racing.

"Good points all. Well, with that. Maybe you'll have more luck with a less astute team." Hayashida nodded to Sugatani, then got up to leave.

"Th-Then maybe I can request a job from you!" Sugatani, panicked, shouted.

"A job? Put in a named request through the guild."

"I-I can't do that."

"Why?" Hayashida leaned in. "You planning on having us smuggle something into the dungeon?"

"Not at all! I'm planning on starting a business initiative! And I'd like to make it a joint venture."

"A joint initiative?"

They were top explorers for now, but they couldn't continue diving forever. Another ten or fifteen years would see them past their prime. And they were planning to live longer than that. What would they do for the remaining—if they were lucky—sixty or so? All of them were already thinking about what they would do to find an alternative source of income. Well, all of them except maybe Kiyan.

"Do you know about the dungeon boot camp?" Sugatani asked.

Hayashida cocked his head. The boot camp that D-Powers—that amateurish-looking crew he'd met down on the eighteenth floor last month—ran?

"D-Powers'?" Hayashida sat back down.

"That's the one. To put it simply, I'm thinking about starting up an identical service in partnership with you."

Everyone knew by now how difficult it was to get spots in the camp. A copycat service would make bank, that much was for sure. But— "Legally...is this on the up-and-up?"

"That won't be a problem."

Sugatani had looked at a copy of the NDAs Fuwa and Takada had signed with D-Powers, and noticed one important point. The

contracts prohibited them from *telling* anyone else about the contents of the course. It didn't say anything about starting their own program. Technically, even if they ran a course with an identical regimen to D-Powers, they'd be clear so long as they didn't *tell* any trainees the courses were the same. It might not have been strictly *ethical*, but it was totally *legal*. The lawyer Sugatani had consulted had confirmed this.

He explained as much to Hayashida.

"You're kidding."

"Now the one protection this offers them is that if a copycat camp doesn't produce the same results, it can't be connected back to them. No liability."

It was a strange NDA. Really, could you even call it an NDA at all? It was almost as if it were *inviting* enrollees to set up their own camps. Then again, D-Powers did have a clause about assisting them in dungeon exploration in exchange for going through the boot camp. Maybe setting up more camps was supposed to be an element of that.

"In any case, the main client base would include JAAF, the Japan Swimming Federation, and just about every other major sports organization you can think of. They have deep pockets and even deeper connections."

Hayashida thought for a moment. He *had* wanted to try out the boot camp. And if he didn't like how things were looking in terms of setting up the copycat business scheme, he could just drop out at that point.

"We would need to attend the camp ourselves first, and admission is decided by a lottery system," Hayashida pointed out.

"The JDA has a special framework for reserving slots. They could recommend you." Shibu T was one of Yoyogi Dungeon's top teams. If they put in a request, they might get preferential treatment.

"Would we need to bear any startup costs?"

"I'd like to say half and half, but I'll be piggybacking off of you for the content, so...I'll front everything."

Hayashida looked behind him at his team, then nodded.

"All right. We're in business, partner, so let's do our best to make

each other rich."

"The next boot camp is on the twenty-third. Try to put in word with the JDA as soon as you can."

"Got it. All right. We're gonna get diving, but we'll be in touch soon."

Hayashida stood up, shook Sugatani's hand, then walked out of the café with his crew.

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Message Board [What are they going to do] D-Powers 203 [Next?]

1: Anonymous Explorer ID: P12xx-xxxx-xxxx-2932
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.

103: Anonymous Explorer
The Yoyo-D Info Bureau just got a major update!

104: Anonymous Explorer
Is this the right thread for that?

105: Anonymous Explorer
Well, yeah. It says they're "contaminated with D-Powers" or something in English. Weird

---

106: Anonymous Explorer
That's "in collaboration with D-Powers" you dummy

107: Anonymous Explorer
Collaboration! rofl So they're finally working with the Wiseman?

108: Anonymous Explorer
Apparently from now on, if you submit an unknown item to the JDA, you can get Wiseman to appraise it and they'll publish the results!
This might mean new items popping up!

109: Anonymous Explorer
Good for public info on drop locations too! Since only the Wiseman knows what's in Appraisal descriptions, you couldn't try to cover up where you got it. If the drop location showed up in Appraisal, you'd be busted.

110: Anonymous Explorer
Uh, what's up with this UI? Are they for real?

111: Anonymous Explorer
Try downloading the app, >110. They have Windows and Mac versions, and Linux is, uh, "coming soon" (insert photo of skeleton on bench)
Apparently the browser version has fewer features

112: Anonymous Explorer
It's missing the "Virtual Dungeon" feature. It's like a crazy 3D map
I thought it'd be like Street View, but no—it's actually full 3D modeling? Is this a world-first?

113: Anonymous Explorer
Probably >112
But it looks like right now it's a mix of street view style mapping and 3D modeling

---

114: Anonymous Explorer

I mean, right. There’s no way they could model all of Yoyo-D in 3D

115: Anonymous Explorer
It’s just the main routes, but it goes all the way down to the 31st floor. That’s crazy! This is gonna put dungeon raiding forward centuries!

116: Anonymous Explorer
Who’s making this, and how? Are they modeling based on photos?

117: Anonymous Explorer
Nope, according to the explanation they’re using point cloud data from sonar imaging and other tools to complete the rendering. So it should be pretty accurate

---

118: Anonymous Explorer
I wonder what “other tools” are lol
They probably wanted the maps up since they’ll need to start carrying equipment down to the safe area

---

119: Anonymous Explorer
Right, they’ll need safe import routes

120: Anonymous Explorer
They’ve already got ’em, right? You saying they need more?

121: Anonymous Explorer
There’s a link to 2D maps for rental spaces lol

122: Anonymous Explorer

Jeez, things are getting wild with the safe area being found

123: Anonymous Explorer
We’re in the era of parties and companies setting up permanent dungeon bases. Who’da thunk.
But what about slimes?

124: Anonymous Explorer
If there are slimes even in the safe area, they’d just have to keep buildings permanently staffed; no empty offices

---

125: Anonymous Explorer
How much to rent space in the safe area?

126: Anonymous Explorer
It’s just info about zoning right now. They’re doing a company bidding system.

127: Anonymous Explorer
Dang

128: Anonymous Explorer
D-Powers might be collaborating, but can we please keep this on topic?

129: Anonymous Explorer
Look, under the map screen! “Data contributed by D-Powers”

130: Anonymous Explorer
What? Not by the JDA?!

131: Anonymous Explorer
Well, that answers 116’s question.
But I’ve never seen Azusa in the dungeon. What gives?

132: Anonymous Explorer
It doesn’t necessarily have to be her

133: Anonymous Explorer
I’ve seen some matango guys walking around for the old Dungeonview images. Think they used the same strategy? But this goes all the way down to the 31st floor. How’d they manage that?

134: Anonymous Explorer
Matango lol

135: Anonymous Explorer
Well what else would you call someone that looks like they have a mushroom-cap head

---

136: Anonymous Explorer
lol you’re right >matango

137: Anonymous Explorer
Since it’s sonar instead of a camera, they can probably use smaller devices. No optical systems required. The problem would be the processing equipment. And the battery.

138: Anonymous Explorer
They’d need some kind of optics for the surface textures, right? They probably used both

---

139: Anonymous Explorer
You'd have to change the batteries once an hour. How many could they bring in?

140: Anonymous Explorer
Whoa, whoa
There are monsters on the 3D map! :0

141: Anonymous Explorer
It's projection mapping, so they probably picked some up. You can click on the monsters to get info about them! Their drop lists and everything!

142: Anonymous Explorer
Whoa, for real!
But, uh, come on guys, just make a table! -_-;

143: Anonymous Explorer
That's the WDA's job. They've got their databases. The Yoyo D Info Bureau is basically just for fun

---

144: Anonymous Explorer
A fun site? A fansite?

145: Anonymous Explorer
Fun! Stay on topic!!!

146: Anonymous Explorer
Right. Not a site for rotating cooling blades. Got it.

147: Anonymous Explorer
All right, wrap it up. We're just spinning our wheels

148: Anonymous Explorer
Hold on, isn’t some of this data weird? It goes into way more detail than the JDA’s item database

---

149: Anonymous Explorer
Because of the Wiseman, duh

150: Anonymous Explorer
But I heard the Wiseman wouldn’t take Appraisal requests

151: Anonymous Explorer
She’d do it for ones that sound like they might be deadly based on the names. Anyway, maybe the virtual dungeon is her way of getting around dealing with individual requests?

152: Anonymous Explorer
Maybe they get paid per visit!

153: Anonymous Explorer
What? There’s no advertising saying that or anything, and it doesn’t seem like they need the funds
>151 ARE YOU WITH THEM?!

154: Anonymous Explorer
>153 Jealous...
But anyway, update the item database first!

155: Anonymous Explorer
>151 They gotcha! >153 maybe they turned the JDA down on sharing with the database

---

156: Anonymous Explorer
Nice job >155
>154 The info bureau and database probably have different owners. This is like the layman site

---

157: Anonymous Explorer
lol @ the layman site having more info

158: Anonymous Explorer
Hey, that’s how it always works, right? Fansites have more info than official ones—like game wikis having more info than official publisher sites
Er, sorry, “fun sites”

159: Anonymous Explorer
That kinda tracks. Dungeons are basically like games after all...

160: Anonymous Explorer
But what is this flavor text-type stuff? This isn’t in the database

---

161: Anonymous Explorer
Talk about fansite. Who thought of it?

162: Anonymous Explorer
There’s a note about that. The flavor text is from Appraisal!

163: Anonymous Explorer
What?!

164: Anonymous Explorer

You’re telling me a dungeon wrote this text?!

165: Anonymous Explorer
lolol You could just stare at an item, cover one eye and be like, “I see it. The forces of the dungeon call out!”

166: Anonymous Explorer
New fetish just dropped

167: Anonymous Explorer
It has average and special drop rates too!

168: Anonymous Explorer
Just based on sampling though, so it may not be accurate

169: Anonymous Explorer
“Just”... This is revolutionary!

170: Anonymous Explorer
I’ve given up on being surprised by anything after they said stats were real. Dungeons are games. Final answer

---

171: Anonymous Explorer
You guys are all pretty experienced with the dungeon, right?

172: Anonymous Explorer
I dunno. Everyone’s putting in serious training now. Like Fuwa the other week

---

173: Anonymous Explorer

Fuwa?

174: Anonymous Explorer
You haven’t heard his interview from the Beppu-Oita Marathon?!

175: Anonymous Explorer
Oh, right. I thought it was Takada though?

176: Anonymous Explorer
No, she was the Osaka women’s international winner

177: Anonymous Explorer
There was something about “Sergeant Cathy”

178: Anonymous Explorer
What? Cathy ran in a marathon?!

179: Anonymous Explorer
No! Here
https://URL/...

180: Anonymous Explorer
This makes me laugh every time I see it lol

181: Anonymous Explorer
“What? Huh?” lol poor interviewer

182: Anonymous Explorer
Okay, I watched it. Guess I missed it when it aired

183: Anonymous Explorer
I can’t see the link. Somebody, explain!

184: Anonymous Explorer
It’s a postmarathon interview from Beppu-Oita, >183 Fuwa broke a world record, then took over the mic and went “Sergeant Cathy! We did it!” and did a fist bump toward the camera lol talk about bold

---

185: Anonymous Explorer
People pointed this out last week too, but that’s definitely the boot camp

---

186: Anonymous Explorer
With Takada’s statements, they probably enrolled together in the camp on the twenty-sixth

---

187: Anonymous Explorer
Those two are pretty good, but what’s going to happen when all the athletes who were already better than them start dungeon training? They set world records after just one day of the camp. It’s gonna get nuts

---

188: Anonymous Explorer
Can’t put the genie back in the bottle.

189: Anonymous Explorer
I mean, it could just be a coach named Cathy.

190: Anonymous Explorer
You know many athletes who call their coach “sergeant”? No, if there is a “Sergeant Cathy” in Japan, she’s probably at Yoyogi

---

191: Anonymous Explorer
They both cut like eight minutes off their times.

That’s around a second every 100 meters. We only have the final times, not their running paces, but it’s like they got 10 to 20 percent faster, right?

192: Anonymous Explorer
In one day? Even though they were already in peak athletic condition?
Damn, if Eliud Kipchoge took the boot camp, he’d probably break 1:54!

193: Anonymous Explorer
You have to be willing to help out with exploration in Yoyogi for a while. I’m not sure Kipchoge could swing it

---

194: Anonymous Explorer
Yeah, but “helping out” to an athlete would basically just be more free training, wouldn’t it?

195: Anonymous Explorer
Training on upper floors is different from diving down to the front lines.

196: Anonymous Explorer
Apparently the contract for the boot camp just says “as much as possible.” But it’s hard to even get into the camp in the first place. There’s a lottery system. How did Fuwa and Takada even get in on the same day? Must have leveraged some connections

---

197: Anonymous Explorer
But look at it. Ryoko Saito, Takada, Fuwa... It looks like all you need to do to set a world sports record is

go through D-Powers’ boot camp. And the fee for individuals is just thirty thousand yen! Thirty thousand yen for a world record? Breaking track records usually gets you one hundred million!

198: Anonymous Explorer
They’re doing it three times a week with a maximum of seven enrollees per session. That means twenty-one people a week is their cap.

199: Anonymous Explorer
Forget thirty thousand yen, top athletes would probably pay thirty thousand dollars to get in

---

200: Anonymous Explorer
You can only apply for the next round of openings—you can’t try to put in for one further out. That means all you can do if you don’t get in is reapply every week and hope you’re chosen for the next slot. It’s almost impossible to get in. If you could just schedule it, I really would pay thirty thousand dollars

---

201: Anonymous Explorer
We found the athlete >200

202: Anonymous Explorer
Cut it out >201

203: Anonymous Explorer
Yeah, I’d love to know how they’re picking people. They could prioritize explorer experience, but it seems like most of the demand is coming from the entertainment and sports worlds

---

204: Anonymous Explorer
What does dungeon training have to do with entertainment?

205: Anonymous Explorer
There were two pinup models who recently exploded onto the scene after going through training similar to the boot camp. One’s been racking up acting roles, even major film ones, and according to official postings, the other’s taking part in Fashion Week. There’s no way the D-Powers connection didn’t have something to do with that

---

206: Anonymous Explorer
Maybe the “lottery” deciders are getting certain favors

207: Anonymous Explorer
Hey now >206
Maybe we should all chip in for some presents for Cathy

208: Anonymous Explorer
Let’s not overlook one important group that’ll be driving up demand: slow runners worried about upcoming middle-school track meets

---

209: Anonymous Explorer
Oof. You know how to hit someone right in their own lived experience. I’d skip school to get out of those sometimes >208

210: Anonymous Explorer
Come oooon >208

211: Anonymous Explorer
Dang, I’m getting more jealous of Fuwa and Takada the more I think about it! How did they manage it?

212: Anonymous Explorer
The window to apply for the camp that happened on the 26th was so brief, only people who had been stalking the site waiting for it even noticed. There probably wasn’t as much competition to get in.

213: Anonymous Explorer
But if this keeps up, some other company or party is going to try their own version to meet demand, huh?

214: Anonymous Explorer
Feels inevitable. >213 Whoever does it’ll make bank.

215: Anonymous Explorer
But what about the know-how? People tried running in dungeons like it was high-altitude training for a while, but it didn’t produce any major results

---

216: Anonymous Explorer
You could just copy whatever D-Powers is doing

217: Anonymous Explorer
Right? Their first, pre-boot camp session apparently had DSF members like Team Simon. I wouldn’t be surprised if the DSF is already holding its own copy training. Maybe they’ll even open it up to the public soon.

218: Anonymous Explorer

But they’d all need to wait until the stat-measuring devices go on sale.

219: Anonymous Explorer
They said preorders would start on 2/25, and be filled as soon as possible after that. But apparently production runs are small. At least it isn’t like the boot camp though. No lottery; preorders get filled first come, first served

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220: Anonymous Explorer
Even the nonpro version costs one million yen. I don’t think they’re going to move that quick...

221: Anonymous Explorer
I don’t know, I’m waiting on pins and needles...

222: Anonymous Explorer
Scalper >221?

223: Anonymous Explorer
According to the description, you can’t scalp them. Not really sure how it works

---

224: Anonymous Explorer
what

225: Anonymous Explorer
Something about measurement data being connected to a database. The devices don’t work on their own. The equipment has some kind of ID too

---

226: Anonymous Explorer

So they need personal ID when ordering, and it like...what, charges a call fee?

227: Anonymous Explorer
I’m pretty sure it’ll just work off of ordinary wi-fi lol >226
But who knows. There might be some kind of monthly service charge. Might be best to have some kind of limit on the number of measurements too, so that people don’t go wild and clog it up

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228: Anonymous Explorer
It’s going to be a huge mess for privacy rights

229: Anonymous Explorer
No matter what happens, I’m looking forward to it

February 12, 2019 (Tuesday)

NARO Institute of Fruit Tree and Tea Science, Fujimoto, Tsukuba City, Ibaraki Prefecture

Sayama had spent the Monday holiday resting, then returned to work promptly Tuesday morning to check on his orange trees. His eyes grew wide as he opened the greenhouse room door.

“Wh— What is this?”

The tree no longer looked like an orange tree. It stood a towering eight meters tall, with its top brushing against the greenhouse ceiling. Its branches extended in all directions, and although it hadn’t been pruned, it had maintained an immaculate shape. The glass divider on the terrace side had been shattered by one thick bough—the structure now looked like it had formed around the tree rather

than the other way around. Its leaves, swaying gently back and forth, cast a dancing pattern of shadows across the floor.

Half thinking, in his daze, that he might have entered the wrong room, Sayama checked the doorplate. It was indeed the same location he'd started his experiment the day before yesterday.

"Wh-Why? I just grafted it?!"

In a hurry, Sayama shut the door. He fell to the ground, noticing only now how quiet his surroundings were. If the tree had broken through the glass, the room's negative pressure system should have been working overtime to suck out all the excess air. Yet there wasn't a mechanical rattle to be heard. In other words, the branch...

"Must have completely plugged the hole?" he mumbled to himself.

He wandered back in, checking the break in question. It was as if the glass had melted around the branch, forming a new airtight seal.

But this defeated the purpose of the negative atmosphere greenhouse they'd been using to contain the sample. Looking at the branch extending outside, Sayama felt a wave of panic. If he didn't do something before it bloomed, its pollen would contaminate the surrounding environment, perhaps forming wild hybrids.

He felt a cold sweat coming on. It was equivalent to a deadly virus, some kind of biohazard, escaping a secret lab.

Whether the oranges were Setoka, Amakusa, or the unshu he'd used as a base, all should take at least two more months to flower, but then again, none of them should have produced a tree this large this quickly either. He couldn't be sure of anything.

Although, wait—the pollen recipient trees by Mt. Tsukuba wouldn't be blooming for a while. There was no worry, then. But, *argh*! That was all according to the science he'd known and clung to up until just one second ago. He gazed back up at the tree.

Certainly, this was no longer that same science. He'd need to get in touch with dungeon experts. He picked up the phone and dialed Mizuki's extension to explain the situation.

"Sayama...are you sure you've gotten enough rest?"

He'd slept all day yesterday. Maybe he still needed a bit more shut-eye if he was seeing giant trees. That was the implication

behind Mizuki's wording.

"No, sir. It's real. It broke through the greenhouse room glass, and—"

"If it broke through the glass and threw off the pressure system, an alarm should have gone off. Sayama, are you sure you're all right?"

"I may not be..."

"Hey, now..."

"L-Listen! Could you just come down here right away? You need to see it with your own eyes."

"Understood." Mizuki sighed before hanging up.

"Whew..."

To collect himself, Sayama started rattling off late-blooming, midsize Japanese citruses like he was reciting the Lord's Prayer.

"Iyokan, Shiranuhi, natsumikan, hassaku, Ponkan, yuzu, Kiyomi..." He drew a deep breath.

But if the tree had grown this much in one night, didn't that mean that soon—

No sooner had the thought crossed Sayama's mind than he looked upward to see the leaves and branches rustling.

"Huh?"

The tips of the branches started glowing, and in a moment, all across the tree, a multitude of glowing white *somethings* appeared.

"Huuuuh?!"

Thousands of flowers had appeared, each in early bloom. A sweet fragrance filled Sayama's nose.

"No...way..."

Sayama heard the outer door unlatch behind him, with Mizuki soon scurrying in through the second, inner entrance.

"Sayama, what the hell is—?!"

Mizuki lost the rest of his words upon seeing the giant, blooming tree before him. The two of them stared silently up at the flowers. A single petal tumbled down.

Mizuki regained his senses first. He ran to the phone, hurriedly lifted the receiver, and shouted back to Sayama while dialing.

"Get a tarp over this thing! We don't want anything getting out!

And cut off those branches!”

“H-How?”

“There’s a pruning chainsaw in storage! Go get it! Take down all the flowering branches outside and cover the opening! Stop the spread as much as you can!”

***

“Stop the spread as much as you can!” Easier said than done. Standing on the outside of the glass, Sayama looked at a particularly thick branch and took a chainsaw to its edges. The chainsaw let out a high-pitched squeal as it dug into the bark, which was followed by the sound of stressed and splintering wood, and at last the thud of the branch hitting the ground.

A coworker wrapped the fallen branch up in a tarp Mizuki had provided. Sayama walked up to another branch. However, no sooner had he reached out with the blade than— “Wh-What?!”

The place on the main branch from which he had just cut the smaller one had started to glow. Sayama looked away for just an instant, out of both surprise and panic. When he looked back, the branch that had been there before had entirely regenerated.

“H-Huuuh???”

What was more, his towel, which had been resting on the branch before being absorbed by the ball of light, was now perforated by the regrown branch. The branch extended straight through the towel, as if the towel had been sewn around it, with a hole perfectly measured to the shape and circumference of the branch.

Sayama shuddered to think what would have happened if part of his body had been touching the branch when it started glowing.

He had the sneaking suspicion it might be dangerous to keep cutting. He shut off the chainsaw and set it down.

Regenerating branches? He looked at the branch his coworker had bundled up. Sure enough, it was still there. The new branch was identical to the old.

Mizuki had been watching from inside.

“Th-That’s insane...” he murmured.

An idea both frightening and awe-inspiring flashed through Sayama's mind. This was probably...

"Respawning." He sampled the feel of saying the word aloud. This wasn't a dungeon. *Yet the tree was respawning*.

He'd never heard of anything respawning dungeon-style in the outside world.

Of course, this wasn't his field. He needed the help of an expert. Thankfully he had recently acquired a personal connection with the world's current one and only user of Appraisal.

As he was focused on that thought, his coworkers went into a tizzy as the flowering branches once again began to glow with golden light. When the light surrounding them had faded—

"Fruit...?" Sayama muttered, finally noticing the commotion.

Plump citrus fruits hung from every branch. Sayama crept forward, then plucked one from its stem.

"Setoka...?"

Thankfully, the fruit didn't respawn right away.

Sayama, a mere mortal, had no way of knowing that at that moment, workers at a nearby Tsukuba energy research lab were in just as much panic as he was.

Yoyogi-Hachiman, Office

"Yeah, Naruse?"

Judging by the salutation, apparently Miyoshi had just taken a call from our favorite dedicated supervisor. Usually she'd show up at our door when she had any kind of urgent business, but apparently she'd been stuck playing phone tag for a few days and couldn't make it over.

I stole out of the dining room so as not to be a distraction, taking Glas with me and plopping him down on the living room sofa, where he sat looking like he owned the place. I switched on the TV. Glas fwumped over horizontal. Ah well. He wasn't really on guard-dog duty so much as he was here to be a communication method for updating boot camp stats.

The hosts of a morning variety show were talking excitedly about an incident that had apparently occurred this morning, pulling out one explanatory graphic board after another.

"Inexplicable! The Case of the Vanishing Magic Crystals!"

The words were written in a self-consciously spooky font across one of the boards. It was a little early in the day to be leaning into horror.

"Wait, magic crystals?"

Cocking my head in confusion, I turned up the volume, which had been muted.

"And so, to take officials' words for it, the crystals simply vanished."

"We're certain no one stole them?"

"The facility is manned twenty-four seven, and a rather high number of crystals disappeared. It wasn't an amount one could simply walk out with undetected."

"A modern-day phantom thief, then? Did they leave any calling cards?"

A bearded, middle-aged man chuckled at his own bad joke, and a cohost gave a faint grin.

"I...don't think so. Anyway, the facility has been in a panic since the incident was discovered..."

Apparently a batch of magic crystals had disappeared under the watch of NIMS, the National Institute for Materials Science. Even stranger were emerging details that the crystals had vanished from right in front of researchers' eyes, in a burst of bright light. It was more like they'd evaporated than been stolen.

People were used to a similar phenomenon with orbs, but orbs had time limits. Something that didn't have any maximum time attached disappearing would definitely cause a kerfuffle. It also called into question certain basic assumptions about the natural order.

They still weren't sure of the cause.

I picked up a tablet near me and started running a search. Usually online message boards and social media were faster for big incidents like this—even if their veracity was questionable.

"Ah, here!"

According to online reports, there was another incident that had taken place not far from NIMS. The incident was similar in nature, and already there were rumors swirling about a "synchronicity."

"Seriously?!" Miyoshi's voice echoed from the dining room. "O-Okay. Got it." She hung up the phone.

"What is it? Something happen?" I asked.

"Um, how do I even begin? This is going to be hard to swallow."

"Even for us?"

"Kei, have you ever heard of respawning happening *outside* the dungeons?"

"Come again?"

I wasn't sure if she was joking. It was just such a ridiculous question. Everything we knew about dungeon systems said they stopped applying once you got a few meters from their entrances. After all, that's where the reset switch for experience accumulation lay.

None of the usual dungeon phenomena should have applied to "floor zero," as we might call the outer world. That initial runaway goblin I'd killed hadn't respawned either.

"Uh, if that were possible, wouldn't the world be overrun by monsters right now?"

Mitya and Simon had indicated their countries were probably running experiments on monsters brought out of dungeons. If they could respawn every time they were killed, then there would have been more loose monsters sightings by now.

"Remember what I told you when I explained how I got my D-Card? That it was way too scary even thinking about goblins walking around in city alleys?"

The thought definitely wouldn't have seemed so unusual to Miyoshi if surface-world respawns were possible. Heck, it'd be the end of civilized society. There'd be almost no way to prepare yourself for attacks. Slimes would be the worst of it—especially if they broke down essential components of a nuclear reactor. Or a missile silo. It'd be like the world's worst-case *Sim City* endgame scenario.

"Right. For all the danger surrounding stampedes, we haven't

even seen one of those happen yet," she agreed.

"The closest we've come is Yokohama," I replied.

"But apparently something has respawned."

"What?! When?"

"Orange tree. A branch. Apparently."

According to Miyoshi, two days ago Sayama had grafted the orange-tree branch he'd retrieved from the dungeon expedition. He'd set it up in a greenhouse room, which it had started to break out of, and when he'd lopped off a branch, that same branch had promptly respawned. It had also flowered and— "Bore fruit."

"What is this, 'Hanasaka Jisan'?!" I shouted, referring to the classical story of a man who made flowers bloom.

"They're worried about crossbreeding if any pollen escapes."

"There's still time before citrus flowering. Shouldn't we be okay?"

"NARO's taking the same stance. They're hopeful the fruit appearing was the end of it, but..."

"With D-Factors, you never know."

Our wheat growth had been abnormal too. There was no telling what sort of schedule dungeon-based vegetation ran on.

"They're hoping we can go to the site."

"Ah, for Appraisal?"

Since the grafted branch had come from the dungeon, Miyoshi's skill would probably be the fastest way to glean more information.

"Probably."

"You okay with that?"

"I mean..." Miyoshi cast a glance toward the TV, indicating she was aware of the earlier news. "Aren't you curious?"

Magic crystals had disappeared just after a dungeon tree branch respawned here on the surface. It seemed pretty hard to dismiss as coincidence.

"I guess more curious than not. If it's okay with you then, let's go!"

"I'll get prepped!"

"Right now?!"

"Naruse's already waiting for us there!"

NARO Institute of Fruit Tree and Tea Science, Fujimoto, Tsukuba City, Ibaraki Prefecture

It took ninety minutes to reach Tsukuba from Shinjuku using the Tsukuba Express. From there we flagged a cab, told the driver the address, and arrived not long after at the NARO Institute of Fruit Tree and Tea Science front gate. Or so we thought.

All that greeted us was a large sign reading "Institute of Vegetable and Floriculture Science."

"Doesn't Sayama work for NIFTS?" I asked.

"He does," Miyoshi responded hesitantly. "Ah, Kei!"

I followed the direction of her outstretched finger to a "Fruit Tree and Tea Science" sign half hidden by outdoor shrubbery. *Why is there shrubbery in front of a sign?*

The signs were the same size—it was just the placement that caused problems. Why make only one immediately visible? Either way, it looked like we were at the right place.

Ignoring my *signs* of confusion, Miyoshi called Naruse to let her know we'd arrived, then reported to me that Naruse would be out to greet us in a minute.

"Hey, Miyoshi?"

"Yes?"

"What is floriculture?"

"It's um... Right! I feel like it has to do with potting...and containers?"

"Ah. Makes sense that they do it here instead of at the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry, and Fisheries, then."

"But wait, only NIFTS has the Japanese character for 'industry' in its name. I wonder why. Potted-plant research is more explicitly commercial."

While we were tossing around our pot-calling-the-kettle-black nomenclature criticism, Sayama came running out.

"You're here! Thank you for coming! Thank you! Thank you! Oh, we're at our wit's end!"

Apparently after discovering the situation, NIFTS had started by

notifying the JDA and the national government's Dungeon Agency. But since the problem was technically *outside* the dungeons, neither one could respond.

"Then what about Naruse?"

"I didn't have high hopes, but I tried putting in a personal request."

"Ah. Her supervisor's the type to take personal interest in something like this."

"To quote," Naruse interjected, "'You're the only one with the time to look into something like this. Would you mind running over?'" Her lips curled into a smile.

In principle, the JDA wouldn't touch incidents occurring outside dungeons. That would be encroaching on other organizations' jurisdictions. But the magic crystals disappearing at the same time had gotten Director Saiga's wheels turning—perhaps they were on the verge of the biggest surface-world dungeon-related discovery since the first skill orb disappeared after hitting its time limit.

"This way."

Sayama led us through the campus. It looked like a basic research college, except for the scale. Both sides of the path were flanked by patches of grass.

"By the way," Miyoshi asked Sayama as we walked, "what exactly is floriculture? It's not just the study of plant pots, is it?"

"Ah! N-No. You see..."

Apparently it encompassed all study of plants intended for human viewing.

"We call it floriculture, but it actually includes houseplants that don't flower too."

"Huh."

It even included care for cut flowers and mosses.

We walked a bit further and turned the corner, upon which we immediately saw a building with...what appeared to be a tree sticking straight out of it. Fruit swayed back and forth gingerly on the tree's branches.

"So you see." Sayama gestured.

"Quite a houseplant you've got there."

Some of the greenhouse glass had been peeled away. It almost looked like the tree was growing straight out of the pane.



Even though it was still small in comparison to the source tree in the dungeon, it was huge for a normal orange tree.

"It grew this much in one night?" I asked.

"I grafted it Sunday afternoon. Yesterday was a holiday, so I'm not sure if it was just one night. We can determine more precisely using security footage."

I supposed it didn't really make a difference whether it was one night or two. The growth rate was still abnormal.

"And the connection to the magic crystals?"

"I believe I can answer that," Naruse replied.

Apparently Naruse had tried running a little experiment before we'd arrived. She'd brought some magic crystals with her, then tried cutting off a branch of the tree. As expected, the magic crystals she'd prepared disappeared at the same time as the cut branch regrew.

"So these branches really respawn?" I asked. I compared the branch Naruse had cut to the one that had grown in its place, bending the new branch a bit in my hands. Just then, Sayama called out in a panicked voice behind me.

"Ah, be careful!"

"Of what?" I turned around.

He informed me of the danger of being too close to a branch as it grew.

"So any cut branch starts glowing, and anything in its way when it grows gets perforated?"

"That's right! The first victim was the greenhouse window. As you can see, the tree branch looks like it practically fused with the hole. The next victim was my towel..."

He showed us a hand towel with a perfectly round—or rather tree-branch-shaped—hole through the middle.

"Whoa, Kei! It's like a real-life laser sword!" Miyoshi exclaimed.

I wasn't so sure about that. It was more like some kind of antimatter blade.

If each cut branch had the same properties, you could manage a pretty potent weapon out of just carrying it around with some magic crystals for fuel. Every time you cut it, you could just aim the cut

end at the target and...*shwoom*!

That made it fairly different from your average respawn. In dungeons, objects wouldn't respawn where there was anything in the way.

"Then you're just lucky there wasn't a worse accident," I responded.

"Truly." Sayama nodded solemnly.

Right now they were apparently doing everything they could to not only make sure that no other branch got cut, but, to avoid the tree causing any cross-pollination, also start rush construction of another enclosure around it.

"Thankfully it isn't flowering season for other trees," Sayama added. "However..."

We weren't sure if D-Factors wouldn't throw an additional wrench in the works. They weren't exactly known for respecting the laws of nature.

"Kei, the Dungeon Agency might have passed on this, but this is a new variety—no, maybe even a new life-form. Shouldn't we report it to *some* kind of government body?"

"Like...what?"

"I don't know. The Ministry of the Environment?" Miyoshi cocked her head.

"I don't know exactly how they'd handle it, but I can guarantee this tree isn't on the list of designated invasive alien species."

You could never underestimate a governmental body's commitment to working by the book. We even had Shibuya registering the hellhounds as dogs as one example of this, albeit one that had proven advantageous for us.

"Then maybe we could frame it as a contagion risk? The Ministry of Health, Labor, and Welfare?"

"If we wanted to take that tack, we'd be better off with Agriculture, Forestry, and Fisheries. They take care of national plant contagions..."

Sayama, overhearing our talk of "contagion," tilted his head to the side, apparently disagreeing with our assessment.

"This wouldn't show up on their list of 'major diseases and

insects' though."

"Is there an office in the MAFF dealing with invasive species?"

Of course, normally "invasive species" meant "invading from another region of the world" and not "from another plane of existence." But invasive was invasive.

"There is, but..."

Apparently that fell under the Rural Development Bureau.

"The Rural Development Bureau?"

"Yes. Specifically, the Rural Environment Conservation Office in the Rural Policy Department's Wildlife Management and Rural Environment Division."

"I've never heard of that division or office in my life," I replied, grimacing at their overly specific—and yet simultaneously strangely overly vague—names.

Apparently divisions and offices in that field tended to come and go all the time, Sayama explained. There wasn't much promise of longevity.

Anyway, in March 2008, there'd been an "invasive species countermeasure policy" drafted by what was called at the time the Rural Development Bureau Planning Department Natural Resources Division Rural Environmental Safety Office. *MAFF, can't you do* something *about these names?!* But the policy had only amounted to a few informational pamphlets that delivered groundbreaking advice like "if you see anything out of the ordinary, try to get rid of it right away."

Later, the Biodiversity Conservation Desk within the aforementioned Rural Development Conservation Office had taken over responsibility for the awareness campaign.

"Their current stance has been amended to 'allow harmless invasive species to live, in order to avoid causing harm to the greater ecosystem,'" Sayama explained.

Things like Persian speedwell and white clover apparently fell into that category. It was true that there wasn't any direct harm even if they spread. And there was no way to clear them out now that they were established here.

"So is there *any* government agency that can help us out?" I

asked.

"There...might not be," he answered, downcast.

Even if the tree was dungeon-produced, and even if the Dungeon Agency wanted to get involved, there was no other agency with obvious jurisdiction for it to clear its response with.

"The buck stops with us." Naruse sighed.

"What Japan really needs," I proclaimed, "is a Department of Responding to the Unprecedented."

Miyoshi elbowed me.

"You may want to have ideas better than an excited middle-schooler's before you try running for office," she said.

"One only knows how feeble their dreams are once they *get* to office!" I responded.

"A dream is at least supposed to have a wing and a prayer."

Even a local government would have trouble allocating tax funds to my proposed office—let alone the national government.

"Our Institute of Crop Science would probably love this one," Sayama mumbled, gazing up at the tree.

The NARO Institute of Crop Science—NICS—worked with other NARO agencies to develop next-generation cultivation technologies and other advancements to improve the commercial viability of various branches of agriculture. To hear Sayama tell it, it was one of the leading research organizations in its field.

"I mean, this thing does represent unlimited fruit production," I agreed.

There was no greater cultivation technology than that. The only problem was that this particular tree didn't seem poised to bring profits—just panic.

Sayama's phone started buzzing. His shoulders sank as soon as he saw the name on the screen.

"Looks like I've got to go see the boss," he said after taking the call. "I'll be just a minute. Go ahead and look around the greenhouse if you want! Good luck!"

With what? I wondered. Well, whatever. We waved goodbye as he sped off.

Left alone with just Naruse and Miyoshi, I posed a question to the

latter.

"So, what are you thinking?"

"It's not actually respawning," she answered immediately, as though she'd been waiting for me to ask.

"Great minds think alike."

"Whaaat?!" Naruse squealed. "But an identical copy reappeared!"

"Nice work, Kei," Miyoshi responded, offering some rare praise. "When did you figure it out?"

"I knew from comparing Naruse's cut branch and the current one. They're obviously not the same." I held the branch Naruse had cut up to the current one as I explained. "Plus, the respawns we're familiar with don't cut through preexisting objects."

That might not have been proven absolutely, but we'd never heard any reports of respawns doing so in the three years the dungeons had been around. If anything like that *could* happen, we'd probably have heard at least one report of someone stumbling across a woodland monster trapped in a tree. The principle we were observing here seemed to be that the branches replaced whatever was in the space they regrew into. If dungeon respawns worked the same way, then a respawning monster could theoretically respawn into the space occupied by a tree, and would replace the tree's interior, becoming trapped inside.

"And we're pretty certain respawning is part of the dungeon's management system," Miyoshi added.

"Right. If that system worked on the outside, I'd really be scared."

"A statistically probable nightmare," she pointed out.

"We'll cross that bridge *if* needed." I thought back to the wording we'd been using earlier. "I guess rather than 'respawning,' what we're seeing here is more like...'regrowing.'"

"I agree."

Miyoshi pulled out a notebook and jotted down the results she'd gotten from Appraisal.

Aureus arbor

Descendant of the radiant branch birthed by the giant-stolen goddess, snatched by a hero from the garden of the daughters of twilight, and thrown into the wedding feast of the goddess of the sea.

As long as there is light, reason shall cycle the ring, and the ring cannot perish.

Looking over the note with Naruse, I couldn't help but let out a sigh.

"I don't know why I expected the description to be clear for once," I said.

"Ms. Maker still thinks of herself as some kind of poet, huh? Or maybe she just enjoys messing with people."

"But if Appraisal worked on it, that means this is still treated as some kind of dungeon item, right?"

"Not necessarily. It doesn't display a name when you touch it," Miyoshi pointed out.

That was true! If the cut branch were a dungeon item, a name would pop up in your vision as soon as you laid a hand on it.

"So what determines what you can use Appraisal on?" Naruse asked.

"Trade secret!" Miyoshi responded without missing a beat.

I decided to keep the real answer—"She has no idea"—to myself.

There were things Appraisal responded to and things it didn't, so there was a cutoff point somewhere. However, skills could grow through use. Something that didn't register with Appraisal yesterday might just register today. Plus, if it were working off of the dungeons' access to some sort of shared human consciousness, then the more the dungeons integrated themselves into human society, the more Appraisal might develop. There was no telling what it would be able to respond to at any given point in time.

But that wasn't an answer that would necessarily fly with other people, and even if you explained the way it grew, people wanting appraisals might get their hopes up, or assume she was hiding info. It was best to keep the exact mechanics to ourselves for now, say

we were turning down all requests due to workload, and utilize the lack of knowledge on its mechanics to keep the presence—or lack—of limitations under wraps, playing things down with dry humor. Probably.

Either way, our more pressing concern was the tree. "Aureus arbor" was Latin. It translated roughly into "golden bough." The "daughters of twilight" were probably the Hesperides. It was referring to the three golden apples Hercules had stolen as one of his twelve laborers. Later, Eris—goddess of discord—had spitefully tossed one of them into the wedding of Peleus and Thetis to stir up strife among some goddesses, which ultimately caused the Trojan War. The last part of the description probably referred to Norse mythology rather than Greek—drawing from the second scene of the prologue to the first part of Wagner's *Ring* cycle. In addition, some scholars believed that "golden apples" actually referred to "oranges," with "apple" having been a general term for all fruit, which would explain the citrus connection.

"So in that case dungeon Setokas are ambrosia?" I asked. "Food of ancient Greek gods?"

"Or a 'descendant' of it. You can probably guess their stated effect."

"That they just taste like whatever you're imagining?"

"Hey, at least the dungeon had the courtesy to make its 'ambrosia' oranges instead of a fruit-topped American cake!"(30) Eating too many of those would pack on some extra body mass, she added.

I'd said "just," but tasting like whatever you imagine would be a pretty incredible effect by any measure. It was just that, in the original lore, ambrosia granted immortality. Even the Appraisal results had included the "cannot perish" bit. That did get my hopes up a bit.

"So what do we think 'cycle the ring' means?" I asked. "Practically."

"The cycle probably refers to fruit trees' annual life cycles, right?" Naruse interjected.

Growth, flowering, fruit-bearing—the routines we were all familiar with.

"Then the light?"

"Well, at least we can guess it's probably not the sun," Miyoshi responded.

I recalled the magic crystals disappearing from the National Institute of Materials Science and the surrounding area. Magic crystals were highly condensed D-Factors, and there were a number of facilities dedicated to their research nearby—including NIMS.

"So this might have only happened because the tree is growing in Tsukuba?" Naruse asked.

You needed sufficient D-Factors to get miraculous dungeon phenomena. Even if the mechanics were there, if the fuel usually wasn't... At least, that was my going theory.

Miyoshi gazed up at the tree, contemplating Naruse's question.

"Hopefully..."

The theory held water. An untold number of items had been brought back to the surface from the dungeons in the three years since they'd appeared, and not all of them were drop items either—branches and small bits of foliage probably got dragged out all the time—and we knew there had been experiments with bringing out lumber. If a situation like this were all that likely to happen, it would have happened before.

I also feel like this might've only happened because you were around when he cut the branch, Miyoshi signaled over telepathy.

What? Now you're just overthinking things!

I was pretty sure this all stemmed from Nathan putting the Nemi Lake myths into Sayama's head.

I wonder if that's really all it was... Miyoshi mused.

She could speculate all she wanted, but this was probably one of the only surface locations suffused this heavily in D-Factors. It was entirely possible that Sayama could have grafted the branch in another location, thought about Nemi Lake as hard as he could, and there *still* wouldn't have been any supernatural tree growth. A car—or otherworldly arboreal phenomenon in this case—needed fuel to run.

“If he runs the security footage and finds out the first branch—or the entire tree—regrew exactly when the crystals disappeared from NIMS, we can at least be confident about that much,” I asserted.

“True. I’ll try looking into that too.” Naruse, eager to help, took out her phone and started calling relevant offices.

Judging from Naruse’s experiment, even if we weren’t one hundred percent sure, it didn’t seem like the magic crystals were unrelated.

“Then we have to worry about how far this is going to spread.”

“Spread?” Miyoshi said with a quizzical look.

“Sayama was panicking earlier about building an extra enclosure to avoid any pollen getting out.”

“That was because he was worried about it cross-pollinating with other citrus trees, right?”

“Right. In other words, he might have just thought of a new idea for the tree to utilize. And thought it *hard.*”

Miyoshi caught my drift, small beads of sweat forming on her forehead.

“B-But it’s not flowering season...right?” she asked shakily.

“That might be our one silver lining, except...”

“Except?”

“Will the D-Factors care about that?”

Miyoshi scrunched her face, crossed her arms, and looked up at the tree, its branches drooping with the weight of their fruit. A cool breeze blew, rustling the leaves. Their shadows, still long in the morning sun, wavered back and forth on the ground.

“After all,” I said, lifting up and spreading my arms as if to frame the giant tree, which had apparently grown in just one day, “there are way too many magic crystals in Tsukuba.”

Makabe, Sakuragawa City, Ibaraki Prefecture

Around ten kilometers to the north of NARO, in the foothills of Mt. Tsukuba, lay a cluster of mikan groves. Tsukuba was often referred to as the northernmost limit for orange cultivation in Japan, with the

area on the western side of Mt. Tsukuba in particular having once thrived off of the crop. Most groves were located at an altitude of approximately 150 meters, on rolling slopes with relatively warm climates.

On this day, as usual, a certain farmer had driven his car up into the foothills to inspect his grove. He stopped short when he noticed something peculiar—something vibrant orange—hanging from his not-yet-bloomed trees.

"What the?" He would have thought it was a prank—except there were too many of them. He ran up for a closer look, eyes growing nearly as wide as the fruit they beheld. "Wh— What?"

His mikans included unshu on the shorter trees and the local Fukure Mikan on the slightly taller ones. They bore fruit from October to December. There were other groves with other varieties mixed together, but it was February. None of them should have been in season now.

"What the hell is thiiiis?!"

What appeared to be textbook unshu were dangling from each branch.

February 13, 2019 (Wednesday)

Yoyogi-Hachiman, Office

The time on my alarm clock would have sent any company worker into a cold sweat. However, without the slightest hint of panic, I rose and simply thought, *Huh, guess I slept in a little.* That thought was followed by *Maybe I've gotten a little too used to this newfound freedom*, as I headed down the stairs to the office.

"Ah! Kei! We've got spread!"

"Like jam?"

"Not *that* spread! This!"

She shoved a tablet at me. It was open to some sort of video that had apparently been making the rounds online.

"What is this?" I asked.

Miyoshi leaned over and tapped "play," then stood back, gesturing with an open palm. *See for yourself.*

The video showed a frantic mikan farmer pointing to a tree's branches, laden with fruit, then a local news crew began discussing the rarity of out-of-season sprouting.

"Is this from this morning?" I asked.

"Yup."

If this were in Ehime, that wouldn't have been unusual in February. However, the farm was located in the town neighboring Tsukuba. The trees were unshu mikan.

"Then this means..."

"*Absolutely* the work of our favorite anomalous foliage," Miyoshi responded.

"Shoot! So it didn't care about normal pollination timing after all!"

"We shouldn't have expected any better of D-Factors. Those guys just can't read the room."

Then again, from another perspective, maybe they read it *too* well.

"So what do we do?" I asked.

"What *can* we do?" She shrugged.

"Bubkes," I replied.

Dungeon phenomena were one thing, but we couldn't go strolling onto a private farm claiming we had some right to be there. Even if the owner thought there was a problem and we claimed we might be able to help, we'd be turned away at the gates as opportunistic frauds.

"We need someone with authority," I concluded.

"Naruse's already put in a report at the JDA."

"All right!" I replied with relief. "Then our work here is done!"

However, to my surprise, Miyoshi—ordinarily all for passing the buck—furrowed her brow and crossed her arms, tilting her head to the side.

"Do you really think that...wraps it up?" she asked hesitantly.

"Um..."

There *probably* wouldn't be any more magic crystals disappearing

so long as no fruit was plucked. That said, it wasn't like mikan farmers could just stop selling their crops. And we couldn't say for sure that whatever property of the D-Factors had led to the Mt. Tsukuba trees' "infection" wouldn't keep happening.

"Our biggest concern should be whether this phenomenon spreads to other species of plants, right?" she observed.

"You think the D-Factors are going to jump from oranges to other species?" I asked.

"It's *D-Factors*, Kei. What do they care about species? They just made a whole grove of mikan bear fruit overnight."

That was...true. Given what we'd seen, there was no reason to think they'd necessarily keep restricting themselves to oranges, or even fruit trees more generally.

"Wait, so instead of a Great Oxidation Event(31), we're looking at a Great D-Factorization Event?!"

"At a pace so rapid that comparison won't even hold," Miyoshi responded.

"If things go according to dungeon rules...or rather, human culture rules, then..."

Our current citrus-centric crisis had to have *something* to do with the King of the Woods boss we'd left on the twenty-first floor last trip. If we extrapolated from his title, "King," he probably had some dominion over his bit of nature—using it to serve either his or his "people's" ends.

"Sayama might need to become the new king after all," Miyoshi surmised.

If someone became the new rex Nemorensis, they would probably obtain the power to control specimens from the forest in the same way. At least, that was our best theory for now.

"I hate to break it to you, but there's no way Sayama has a chance in hell of defeating that thing on his own," I cautioned.

"We don't have time to train him either. We may have to think of a way to make this happen with a little modern ingenuity. Of the kablammy, gunfire-explosion kind," Miyoshi replied.

"That we might just be able to manage..." I responded, with

some trepidation.

Guns would still barely get you by against the average monsters on the twenty-first floor. This was a boss monster, granted, but Miyoshi's Appraisal and our own experiences had indicated it was slightly different from the usual boss-tier foe.

Even then, it wasn't like we could just throw a bunch of guns and bombs at a total amateur and send him in expecting him to win. Plus...

"If he turns us down, we can't exactly drag him in," I pointed out.

"True... Maybe you should try breaking a bough yourself. Er, no..."

We'd discussed a certain theory about the King of the Woods the other day—namely, that he'd come out weaker than we'd expected because I wasn't the one to trigger him. If our theory held true, and he scaled according to the branch-breaker's level, I could be unleashing the greatest calamity the world had ever seen were I to have been the one to have broken the bough.

Dungeon Management Section, JDA Headquarters, Ichigaya

"Back from the trenches, sir?"

Section Chief Saiga returned from three consecutive meetings to find Miharu Naruse waiting for him in his office's small reception area.

"Naruse?" He cast a weary glance toward her, then continued, voice lowered and sagging with exhaustion. "I'm just not cut out for meetings. All that wheeling and dealing..."

Naruse pasted on a polite grin. If Saiga wasn't cut out for meetings and dealings, she thought to herself, who on earth was?

She stood up and passed a report to her chief.

"Ah, yesterday's Tsukuba visit?" Saiga flipped through the pages. "Thanks for the details, but I'm afraid this is completely out of our jurisdiction now."

"I'm not sure how long we'll be able to keep saying that, sir."

"What?!" Saiga began frantically reading the report. "So it *was*

because of the magic crystals," he mumbled a moment later.

"At least that's what my experiment with the crystals I brought indicates. In addition, we know from security footage that the growth of the tree coincided with the disappearance of the crystals at NIMS."

"Still, it's evidence, but not definitive proof."

"In addition," Naruse continued, "this didn't make the report, but..."

"There's more?"

"This morning a grove in the middle of the Mt. Tsukuba foothills reported all its mikan fruiting, en masse. Months out of season."

"What?!"

"They were all unshu mikan, all ideal specimens. The grove owner was confused, but decided to go ahead and start picking, and..."

"Don't tell me."

"After he picked one tree bare, its flowers instantly blossomed again and turned into a new batch of new fruit."

Saiga sighed.

"The grove owner was overjoyed, and kept harvesting from the tree over and over again. It made the morning news."

"Now it all makes sense..." Saiga declared, as if a thought had just struck him.

"Sir?"

"This morning, magic crystal prices skyrocketed across the world dungeon market."

"Mightn't that just be because of the loss of the NIMS laboratory's surplus?"

"Maybe, *if* the trend were limited to Japan. But prices shot up across the Americas, Hong Kong, and the EU."

"Worldwide?!" It was Naruse's turn to be shocked.

"Yep. At first I thought maybe the goal was just to export to Japan, profiting off the sudden shortage. But the rate and scale of the increase was too big. It looks like there are more than a few parties across the globe just snatching up crystals without limit, buying any that hit the market at any price."

"Then their goal is probably to..."

"Now that I know about that news story, it makes sense. They're probably hoping to get their hands on some of the anomalous oranges and use the crystals to fuel their own permacrops. Though whether they hope to get the oranges from Tsukuba or the twenty-first floor of Yoyogi, I don't know."

Citrus branches were relatively easily graftable, with high success rates. Who wouldn't want to get their hands on a magical branch that produced infinite yields? On the other hand, no one knew yet whether the branches from the Mt. Tsukuba grove trees would pass on their miraculous properties when grafted, or whether the fruit was even safe for human consumption. The rate of crystal consumption was another unknown factor. Even if the harvests were unlimited, unless the crystal hoarders could ensure they'd sell the oranges at a considerable price per unit, their efforts and expenditures might be in vain.

There were only a few organizations that would put up that much money for crystals that quickly while facing those kinds of risks—either companies with eccentric and nearly dictatorial CEOs or ones with a major interest in changing agricultural winds.

"We don't know that ordinary branches from the twenty-first floor would produce the same results," Naruse explained. "Apparently the one the NARO researcher took was from a rather unique tree."

"Ah, right. The one protected by that King of the Woods from the write-up?"

Saiga still found it hard to believe, but according to the report, the area had contained an immortal area boss. One of the report's contributors being a head researcher at the WDA, however, left little room for doubt. Saiga wasn't sure how D-Powers had escaped, but many less prudent explorers would probably keep trying to fight until they were too tired to run.

"We can't close off the area on such short notice," Saiga stated, now concerned about others traveling to the floor in search of orange branches to graft.

There hadn't been any actual casualties in the area to justify such a move. And if they rushed into restrictions, there would be

pushback from the public, with people figuring the immortal boss story was just a fabrication by the JDA meant to justify its continued control over the oranges.

They'd also just announced their restrictions on Mining usage. Another rule so soon would rile up even more explorers.

"We'll do what we can with the twenty-first floor for now," he concluded. "But our hands are tied on Tsukuba. We don't have authority there."

Since mikan saplings could also be purchased overseas, they couldn't rely on any customs measures other than those for epidemic prevention. People would be able to legally export branches.

"We just don't have the ability to do any more within the confines of the JDA." Saiga sank—or rather slumped—into his chair.

It was true. Anything outside the dungeons, dungeon-related or not, was out of the JDA's control. That said...

Saiga picked himself up, reached for the receiver, and dialed an inner line.

"Director Tachibana. This is Saiga. Yes. Yes. Actually, we've got an urgent problem that needs to go straight to the Dungeon Agency. Got it. Right away."

Saiga set the phone down and stood up.

"I'm going to get in contact with the Dungeon Agency to set up a meeting with the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry, and Fisheries about prohibiting picking mikan in the Mt. Tsukuba area. We can use the excuse of an emergency measure against further depletion of crystals as our in."

"Sir, one more thing," Naruse called out as her boss was getting ready to leave.

"What?" He had a bad feeling. If she was going so far as to stop him from rushing out to an important meeting, she must have had something urgent to add.

"According to Miyoshi, there may be a way to cut this problem off at its source."

"At its source?" Saiga blinked.

If that were the case, why hadn't she told him earlier?!

Makabe, Sakuragawa, Ibaraki Prefecture

A throng of news vans covered the slopes leading up to the Mt. Tsukuba mikan groves. The out-of-season crops had already made the news once, but now word of another, even stranger phenomenon was buzzing online.

Honking at one news crew after another to get out of the way, Dungeon Agency employee Yoshiro Natsuka disdainfully clicked his tongue.

"Don't they know parking here is illegal?"

Every time he honked his way past a news team, he got a few choice words hurled back in return.

"Reporters are like flies," commented Natsuka's partner for the day—a burly fellow from the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestries, and Fishing—bitterly. He was reviewing a paper packet detailing their mission.

Natsuka met the comment with a serene, Buddha-like expression. His partner was rather...caustic, he sensed. He thought back to the exchange of business cards they'd conducted before heading out. The man was apparently an expert on negotiations and media management. What was his name again? That was right—Mihashi.

"Still, what a crowd. We're really going to be the bad guys if it winds up being our fault they came all this way for nothing."

"No good guys or bad guys on the job," Mihashi answered coolly, spreading out the materials in front of him. He put his hand to his chin. "The hard part is the legal basis."

Members of every national ministry and agency had been assembled at the Dungeon Agency's request earlier that day. Legislation already specified that all new dungeon-produced food items be reported to the WDA's Department of Food Administration, but in this case the definition for "dungeon-produced food items" under the Food Sanitation Act didn't fit.

Ultimately, the consensus was to use the same legal framework that had restricted food exports out of areas around the Fukushima Daiichi generator following the Great East Japan Earthquake. Government thrived on precedent.

In 2011, no regulations on domestic foods contaminated by radiation existed in the Food Sanitation Act. However, the Ministry of Health, Labor, and Welfare had been able to find legal basis for new rules by incorporating an index number provided by the Nuclear Safety Commission regarding safety cutoffs for radioactive substances in food items into a provisional regulation justified under the same law.

Invocation of that same provisional regulation clause would work now. This time, support on the legal-basis front would come from the Ministry of Health, Labor, and Welfare, while MAFF would handle inspection and execution, and the Dungeon Agency would play the strategic oversight role formerly helmed by the Nuclear Emergency Response Headquarters. The result would allow the national government to issue special orders to prefectures. The order this time: no selling of mikan.

However, all of this would take time—too much time to handle the situation in Tsukuba. For that, the buck for that had been passed to the Dungeon Agency and MAFF. It was now Natsuka and Mihashi's job to break the news to the grove's owner.

Proper legislation would help with issues to come. The problem was what to do now—especially when the issue was just "picking." The Food Sanitation Act was a law made to "prevent dangers posed by food and drink." As defined by the law, "food and drink" referred to items bought and sold for consumption—not fruit simply plucked from branches.

Upcoming laws might provide an answer, but in the meantime, could they really find a way to prevent someone from plucking mikan off the trees of their own private grove?

Mihashi sighed, closed his packet, and pinched the bridge of his nose with his thumb and index finger, rubbing his jingming acupressure point.(32)

"What's up?" Natsuka asked, noting Mihashi's frustration.

"No matter how you slice it, we can't force the owner to stop picking."

"Didn't we talk this out already?"

The cross-organizational meeting helmed by the Dungeon Agency, which was taking a worst-case scenario approach—or perhaps was just being urged to do so by the JDA—had brought up exactly that issue.

Ultimately, it had been determined that restrictions on the sales of any product would effectively remove the reason to conduct any harvesting—it would lead to a de facto moratorium on picking fruit too. What need would there be to pluck trees bare if not to sell?

"'Talk this out already?' Look around."

Congestion on the roads leading up to the groves had increased the closer they got. And it wasn't just reporters—curious onlookers had gathered too.

"Trees that reflower and bear new fruit in an instant as soon as they're picked bare? These people are here just to see it and get footage for social media. There'll be plenty of reason to keep picking these trees regardless of fruit sales being banned."

Even if they didn't have permission from the owners, people would still be curious enough to sneak up to the groves and try picking the fruit. It was inevitable. They wouldn't think they were doing anything wrong—and even if they did, they wouldn't care. With his long years of experience, Mihashi knew that all too well.

They would have to find a way to prohibit picking the fruit itself. Or at least get the grove owner on board with preventing it. Otherwise he would happily acquiesce to any media or visitor requests to demonstrate the regrowth process. After all, where would the harm be? Sure, sales would be banned, but wouldn't be enough to curtail harvesting in this case.

It was going to be a difficult negotiation. That much was certain.

"Miyabison Mikan Grove. This is the place," Mihashi announced as Natsuka drove up to the sign.

"What a name," Natsuka replied, noting its flowery construction from the characters for "grace" and "respect."

"The owner's name is Mitani."

"Huh?"

Natsuka had meant to ask how that was relevant. It wasn't until he got a glimpse of the owner's business card that he understood.

The card read "Yoshitaka Mitani." It was constructed out of characters which could be read "Miyabison," rewritten phonetically with the elevated kanji in the grove's name.

Mihashi took the lead, explaining the restrictions that had been issued by MAFF.

"So you're showing up here to say I can't pick my fruit anymore?"

"It's a *request* rather than an order, but, yes, that's the long and short of it."

"A 'request,' huh? I don't suppose there's going to be any national financial compensation for complying with this 'request,' will there?"

"Compensation for what, exactly?"

"For my mikan, right? You're tellin' me not to pick fruits that make up my livelihood."

"Yes, but Tsukuba mikan season is over. And your main business is offering mikan-picking booking for guests, not selling harvests yourself. You should experience no loss of revenue."

"Now wait jus' a dern minnit here, jus' cause yew fatcats come rawlin' up here doesn't mean I gotta..." The more riled up Mitani got, the more his regional Ibaraki dialect came out.

Natsuka struggled to keep up.

"Excuse me..." After a moment, Natsuka attempted to insert himself into the conversation. Which only seemed to perturb Mitani more.

"An' who the hell are yew?!"

"We exchanged cards. Natsuka from the Dungeon Agency."

"The Dungeon Agency? What's that gotta do with mah grove? Pipe down, lad. We're talkin'."

"That isn't the case at all. As a matter of fact, if you continue picking these fruits, Mr. Mitani, I'm afraid it may constitute theft."

"Theft?" That got Mitani's attention. For a moment the gregarious grove governor was gobsmacked.

"There's an incident you might have heard of the other day. A number of magic crystals, dungeon items, disappeared from a Tsukuba research facility. And based on our findings, there's a high probability it's related to those mikan you've been picking so recklessly."

Natsuka explained—as simply as possible—their current hypothesis surrounding the crystals' disappearance.

"So yer tellin' me my mikan have something to do with those magawhatsits—"

"Magic crystals."

"With them disappearin'?"

"Correct. To put it in agricultural terms, you could think of the magic crystals as fertilizer."

"I see..." Apparently weighing Natsuka's words, Mitani reached for a packet of cigarettes on the table. "Mind if I have a puff?"

"I'm afraid I'll have to ask you to refrain."

Mitani cocked a bemused eyebrow.

"Come again?"

Natsuka came back to his senses. He'd replied automatically, based on Dungeon Agency policy.

"Ah, forgive me. Go ahead."

There was a rumor often whispered in the Kasumigaseki government district—a rumor perhaps not far from the truth—that the Dungeon Agency was home to some of the most technically proficient but least...socially acclimated...government employees in Japan. The agency had been formed in a hurry, utilizing personnel on loan from other organizations. To avoid an imbalance of power, nearly all offices had recognized the need to send their brightest, but were understandably reluctant to give up their stars. Government organizations needed hardworking team players more than exceptional geniuses. So they had kept their team players and sent their eccentric geniuses to staff the Dungeon Agency. The organization was full of castaways—those who had *only* talent to boast of.

If he hadn't been with Mihashi, Natsuka—far from apologizing—might even have doubled down. "If you weren't even expecting to hear no, why ask in the first place?" he wanted to ask. But even he knew enough to not risk derailing an important mission for MAFF, as well as for his own agency. He tamped down the urge to stick to protocol.

Mitani took out his cigarette box, dark blue with an olive branch

and golden dove on the front, then brought one stick to his mouth with a kind of practiced grace. He touched a flame to the end, inhaled, and blew out one thick blue-gray stream.

"And yer saying my grove is usin' this 'fertilizer' from some lab on its own."

"Correct. And at quite a high rate of consumption."

Natsuka knew that if Mitani were more savvy, this was exactly when he could press them on the fact that they had no proof—only correlation. On the other hand, continuing to pick after hearing Natsuka's explanation *could* be construed as willful negligence. Natsuka had that card in his pocket, if needed.

Mitani blew out another puff.

"Got it." He nodded. "All right."

Mihashi breathed a sigh of relief and took out a packet of papers.

"You won't be able to sell any of the mikan you've picked, but just this once, the Dungeon Agency is willing to pay you for the equivalent of your current stock," Mihashi explained.

Mitani signed and stamped—with his personal seal for business—each page in front of him, listening to Mihashi's continued explanations. However, his hand stopped when he got to a particular spot.

"Now this 'un I'm afraid I can't sign." The sheet contained an NDA clause relating to the rest of the sales contract.

"Why?" Mihashi asked.

"Plen'y o' TV stations 'ave already been askin' to come get footage of the fruit growin' back in. I can't turn 'em down now without givin' a reason, so..."

"I see."

"Plus I don' wanna seem like I'm just hidin' some juicy secret fer myself. Can't I just tell 'em I been banned?"

Mihashi cast a glance at Natsuka. Natsuka nodded.

"Understood. In that case, by request of the Dungeon Agency..." Mihashi began.

"Wait, Mihashi," Natsuka interjected. "Could you make that request of the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry, and Fisheries instead?"

"Why MAFF?"

"There's currently nothing publicly connecting this phenomenon to the dungeons."

Mihashi scrunched his brow.

"And what do we do if a bunch of coverage comes MAFF's way?"

"'No comment.' Or just say you can't allow any plant life exhibiting such unusual properties to spread without proper research."

Banning picking and then giving a "no comment" answer?

"Um...are we good, or...?" Mitani asked, cocking his head.

"All right," Mihashi responded. "You can tell them you're complying with MAFF orders—that it's out of your hands."

"Got it." Visibly relieved, Mitani signed the last piece of paper. "Now, er...about those magic whatevers..."

"The government will handle the lab's compensation."

"Thank ye kindly."

"However, any *further* loss..."

Mitani nodded vigorously, catching Natsuka's thrust.

"O-Of course! No argument from me."

And so the gambit to ban fruit-picking at the grove had, just barely, come out a success. Unfortunately, they had forgotten that there was more than one way for the grove to make sales—many *branches* and avenues unexplored.

February 14, 2019 (Thursday)

Marinard Underground Shopping Center, Naka City, Yokohama

I'd been dragged out early in the morning by Saito. Our destination: the Marinard Underground Shopping Center, located just one stop away from Sakuragicho where we maintained Shinshinan.

"There!" Saito shouted.

Just ahead, a little ways past the Isezakicho entrance, was a

small area with a splotch of red carpet, upon which sat an upright public piano. Apparently public pianos were all the rage. I'd heard they were even planning to put one in the South Observatory of the Tokyo Metropolitan Government building once renovations were done in April.

"We came all the way to Yokohama...for a piano?" I asked.

"Hey, there aren't that many pianos you can just walk up to and play! You can't exactly go into a music shop with no intention to buy and just ask if they'll let you—"

"You play?" I asked, surprised.

"I have this pianist part coming up..."

"Hold on, could you play before?"

"That's *exactly* what I was hoping to talk to you about. Observe."

She suddenly lowered her head, a look of deadly determination in her eyes, and plopped herself down on the piano bench. She placed her hands on the keys, and let loose a resonant D# octave with her left hand.




BN
STR

"Wait, what?" was all I could manage. I still wasn't sure why we were even here.

Spectators walking past started tossing curious glances Saito's way, excited to see someone playing. Most walked on by, but after a moment, many stopped, turned on their heels, and came back. A few moments later, as Saito started churning out an incredible melody with her right hand, no one was *walking on by* anymore.

That's not *just acting technique...*

"Hold on, is that Ryoko Saito?"

"The actress who made all that news with archery?"

"No way. Why would she be playing piano here? Some kind of marketing campaign?"

"A famous actress doesn't need odd jobs, right?"

A man clutching a bundle of sheet music appeared, apparently a regular who had intended to play the piano himself.

"Flawless... Magnificent..." he muttered.

Despite the speed of her playing and the vast distance her left hand was covering, each note hung cleanly in the air—there was no interference, no mistimed keystroke or slip.

Sometimes idol groups had members who had played piano since childhood and would bust out their skills at a show, but this was on a whole other level. At the very least, that was the impression I was given by another bystander—a classical music enthusiast, I guessed—muttering, "Just like early Horowitz" reverently under his breath.

Saito finished her makeshift concert just over two minutes later with a brilliant fortissimo, the final chord lingering triumphantly in the air. She lifted her face to see her makeshift audience for the first time. In response to their thunderous applause, she gave a small bow from her seat, then turned toward me.

"Uh, pretty impressive," I stammered.

"It was some famous pianist's etude. I can't remember who." She looked down, pouted, then looked back up again. "So, *Coach*, mind telling me why can I play this well?"

Yoyogi-Hachiman, Office

"You did *that*...on a public piano?" Miyoshi, brewing up coffee in the kitchen, was grilling a slightly bewildered Saito after we returned.

"It was just a little over two minutes," I said, coming to Saito's defense.

"Both of you, really. Underestimate the internet at your perils. I bet Saito's blowing up right now."

"Come on, I doubt it," Saito protested.

"It seems like someone needs to learn exactly how much of an icon she is online." Miyoshi scrunched up her face.

"Now, now," I said, eager to defuse the situation. "Back to the main question here. You just put in a lot of practice, right?" I asked, addressing Saito.

"Practice? Nah, I'd never touched a piano before the other day. After observing an instructor play a piece—just once—as part of my role preparation, I just figured I could do it about as well, and..."

"And you actually could?!"

She nodded solemnly.

After her dungeon training with Aethlem, her stats should have been around 35 for INT, 50 for AGI, and all the way up to 90 for DEX. According to Miyoshi's hypothesis, Saito was probably at the world-champion level for dexterity, surpassing even the bulk of pro explorers. Her AGI probably let her follow all of her teacher's movements, and her high INT allowed her to analyze and memorize them. Then, with her DEX, she could perfectly replicate what she'd seen and processed. *But how to delicately explain that...?*

"It's not like it's a problem, right?" I suggested.

"Not really. If anything, it's helped, but...it's just so strange. I don't know how to feel about it." Saito stared up at us, uncharacteristically stern. "You *did* something, right? That's the only thing I can figure."

Uh-oh. I felt like my head was probably on the chopping block. Then again, Mitsurugi had said something similar to me before and we weren't on the outs.

"Remember, I told you before you started your dungeon training that you'd probably be able to move like you'd never moved before,

and even memorize scripts more easily?"

"Right, but this is different."

"Is it, though? Memorizing your piano instructor's movements isn't really that different from memorizing lines from a script. And replicating the instructor's playing is just like honing any other kind of movement skill."

"Hmm... I guess so." She put her hand to her mouth, thinking.

"I mean, hey, you could probably perfectly replicate someone's acting performance after seeing them onstage once, right? That's a skill all actors aspire to cultivate anyway, riiight?"

"Yeah, I probably *could* do that. I guess it's not so different, in that sense."

Seriously? I was the one who had suggested it, but I was still a little surprised to hear her so casually confirm possession of yet another superhuman ability. She was well on her way to becoming the sort of superpowered master of disguise reserved for far-flung genre fiction—like Maya Kitajima from *Glass Mask*. Heck, even in the series itself, Kitajima's teacher Tsukikage had protested that her protege's abilities shouldn't be possible! Step by step, Saito was moving further away from the realm of mere mortals.

"S-So that's it. This music thing is just like mimicry of others' acting," I reiterated.

"Hmm."

"Anyway, all your skills are the result of the dungeon training you did, smashing slimes with Mitsurugi, and later with Drill Sergeant Aethlem. You should be proud!"

"Yeah. I... I guess I can be! In fact, if I got this good after just doing that, maybe I'm some sort of supertalent! Yeah!"

"There you go!" I responded. I realized that maybe this wasn't the kind of attitude I should be encouraging, but Saito's high spirits were infectious. Must be another one of her superpowers.

"Ah, by the way. I meant to give you this." Seemingly at peace, Saito pulled something out of her purse. "Direct from New York!" She handed me a small box and envelope with a smile.

"New York? You don't mean from a certain participant in a fashion event, do you?"

But if Mitsurugi wanted to give us something, she probably would have just sent it to Miyoshi. Why would Saito have it?

"Obviously," Miyoshi said from the kitchen, looking over with a smile. "After all, this *is* the day an officer in a certain postwar occupying force had the idea to give out chocolates to Japanese children."

"There had to have been an easier way to say that. In this century, we call it 'Valentine's Day.' Anyway, so this is from Mitsurugi?"

I took the envelope, adorned with clean block letters in her characteristic handwriting.

"It came in by Kuroneko International Post yesterday. She bought it just after arriving in New York," Saito explained with a smile.

It took about six days for a package to arrive in Tokyo from New York. I'd heard Fashion Week's women's events started on the seventh. She must have sent it right around then.

"Is there Kuroneko in New York?" It was a Japanese shipping agency, so I was surprised.

"There's one just for international packages right by JFK Airport. There are enough people who want to buy and send home souvenirs without lugging them around their whole trip."

"Huh."

"Speaking of, Haru's really making waves!"

"Making waves?"

"Here."

Saito pulled up a New York fashion media site and showed me a wrap-up interview with some of Fashion Week's bigwigs.

"This?"

"Look, look! This part!"

"Huuuh?"

The portion of the interview I'd been pointed to was filled with a torrent of praise for a surprising up-and-comer.

"*She drew all the eyes in the room as soon as she appeared on the runway. And when she moved, it was as if we were all seized by the illusion that the clothes themselves were walking. Who else could pull off a magic trick like that?*"

"*She's an unknown on the world stage. Unfortunately she was barely scheduled to walk, so only the other models, select attendees and staff, and those present for rehearsals got to see much of her—but what a secret for us to keep!*"

"*Photos won't do her justice! Nor film! Nothing where a director's intent would dilute her own.*"

"*She's an extraordinarily rare talent in how she commands the stage. All eyes gravitated toward her, and she didn't let go. For a time, we were all dancing in this great new muse's palm.*"

"*The spring-summer show in London is going to be open to the public. I am* so *hoping she joins. More people deserve to see what she's got.*"

"*Her only flaw, if I may call it one, is her height. If she were just a little taller, she'd be at the top of the runway game.*"

"Whoa!" I shouted as I reached the end of the article.

"They're loving her, huh?" Miyoshi chimed in.

"Holy heck, she's like a modern Cleopatra. What exactly did Mitsurugi do?"

"I don't know. There aren't many photos, maybe because her runway was mostly unknowns. She must have really made a splash during rehearsals."

"Wow. She's just going to get even more famous from here."

"Seems like it! Anyway, take your chocolates already!"

I opened the package Saito had handed me. Inside was a neatly wrapped, lavender-colored box of sweets.

"Whoa, Vosges Haut-Chocolat!" Miyoshi exclaimed.

"I shouldn't be surprised you know them by sight," I said, responding to Miyoshi. "Did you get any, Saito?"

"Why would Haru send *me* chocolates?" Saito had gotten some other souvenir, she added, eyes flitting back and forth between me and the chocolates, unsubtly indicating she wouldn't mind partaking of them. "Anyway, Haru was pretty much at a loss for where to go to get chocolates in New York."

"Why?" I asked. "There should be tons of famous chocolatiers there."

"Most famous New York chocolatiers' chocolates can be

purchased in Japan too," Miyoshi explained.[(33)] "Not exactly exotic. Mariebelle has a shop in Japan, and you can buy Mast Brothers and Dean & DeLuca too."

I didn't know much about famous New York chocolatiers, but there had been a Salon du Chocolat event held in Tokyo recently. It was definitely becoming easier to sample the whole world's sweets without leaving the country. There probably wasn't much you couldn't get your hands on here at this point.

"Ooooh, she tossed in a curveball!" Miyoshi exclaimed, eyeing the contents of the box.

"Curveball?"

"Kei, try that one with the green sprinkles."

"This?"

I pinched the chocolate truffle Miyoshi had pointed out among the rows of others and popped it into my mouth.

"Whoa, what is this? Matcha...and then...hold on, wasabi?"

"It's made with matcha, wasabi, and ginger."

"Seriously? But it's...weirdly good."

"Not weird. *Vosges Haut-Chocolat.*"

So that was the curveball.

Saito asked if she could have one—with her voice and not just her eyes this time—and I obliged, then took a sip of the coffee Miyoshi had poured.

The chocolate melted in my mouth, its flavors remaining pronounced. It was strange to think that it used wasabi—the same ingredient responsible for Teastruction, albeit in extract form.

"But Kei, this is a problem," Miyoshi stated.

"What is?"

"People are going to connect Mitsurugi and Saito."

"Ack!" We'd officially stated at the press conference that Saito had gone through an early version of our boot camp. In other words—"You think people are going to connect Mitsurugi to the boot camp too?" I asked.

"It seems likely."

"Act a little more invested here, okay?! This is our skin in the

game!”

“Wow, so you’re about to revolutionize athletics, acting, and modeling all at once,” Saito remarked rather coolly.

Uh, we only have slots for seven people.

We could theoretically take more people using child parties—grandchild parties, from my perspective, via Cathy—which would allow me to get around party maximums and let me increase more people’s stats per session, but...no, we were still constrained by the physical room space, and even if we weren’t, a child party or three would hardly make a dent in terms of meeting demand.

“Cheer up, Coach!” Saito said, apparently noticing my distress. “Here!” She handed me a small square package tied with a ribbon. A box of candy-coated, vibrantly colored chocolates was inside.

“Wow, this takes me back,” Miyoshi commented, peering over.

“A variety pack?” I asked.

“Meiji Marbles are a true art piece among Japanese snacks,” Miyoshi commented smugly, eyeing the box of what were typically considered children’s candies.

“A bit of an overstatement, right?”

“Someone once said, ‘The invisible land of fairy tales lies in the clear blue vale.’”

Yeah, a pilot in a certain manga, in entirely different circumstances.

Nevertheless, I grabbed one of the sky blue pieces and popped it into my mouth.

“On that note,” Miyoshi continued, “sorry, this was all I could manage.” She handed me a box.

“You too?”

“A small symbol of appreciation.”

“Speaking of symbols, the symbol of the crown prince of Japan is the azusa, huh?” Each position in the Japanese Imperial House had its own symbol. The crown prince’s was the azusa, or Japanese cherry birch, the same as Miyoshi’s given name.

“Unfortunately, no relation.”

I unwrapped the small package and found a box of Tirol Chocolates. Tirol was a major Japanese chocolate maker mostly

focused on kids' products.

"Kyushu limited edition," Miyoshi informed me proudly.

"I'm totally grateful, but...why Kyushu?"

"Tirol's famous for milk nougat, right? But you can only get the original milk nougat variant in the Kyushu limited products now."

"Your fundamentalism knows no bounds. Or should I say fondant-mentalism?"

Tirol Chocolate had started out with three milk nougat flavors. They had been mostly considered kids' candies at the time—and, er, even now.

For as far back as I could remember, they'd had a ton of different flavors in bite-sized versions, having expanded out from the original three. I did remember milk nougat being my favorite though.

I took one, unwrapped it, and took a bite.

"It'sh goob," I said mush-mouthedly. "But man, the nougat's so thick it seems like it'd probably pull teeth fillings out."

"Together with Hi-Chew it forms the greatest villainous duo dentistry has ever seen," Miyoshi responded, comparing it to another gumlike Japanese candy.

I put the wrappers from Saito's Marble box and Miyoshi's Tirol package on Mitsurugi's premium box of chocolates.

We'd had so few women at Hokkoku Materials that this kind of Japanese Valentine's Day exchange—women giving chocolate to men, with men returning the favor on White Day—had never really happened there. It'd been a while since I'd wound up with this many sweets. I had to say, even if they were simple gestures like a box of Tirol or Marble, it made me happy to receive them. Maybe men were simple creatures after all.


CHOCOLATE

Return to Top *All* 1- / Newest 50
Message Board Kanna (Isezaki Mall Side) 497 [See you in Isezakicho!♪]

1: Kanna Post Date: 1/3/2019 (Thursday)
・Please keep all posts appropriate.
・No flaming, baiting, gossip.
・Don’t feed the trolls. Ignore off-topic posts.
・Next thread starts at 980 posts.

762: Kanna Post Date: 2/14/2019 (Wednesday)
Check out what went down in Marinard today:
https://URL/...

763: Kanna Post Date: 2/14/2019 (Wednesday)
Ugh, they set up another public piano?

764: Kanna Post Date: 2/14/2019 (Wednesday)
After Yamaha had to take down the one in Shinagawa after less than a month?

765: Kanna Post Date: 2/14/2019 (Wednesday)
Ah, right, the one they said posed “trouble for public safety”?

766: Kanna Post Date: 2/14/2019 (Wednesday)
I mean, if you put it in the middle of a crowded spot like that, it *is* trouble for public safety

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767: Kanna Post Date: 2/14/2019 (Wednesday)
Apparently one is going in the metro government building in April too. I guess it’s a city fad?

768: Kanna Post Date: 2/14/2019 (Wednesday)
The one in Marinard goes way back though. It’s actually weird how used to it everyone is. Someone can be playing it and no one will bat an eye

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769: Kanna Post Date: 2/14/2019 (Wednesday)
I mean, it’s one thing if you can just walk by them. It’s another thing having to live next to one. Music or not, it’s all noise pollution.

770: Kanna Post Date: 2/14/2019 (Wednesday)
Seems like it’d even carry into surrounding restaurants. What a pain.

771: Kanna Post Date: 2/14/2019 (Wednesday)
This is Japan. We’re way too obsessed with “culture and the arts” to protest. Everyone who wants them gone probably feels too much social pressure to say anything.

772: Kanna Post Date: 2/14/2019 (Wednesday)
But ask the same politicians pushing that where protections for sexy manga are and watch that whole “culture and the arts” lip service fade away

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773: Kanna Post Date: 2/14/2019 (Wednesday)
lmao what does sexy manga have to do with this weirdo

774: Kanna Post Date: 2/14/2019 (Wednesday)
What? Illustrated porn is a hallmark of Japanese culture dating back to the Heian period! Look up “shunga”

775: Kanna Post Date: 2/14/2019 (Wednesday)
Oookay. Shouldn’t they just put public pianos in places where crowds are less likely to gather?

776: Kanna Post Date: 2/14/2019 (Wednesday)
The front of a museum or something would be perfect

777: Kanna Post Date: 2/14/2019 (Wednesday)
Hey, free “participatory art”!

778: Kanna Post Date: 2/14/2019 (Wednesday)
That’d fly at a modern art museum for sure

779: Kanna Post Date: 2/14/2019 (Wednesday)
Or they could make them silent

780: Kanna Post Date: 2/14/2019 (Wednesday)
lolwut

781: Kanna Post Date: 2/14/2019 (Wednesday)
Like use radio waves and let people who want to listen use headsets available nearby

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782: Kanna Post Date: 2/14/2019 (Wednesday)
Like an audio version of Sekai Camera, that old AR app?

783: Kanna Post Date: 2/14/2019 (Wednesday)
Now there’s a name I haven’t heard in a long time. But it might work! You could have sound playing on live stream channels for the pianos too

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784: Kanna Post Date: 2/14/2019 (Wednesday)
Yeah. Those suckers are loud. If an amateur walks up

maybe you can tolerate it for a second, but any more than that, no thanks. Even the world’s biggest music fans can listen to first-rate concerts anytime they want now. No need to wait for some rando to come up and do a public concerto

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785: Kanna Post Date: 2/14/2019 (Wednesday)
Even most good players who walk up to them are just interested in showing off how fast they can play

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786: Kanna Post Date: 2/14/2019 (Wednesday)
Fast arts and culture? Like fast food? Hey, convenient!

787: Kanna Post Date: 2/14/2019 (Wednesday)
Okay, okay, guys.
Wait, hold on, what is this?

788: Kanna Post Date: 2/14/2019 (Wednesday)
What?

789: Kanna Post Date: 2/14/2019 (Wednesday)
Do you guys not have sound on the recording? >788

790: Kanna Post Date: 2/14/2019 (Wednesday)
What is it?

791: Kanna Post Date: 2/14/2019 (Wednesday)
Is this...Saito?

792: Kanna Post Date: 2/14/2019 (Wednesday)
An acquaintance?

793: Kanna Post Date: 2/14/2019 (Wednesday)

Dude, Artemis! Artemis! Haven’t you heard of her?

794: Kanna Post Date: 2/14/2019 (Wednesday)
Artemis? That whole thing’s bunk, right?

795: Kanna Post Date: 2/14/2019 (Wednesday)
Bunk this:
https://URL/...

796: Kanna Post Date: 2/14/2019 (Wednesday)
Okay. But a 70-meter world record with a bare bow? Whatever. Sounds like a publicity stunt

---

797: Kanna Post Date: 2/14/2019 (Wednesday)
That does look like her...

798: Kanna Post Date: 2/14/2019 (Wednesday)
Her story sounds unbelievable because it is, but part of it was recorded, and she’s on the list of candidates for national Olympic training

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799: Kanna Post Date: 2/14/2019 (Wednesday)
Okay, so it’s a *big* publicity stunt

800: Kanna Post Date: 2/14/2019 (Wednesday)
And now she’s a concert pianist too?

801: Kanna Post Date: 2/14/2019 (Wednesday)
Wait, this isn’t an audio edit?

802: Kanna Post Date: 2/14/2019 (Wednesday)
Her movement lines up way too well with the sound

803: Kanna Post Date: 2/14/2019 (Wednesday)

If it is fake, it’s timed even better than the Chopin International-era footage in the Martha Argerich movie.

804: Kanna Post Date: 2/14/2019 (Wednesday)
Piano nerd alert.
>803

805: Kanna Post Date: 2/14/2019 (Wednesday)
If this really is her, she’s a pro!

806: Kanna Post Date: 2/14/2019 (Wednesday)
Hard to tell from just one piece, but she might be way beyond “pro”...

807: Kanna Post Date: 2/14/2019 (Wednesday)
Whoa, every single person walking by has stopped, turned around, and come back.

808: Kanna Post Date: 2/14/2019 (Wednesday)
You sure this isn’t just some flashmob stunt? Seems fishy

809: Kanna Post Date: 2/14/2019 (Wednesday)
The audio and video quality are way too low for this to be an advertising campaign. It looks like someone’s personal phone camera footage. This... This might really have happened.

810: Kanna Post Date: 2/14/2019 (Wednesday)
You can hear a guy near the person filming for a second: “She’s way too good for this to just be a side gig as an actress”

811: Kanna Post Date: 2/14/2019 (Wednesday)
No kidding
>810

812: Kanna Post Date: 2/14/2019 (Wednesday)
It looks like they’re mostly hidden behind a pillar, but there’s someone else by the piano, right?

813: Kanna Post Date: 2/14/2019 (Wednesday)
Looks like a guy.

814: Kanna Post Date: 2/14/2019 (Wednesday)
Whoa! Out on a Yokohama date! Scandalous!

815: Kanna Post Date: 2/14/2019 (Wednesday)
More like “manufactured scandal.” I’m telling you, it’s an ad. They’re just trying to make it look juicy.

816: Kanna Post Date: 2/14/2019 (Wednesday)
Amateur sleuthing time!

817: Kanna Post Date: 2/14/2019 (Wednesday)
This is a Yokohama lifestyle thread. Save the sleuthing for the Artemis or D-Powers boot camp threads

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818: Kanna Post Date: 2/14/2019 (Wednesday)
Boot camp thread?

819: Kanna Post Date: 2/14/2019 (Wednesday)
There are rumors that’s what’s responsible for her talents

820: Kanna Post Date: 2/14/2019 (Wednesday)

Wait, what? A dungeon boot camp made her good at piano?

821: Kanna Post Date: 2/14/2019 (Wednesday)
Maybe

822: Kanna Post Date: 2/14/2019 (Wednesday)
There was another D-Powers affiliate, Haruka Mitsurugi, who got rave reviews after modeling at a big New York fashion show this week. Apparently if she were just a little taller, she could be one of the top runway models in the world

---

823: Kanna Post Date: 2/14/2019 (Wednesday)
Sorry, wut
I don't understand. Now dungeon boot camps make you better at walking too?

824: Kanna Post Date: 2/14/2019 (Wednesday)
At least we know they can't make you taller! Probably.

825: Kanna Post Date: 2/14/2019 (Wednesday)
Yokohama thread. Stay. On. Topic. Please.

Yoyogi-Hachiman, Office

"S-Sorry for the sudden visit." Sayama bowed his head in our doorway.

"No problem," I responded. "What's up?"

"I was..." He trailed off. "Hoping to get some advice."

"Advice?"

"Yes. I know putting this through the JDA would be the usual route, but time is of the essence..."

We listened to his explanation in total shock.

The Dungeon Agency's request had been to prohibit picking the fruit. That had gone through. However, thanks to yesterday's news footage, the grove had apparently been inundated by requests from mikan groves nationwide to provide scion branches for grafting—requests which it had fulfilled. Since the branches didn't grow back, the owner couldn't provide them to every potential buyer, but by the time MAFF and the Dungeon Agency noticed what was happening, several had already been moved offsite.

If the branches had been shipped, they might have at least been able to intercept them prior to arrival, but most buyers had arrived in person for pickup. With no means of confirming addresses, the branches had disappeared into the ether.

"The dungeon branch grew into that giant tree back at NARO in just two days. Y-You don't think the same thing will happen with all the recipients of the Tsukuba grove branches, do you?" he asked.

Sayama's scion branch had been an actual dungeon item. Crazy as it was to say, it made a certain amount of...sense...that it could produce that huge tree. But the terrestrial trees affected by it had only demonstrated continuous fruit regrowing so far—they didn't appear to have the same regenerative properties as the tree at NARO. We couldn't be sure these new branches would have the same effects when grafted as the original that Sayama took from the dungeon. At the very least...

"Given the original tree's growth used up a bunch of magic crystals, I think we can at least rule out anything crazy happening without a supply of those around," I said confidently.

Miyoshi, looking worried, jumped in.

"Kei, as you know, the ultimate solution to the phylloxera plague ravaging European wineries in 1863 involved grafting European vinifera to American grape vines, which were immune. That saved the European varietals."

"In non-wino speak?"

I was familiar with the bare basics of the incident she was talking about. That said, even if it was one of the most famous wine-related historical incidents—fundamental knowledge to aficionados—your average person without a deep interest in horticulture would never

have heard of it.

"The point *is*—that saved the European grape species. In other words, a grafting recipient can take on nearly all the properties of its scion."

"So then the magic tree branch recipients might become...full new magic trees?" I asked.

Even if the recipient trees didn't come out like the one at NARO, we couldn't ignore the possibility that they'd all exhibit the same infinite fruit-regenerating properties the Tsukuba trees had displayed.

"That's what I was afraid of..." Sayama's shoulders slumped.

"But it would still take magic crystals, right?" I asked. "Wait, let me guess. They've...already started vanishing, haven't they?"

Sayama nodded gravely.

So *that* was why he'd come over so quickly.

"A batch disappeared earlier today from the Research Institute of Innovative Technology for the Earth—or RITE—in Kizugawa, Kyoto."

"Kansai Science City?"

Kansai Science City was a prefecturally unaffiliated city nestled in the center of Osaka, Kyoto, and Nara Prefectures. It had started with a Kyoto University president's suggestion to create a science and technology research hub at the height of the excesses of the bubble era, but its sense of purpose became muddled when the government decided it needed to incorporate cultural and literary research in addition to STEM fields.

That decision made it a bit of a half-hearted research hub in comparison to Tsukuba, but it still boasted the Research Institute of Innovative Technology for the Earth, as well as the Omron Innovation Center and NTT Communication Kagakukiso Research Institute. Plus, with Doshisha University on its northern border and the Nara Institute of Science and Technology on its western one, there would have been a surplus of magic crystals around.

"Uh-oh. Not many mikan in Kyoto and Nara, but there's enough of an industry in Osaka to have fruit-picking groves for tourists," I commented.

The disappearing crystals had to be the result of one of the

grafted Tsukuba branches. I was doubtful the effects of the NARO tree reached that far, and even if they did, there were several mikan-producing areas between Tsukuba and Kansai it would've had to have skipped over—places like Shizuoka and Aichi. It wouldn't make sense for the Osaka area to see magic crystals disappearing but not those areas. It was overwhelmingly likely, then, that some Osaka mikan farmer had gone and messed around with a branch taken from Tsukuba.

I put my hand to my chin, thinking.

"Could you put out a public notice asking for mikan growers to stop grafting strange branches? Now that more crystals have disappeared, I mean."

"Perhaps..." he responded. "But we only have correlation, not definitive proof of causation." It would be difficult to issue a notice based on pure speculation.

"But we heard you banned picking in Tsukuba," I pointed out.

"It was a *request* to the owner rather than a ban," Sayama explained. "And from what I hear, it might have involved some veiled threats as well."

"Then...what? Send someone to work out deals with each grove owner personally?"

"P-Perhaps..."

"Hmm." I furrowed my brow. "That's tough, but it makes sense. Plus, a public announcement in that area would just spook whoever has branches into selling them off again. Then we'd be even more in the dark about where they wind up."

With no ability for the government to track who purchased branches, that was the most likely result—and the safest tack for whoever happened to own one when a new public notice went out. By the time any search was conducted, the branch would be out of their hands, and they could plausibly deny having any knowledge where it had gone. Of course, identifying who possessed a magic branch would be a daunting task to begin with—the "infected" trees looked just the same as any normal ones at a glance. Their anomalous properties only became apparent when all their branches were picked bare.

"Then I guess for now the only thing to do is to have the Dungeon Agency contact research facilities and tell them to get in touch if any crystals disappear. Then you could at least identify regions with the grafted branches and start searching groves on foot."

"I-Is that so...?" Sayama's shoulders slumped. Evidently he'd been hoping for more.

"But hey, once you know the area, those groves might be easier to find than you think!" Miyoshi offered. "There's no way anything as crazy as instantly regrowing fruit will stay off of social media for too long."

Right! The information age would be on our side for tracking the relevant groves down. All you'd need to do would be to monitor the most popular sites.

"W-We don't have time to be scouring social media feeds!" Sayama's voice trembled. "J-Japan's entire citrus industry could be on the brink of collapse!"

"The brink of collapse? That's a little excessive, don't you think?" I responded.

"Excessive?!" He clenched his fists. "O-One mikan tree produces on average six to seven hundred fruits. Down to five hundred if they're raised professionally with shipping and harvesting in mind."

"Uh... Huh?"

"And the average mass of a single unshu mikan is around one hundred grams."

"So one tree, around fifty kilos, right...?" Granted, with the magically enhanced trees producing basically ideal fruit every time, their actual yield would probably be on the higher side.

"That's right," Sayama responded. "And with a system to continuously pick these trees as soon as their fruits grow back..."

I began to see where he was going. "They could be harvesting three hundred kilos per hour, 7.2 metric tons in twenty-four hours, and in a year..."

"It comes out to 2,628 metric tons," Miyoshi announced calculatingly. "And if they manage to automate the process to the point that they can harvest a tree once per minute, yield could

rocket up to 26,280 tons. A citrus Ukemochi System."

"What kind of impact are we looking at?" I asked. All this talk of tonnage wasn't worth much to someone unfamiliar with citrus industry norms.

"Twenty-six thousand tons would be more than the *entire annual mikan production of Hiroshima prefecture*," Sayama stated gravely. "Possession of a single enhanced tree could put you in the running for top ten mikan-producing regions nationwide."

"Y-Yikes! With just one tree?" I asked.

"Just one. Last year's total national mikan production was only around seventy-seven thousand tons total, by the way."

"Then..."

"Right." He gulped. "Three trees could outproduce the entire nation."

"Th-That's one hell of a branch. But, hey, there's still no guarantee they'll spread their properties to the entire grafting tr—" *Hold on.* A troubling thought struck me. Even if the branches didn't pass on their properties to the receiving tree, as long as a single branch alone maintained its anomalous properties... "W-Wait. Shoot. The regrowth effects being limited to a single branch instead of the whole tree might actually be an even worse scenario."

"I-It might?" Sayama blinked.

"Unfortunately. Think about it. You can pick a single branch clean faster than you can harvest a whole tree. Suppose ten fruits grow on a branch..."

"Uh-oh. If the fruit grows in the same spot every time, you could *easily* automate the process," Miyoshi jumped in, crunching numbers. "Say you could pick all the fruit in a second and it took them a second to respawn... That would be three hundred fruits per minute."

"In other words," I concluded, "yield from just two of the regrowing branches would surpass the yield rate of an entire tree regrowing its fruit."

A kilo every two seconds, 1,800 kilos per hour, 43.2 tons in a day, 15,768 tons in a year.

"Forty-nine such branches would equal Japan's annual mikan

production," Miyoshi added.

"Yikes!"

"*So*. *You*. *See*." Sayama was nearly on the verge of tears. "Total collapse! And it's all my fault!"

"The worst thing is that as long as there's nothing obviously wrong with the mikan trees, the general public probably won't think there's any negative impact."

If anything, the increased yields would be seen as a huge plus. But society depended on balance. At this rate, farmers would feel forced to get the branches in order to stay afloat. But if everyone thought the same way, the market would be flooded with mikan. The entire industry would go under as prices crashed. Cause of death: circuitous citrus cascade. This was going to be an economic nightmare for at *least* the agricultural field.

"Kei, we really may not have time to sit back and wait for news."

"You think? It's not like big farms are going to try to totally restructure their business around an unknown like magic branches *that* fast, right?"

"Never underestimate the driver of short-term profit. We have plenty of evidence people are already itching to switch over."

"Huh?"

Miyoshi brought out a tablet with an assortment of graphs on-screen.

"What is this?" I asked.

"After the Tsukuba news, the magic crystal market went haywire."

The line graph she was pointing to shot upward in an exponential spike.

"Up eight percent in two days?!" I shouted.

What was more, it wasn't just in Japan. Similar increases had been observed in Hong Kong, America, and the EU.

"Looks like some people are already snatching up all the crystals on the market," Miyoshi concluded.

But they still couldn't have known for sure whether the grafted branches would actually have any effect. Unless...

"Then someone in Japan has already reported their success."

"Yep. Well, there's also the dim possibility that someone

somewhere finally figured out how to extract energy out of magic crystals, but...” Miyoshi shrugged.

“But we haven’t heard anything about that,” I said, finishing her thought. “And even if someone had caught wind of such a discovery, you wouldn’t see prices spike like that—they’d just keep silently buying at the current going rates. It takes multiple people in competition to increase a market price.”

Multiple people competing over magic crystals to drive up market prices, combined with the timing, only made sense if the Tsukuba grove news were the cause.

“If that many people are really gung-ho to start using crystals to fuel infinite mikan production...” I began.

“Then we can kiss the agricultural industry as we know it goodbye,” Miyoshi concluded.

There would be the cost in magic crystals to consider in running an infinite mikan operation, but anyone buying the crystals and branches must already have done the math—at least they’d profit in the short term.

“This is going to get even juicier if there are buyers abroad,” I noted.

It was legal to export unshu mikan saplings, which meant there was no problem with sending branches overseas either. If anything, it was actually more likely for big buyers to come from outside Japan than from within. Once the branches left Japan, none of our government agencies would have any jurisdiction over them.

“Customs duty on citrus fruits is thirty-two percent in-season, sixty percent off-season. If that isn’t enough to deter exports...” Sayama explained, face growing paler by the second.

The Ukemochi System came with the cost and labor of dungeon setup, so we were confident it would be implemented at a rate slow enough for the market to adjust. But anyone could adopt this regrowing orange system right away. The market would break down. Many people wouldn’t balk at tanking the industry so long as they made out like bandits before the collapse.

“And with the TPP(34), the customs tax on in-season citrus will

vanish in 2023, and off-season in 2025!" he added.

Uh-oh. That pretty much took increasing customs tax—to try to deter buyers—off the table as an interim solution.

Sayama clenched his fists even tighter, skin growing ghostly white. If more branches got out like this, he could take most of the blame for destroying the citrus industry. But there was no stopping that now.

"Also, if the new trees also inherit whatever caused the initial spread...that magic pollen or whatever," I pointed out. "We might be looking at a global dungeonization wildfire."

"Wild...fire?" Sayama whimpered.

The trees at Sakuragawa had been close to the initial golden bough site at NARO, so everyone had been assuming their transformation was due to proximity to Sayama's tree. But it was possible there was some sort of contagion element the grafted branches might proliferate.

"Say the magic spreads from grove to grove naturally using nearby magic crystals as catalysts... This could get even more out of hand," I explained.

"A real-world dungeon invasion scenario..." He scrunched his brow and clenched his jaw, turning away. He'd be the de facto accomplice. "A-And what's even worse...if they wind up taking a similar approach to the one they took with bird flu..."

Bird flu containment measures had resulted in the mass culling of livestock—whether or not they were infected.

"Culling plant life?" I asked.

Sayama nodded grimly.

"The Regulations on Plant Quarantine provide equivalent emergency measures."

Culling all the infected trees would be better than the situation running wild, but... Chickens could begin laying eggs at around twenty-three weeks. It took citrus trees *years* to fruit. The industry wouldn't recover for the better part of a decade. The problem would be stopped, but at what cost?

"I-It's five years from sapling to harvest—minimum—for unshu mikan. Ten years in many cases. If the emergency pest-control

measure goes into effect...” Sayama began.

It wouldn’t leave time for careful planning. It would only be invoked in a worst-case scenario, but as soon as it was, it would be carried out in one fell swoop. If we had any other way of wrestling the situation under control, we had to do it soon, before emergency measures were enacted.

“Th-Though, whatever worries we have about what may come, given the immediate danger...” he continued, talking himself toward agreeing with the culling.

A dozen or so doomsday scenarios for the citrus industry now enumerated, I cast a glance toward Miyoshi. She nodded.

“Sayama,” she began. “Maybe, just *maybe...*”

“Maybe?”

“There might be a way to...undo this whole thing?”

Sayama blinked.

“It hinges on getting control over the branches’ magic. Or, at this point, should I say ‘curse’?” She turned toward Sayama. “Anyway, I hate to say it—but it all depends on you.”

February 15, 2019 (Friday)

Ministry of Defense, Ichigaya

“Saiga. What is it this time?”

“We’d like to borrow some weapons. Urgently. Anything you can do to help?”

With “borrowing” weapons*?* Terasawa massaged the bridge of his nose while staring at his old friend and colleague.

“What the hell have you gotten into this time?”

“I know what an imposition this is.”

“Then you should know just as well that I can’t do it.” Meeting the request would constitute providing weapons to the public. Terasawa represented the JSDF, not some shady mercenary outfit.

“Of course you couldn’t...if I were only asking for weapons,”

Saiga continued.

"So, what, you want troops deployed? On what grounds?"

There was great political sensitivity surrounding the deployment of JSDF troops. Even for dungeon raids, there was debate and concern surrounding whether sending in JSDF teams constituted invasion of another territory. There was constantly talk of changing the official verbiage surrounding "raids" or "operations" to "practice" simply to cut down on scrutiny. Verbal subterfuge. "Practice for what, though?" came the jeering criticism. "War?"

"Disaster relief?" Saiga suggested.

"Disaster relief? Without a request from any prefectural governor?"

"In extremely urgent scenarios, there are provisions for preemptively deploying ahead of an official request, aren't there?"

"Even so, deployment requires an order from the Minister of Defense."

"Ordinarily," Saiga countered, "but you should have sufficient authority for a dungeon-related disaster."

Disaster-response deployment of JSDF troops normally required an order from the Minister of Defense complying with a request from a governor, coast guard commandant or commander, or airport director. But when it came to dungeons, Terasawa, as leader of the JSDF's Dungeon Attack Group, possessed equivalent authority to the coast guard commanders. That authority had initially been granted as a precaution against unforeseen stampede scenarios, though the rule wasn't widely known.

"Certain about that, are you?" Terasawa asked. "And a dungeon disaster? I haven't heard of anything." Of course, he knew that any disaster report would likely go through the JDA first, and might simply not have reached him yet.

"I'm not sure it'll *quite* meet the definition for a dungeon-based disaster, but I'm betting on the vagueness of that special authority clause. We need weaponry and the minimal number of personnel necessary to oversee it. A single person will be fine. If the reports I've received are correct, more wouldn't make any difference."

"What the blue hell is going on?"

Certainly the comment about extra JSDF personnel not helping struck Terasawa's pride, but no—more than that, it was an exceedingly abnormal assessment. There must have been something truly unusual going on—unusual enough, perhaps, to provide a basis for deployment. Whether they could actually *help* might be another matter entirely, depending on just *how* "unusual" the situation proved.

"This might also be the JSDF's chance to settle the score regarding Yokohama," Saiga added.

"Yokohama?"

"I've caught wind that you utilized some borrowed anti-slime technology..."

So a certain private party was involved...

"Okay." Terasawa sighed. "Why don't you start from the beginning?"

Yoyogi-Hachiman, Office

The buzzer rang. Miyoshi went to the entryway to find—

"Huh? Miyoshi?"

"Kiyomi? I don't recall giving you our address."

Greeting her was one Kiyomaro Urushibara—a member of ATLA, the Japanese government's Acquisition, Technology, & Logistics Agency, specifically ATLA's Dungeon Capabilities Research Division. He'd helped us out at Yokohama recently.

"Give me your address? Well, actually... Oh!"

I raised a hand in greeting as soon as he stepped into the office. He returned a small bow. He seemed not to have even known Miyoshi and I would be here.

"So what's up?" Miyoshi asked, gesturing Urushibara to the sofa.

"I'm not exactly sure. I'm here on orders."

"Orders?"

"Yes. I was instructed to come to this address and inform the resident that I'm here about a 'specific incident,' and they'd understand. What...um, what *is* the 'specific incident'?"

"Ah."

No doubt he meant the encroaching citrus apocalypse, which we'd contacted Naruse about yesterday. I was pretty surprised the JSDF had gotten moving so quickly. Either the Ministry of Defense recognized the severity of the crisis or the JDA's influence was just that great.

"Here," Miyoshi said, shoving him a piece of paper.

"An NDA? What's this for? Ah, well." Urushibara set the paper on the table and quickly scanned it. "Are you sure you don't want to rethink this?" He looked up at Miyoshi.

"What do you mean?" she asked. "Is there a problem?"

"The way it's written, if a plutocrat or foreign nation really wanted to know your secrets, they could buy them off of someone who'd signed this."

"Ooooh!"

It *would* take someone from the JSDF—with thoughts pointed toward international espionage—like Urushibara to point that out. Our penalty fees might have been out of reach for a normal person, but not for a wealthy group or nation. From a certain point of view, we hadn't truly set penalty fees, just given our secrets a four hundred billion yen price tag.

"We *may* need to rework that," Miyoshi admitted. "But...oh well. If you could just sign it for now."

Miyoshi, you sure? He might be from a research branch, but he is still JSDF. You don't want to redraft it now? I asked via telepathy.

It's not like anything we do will reveal Making.

Hmm...

Fair enough. At this point, that was the main thing we absolutely wanted to keep under wraps.

There was also my ranking as the world's top explorer, but there was no reason to still be overly precious about, say, my Vault and Water Magic. Same for the Arthurs.

"Signed? Great. Thanks. So here's the deal..." I began.

I sat down and explained our intention to have Sayama defeat the King of Woods. If we'd had more time, we could probably have managed something on our own, but the clock was ticking. We

needed some outside help of the artillery-related variety.

"So you want someone who's never been in a real dungeon battle, with absolutely no combat training, to take out a twenty-first-floor boss—on their own? Those are the mission requirements?"

"Uh... Yep, that's the gist."

"Oddly vague and yet oddly specific too." He grinned, then his expression stiffened. "Ordinarily I would just suggest a few months—or more—of combat training, you know."

That *was* technically an option. Sure, there'd be immense economic damage to the citrus industry in the interim, but we might avoid its total collapse if Sayama defeated the King soon enough. However, there was another element in play— "We don't know what'll happen if we wait. There are still too many rules we haven't ascertained."

There weren't any stories about slaves running away from rex Nemorensis for months. We couldn't be sure what would happen if we pushed our luck that way. Or rather, *anything* could happen if we did. The most optimistic scenario was that the King of the Woods would still be there waiting, with no further developments. But who knew? The definition of the "woods" might somehow expand to include the area where the "slave" resided, even if it was outside the dungeon.

"Rules?" Urushibara asked. "I'm not sure I get it, but either way, you have my support."

With that, he gradually began walking us through his thoughts. Clearing a twenty-first-floor boss with JSDF small arms was going to be a tall order. The largest caliber firearm, the 12.7-millimeter M2, weighed at least forty kilos—sixty-something with a tripod. It wasn't the kind of thing an untrained civilian could wield.

"What about porters?" I asked.

"Just between us, we've been testing several models, but they won't be ready in time to meet your needs."

Miyoshi leaned in.

"Kei, we *could* just blackmail Falcon into giving us one as payment for Yokohama!" In spite of her comment's sketchiness, I could tell she was serious.

"At least say we could 'ask' Falcon. Jeez. But let's take that off the table for a minute. Short-range seems out of the question. What about long-range?"

"There's an anti-materiel rifle that uses the same bullets. However, if I may render my professional opinion, no amateur would ever land a shot with it—especially not on a moving target."

"So short-range is too heavy-duty and long-range is too hard to aim."

"There are heat-seeking and laser-guided missiles, of course—take the Type 01 anti-tank missiles—but they'd be near impossible to operate alone."

"C-Cruise missiles?" I suggested half jokingly, applying my limited military knowledge to grasp at straws.

"A decent suggestion. However, use of GLCMs—ground launched cruise missiles—was formerly prohibited by the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty. There aren't any on hand to provide. Although with the agreement having come to an end earlier this month, we might be able to have some ready by August..." he responded, evidently taking me seriously. He pushed up his glasses, a new fire in his eyes. "But, this kind of persnickety problem may be exactly why *I* was selected for deployment."

"Huh?"

"Ordinary weapons are made to combat personnel or vehicles. Only my section, D-Cap, focuses on development of a strictly dungeon-related variety. That is to say, anti-*monster* weapons." He turned around and pointed to a whiteboard behind our worktable. "Do you mind if I use that?"

"Be our guest."

Urushibara got up and began writing his main points on the board.

"The deeper you go in a dungeon, the weaker conventional weaponry becomes. That's common knowledge. However, increasing the energy of the weapon in tandem with descent only gets you so far in terms of practical use. What we need is—" He wrote the words "THINKING OUTSIDE THE BOX" on the board and circled them for emphasis. "This! Goodbye box, hello success!"

Uh, Miyoshi...? I telepathied.

Yep, she responded. *Definitely Nakajima 2.0.*

He leaned forward, gesturing exuberantly and lecturing us until he went hoarse about all the prototype weaponry the Dungeon Capabilities Research Division was developing. He didn't even notice that our eyes glazed over halfway through.

Tokiwa Lab, Edogawa City

"Looks like things have finally calmed down here," I remarked, taking a look around the lab.

In the month or so since the National Center exams, Tokiwa Lab —that is, Nakajima—had hardly rested while filling orders for the upcoming secondary exams.

"Has work been okay with us co-opting Nakajima like that?" Miyoshi asked.

"A little late to ask now." Midori scrunched her lips while setting out some bottled teas in front of us. "Oh well. It's not like we have any hard changes to make before April's exhibition. We're fine leaving our equipment as it is and just focusing on plans for the next version, I suppose." She shot us a sidelong look. *Or rather, we have to be fine with that thanks to you*, she seemed to imply.

"That's great!" I said, ignoring her tone.

"Glad to hear it," Miyoshi responded in turn. "In that case I'd like to have Nakajima take that reference-machine gate he worked on to New York for two days starting on the twenty-third."

"New York?" Midori blinked.

"You want to go too, Midori?" Miyoshi asked, putting on a sly grin. "We'll cover your travel."

"Why New York?"

"There's a huge IRL explorer meetup happening."

"And?"

"Don't tell me you'd pass on a chance to get all that data. We're donating to the costs of the venue."

"So data acquisition is the goal?"

"Bingo!"

"Then why don't the two of you go?"

"We maaaay have a little travel ban hanging over our heads..."

"Travel ban?" Midori leaned back, eyes wide. "Who from?"

"Would you believe...the Minister of Foreign Affairs and the chair of the National Public Safety Commission?"

Midori squinted.

"What did you two criminals do...?"

"W-We aren't criminals! Honest! It's totally unfair..."

Miyoshi started grumbling. Midori's eyes narrowed even more. After a moment, she turned her head down, seeming to think over the offer, then looked up with a smile.

"Aw, what the heck? We've been so swamped here. We could use a corporate retreat."

"Y-Yeah?"

"Corporate. Retreat. One week."

"When did you get to be such a shrewd negotiator?" Miyoshi asked.

"Of course it can't just be Nakajima and me. It would affect worker morale. How does, say, six of our best and brightest sound? Accommodations at the St. Regis New York, and naturally we'll fly first-class. Shouldn't be difficult for you."

"Didn't you say once that only dummies shell out for first class?"

"It's only for dummies if it hurts *your* bottom line. When someone else pays, it's stimulating the economy."

"Fine, fine," Miyoshi acquiesced. "In exchange, just make sure the event days are full work days."

"Then it's settled." Midori smiled.

This had all started with us hearing about a New York IRL meetup due to someone discovering the "find" party command, and somehow now we were sending all the top members of Tokiwa Lab... Oh well, I guessed it was fine as long as it was okay with Midori. They should have all been able to speak decent English, so they'd probably be good fits for the job anyway, but...

"Do you think verifier production will be done in time?" I asked.

"We'll hit the peak of demand with secondary exams for national

universities on the twenty-fifth. Given we'll need time for distribution, we'll have to wrap up by the twentieth anyway."

"That's good. Then I guess this can be a reward for Nakajima working so hard too," I responded.

"It *has* been hard on him. Now, what did you really come here for? You could have just emailed if this was all you wanted to discuss."

"Um, special training?" Miyoshi responded.

Midori leaned back.

"Special training? What for?"

"Would you believe...saving the world?"

There was one reason we'd come out here, so late at night no less: the deserted banks of the Edo River.

"See, Yoyogi Park is too small for what we're doing," I explained. "Too crowded even at night."

"I have *no idea* what you're talking about." Midori stood up as if to imply she didn't want to know any more, sticking her hands in her lab coat pockets. "But do as you like. We won't be getting any sleep until the twentieth anyway."

"Even through the weekend? When did you become a full-on exploitative company?" Miyoshi asked.

"When *you* hired us to make your damn verifiers!" Midori darted around behind Miyoshi's chair and put her in a headlock.

"Gweh!" Miyoshi spat. "Uncle! Uncle!" She slapped Midori's arm.

I looked at my watch. Reports of magic crystals disappearing had continued to pour in from all over the country after our conversation with Sayama yesterday. Like we'd told him, the decision to go through with our plan or not was up to him, but that seemed to have cemented his resolve. Even so, part of me still felt like we were grasping at straws.

To begin with, we needed something that would let a textbook amateur like Sayama defeat a floor boss without having first raised his stats fighting lesser monsters. Dungeon shops only sold light arms, and it would be impossible for him to defeat the King of the Woods using one, for reasons of both weapon efficacy and lack of training. Thankfully our report to Naruse had gotten Urushibara sent

to us the next day. Never underestimate the JDA's connections—or no, probably just the connections of Naruse's chief. Speed, rather than safety, was the order of the day.

February 16, 2019 (Saturday)

Yoyogi Dungeon

"Training go well?" I asked Sayama—who had spent most of the night giving his all with Miyoshi's special training by the riverbank—as we approached the dungeon gates. He suppressed a small yawn.

"I-I suppose. Though I...can't make any promises."

"Ah! There you are! Kei!" Miyoshi called. Sayama and I had gone straight to the dungeon, but Miyoshi had made a stop at JGSDF Camp Mishuku in Ikejiri to pick up the necessary gear.

"M-Morning!" called Urushibara, popping out from behind Miyoshi, giving us little waves with both hands. He was in unusually high spirits.

"What's with him?" I asked.

"He was up working all night."

"He's loopy from an all-nighter?!"

Sometimes staying up all night could give you a little bit of adrenaline to get through the next morning, like the last vestiges of a waning candle burning brightest—apparently that's where Urushibara was.

"Ooooh, that was a rough one, I tell you!" Urushibara said. "That's the first time I've tried to make something like *that* in one night! Ha, ha!"

"Th-Thanks for the hard work," I responded. "Now, how about we get changed and head in?"

For Sayama, I'd purchased the most expensive armor I could find at the dungeon shop that he could still move in. Miyoshi and I relied on our usual beginner gear.

"I-I've never been in a fight in my life. How am I supposed to kill

a monster?” Sayama lamented on the first floor.

“You practiced that technique a bunch last night, right?”

“S-Sure, but I’ve still never so much as fired a weapon...”

Urushibara, listening behind us, almost seemed to want to laugh.

“What? A gun? You just turn off the safety and pull the trigger! Then—pop!—a bullet shoots out! What’s so hard about that?”

“Now, now, Kiyomi,” Miyoshi responded, playing intermediary. “Not everyone’s JSDF.”

“Ha, ha. Well, my drill instructor did say I was a menace and probably shouldn’t handle firearms...”

“Whaa—?!”

“Ugh, ha...ha. Ugh, what am I doing here...?”

Urushibara’s shoulders slumped. The post all-nighter emotional ups and downs were coming to bear in full force.

“You...okay, Urushibara?” I asked.

“Ha. C-Come on, call me Kiyomi, at least...”

He actually likes *that nickname?*

“O-Okay! Got it. Kiyomi,” I responded.

“Now, for your question. Am I doing okay? Not at all! What am *I* doing in a dungeon?! Going to the twenty-first floor?! I must be insane. That’s the Dungeon Attack Group’s job, not ATLA’s! They must be picking on me,” he mumbled.

All we cared about having was a weapon we could use. Then again, there wasn’t exactly a way to just have the JSDF hand you weapons without someone along to attend. They’d had to deploy someone—apparently under the guise of dungeon disaster relief. Urushibara had drawn the short straw.

“I guess it would be kind of problematic if the JSDF just rented out weaponry to outside parties without asking questions,” Miyoshi pointed out.

“Right,” I agreed. “Especially since... Well, bladed weapons would be one thing, but bullets are gone once they’re fired. No sweeping the inventory loss under the rug.”

The UN had dictated even the loaning of small munitions was a problem for member states.

But Kei. The JDAG is part of the JGSDF. They don’t actually have

the authority to give orders to ATLA, do they? Miyoshi asked telepathically.

Then how did Kiyomi get deployed?

I wonder... she responded.

The "deployment order" this time was really just a thinly veiled excuse to get us weaponry. If our theory was correct, the only person who could actually defeat the King of the Woods was Sayama. More troops around wouldn't have made a difference except in terms of carrying gear. Really, they'd have just been a burden. Given that, Urushibara was probably the best choice to work with us. Which meant...

Someone who knows our history probably sent him over. The Self-Defense Forces Act's dungeon exploration revisions are full of vague phrasing and potential loopholes, but...judging from the speed of the decision, it probably took approval from someone above even the Vice-Minister of Defense.

Whoa.

That was all I could figure. The lowest post with unilateral authority over multiple defense-related organizations would have been the vice-minister. We were definitely in big-deal territory.

"Oh well! Orders are orders, ha, ha!" Urushibara laughed. "And it's not all a loss. We got extra funding thanks to how successful our incendiary grenades were at Yokohama. This time might come out a plus for us too!"

"Here's hoping," Miyoshi responded cordially.

Um, weren't the Ministry of Finance's budget hearings for the next fiscal year already over by Yokohama? I asked telepathically.

Not just the hearings. They'd already drafted a plan.

Doesn't seem like the kind of situation in which you could suddenly "find" bonus funds.

Even if they could, rushing through extra weapons-development money would just make them easy pickings for the minority party come this summer's elections.

Assuming a larger budget had been promised, it was probably earmarked for the year after next. That is, if the powers that be still remembered the importance of doing so. People, especially those

courting votes, had a tendency to not remember dangers once they passed. I wouldn't be too surprised if Urushibara wound up hearing that the money had to go somewhere more immediately appealing to the electorate...

"Plus, we couldn't operate the weapons you're providing without you, right?" Miyoshi said, trying to rouse Urushibara's spirits. "Glad it was you, Kiyomi!"

"R-Right." He smiled.

Most of our weapons for the day were prototypes provided by D-Cap.

"And hey, the eighteenth floor has been turned into a cross-company porter showroom right now! You'll want to check that out, right?"

"Ah! Now that *is* good news!" He hadn't gone into detail, but apparently a major part of Urushibara's current work was testing Japanese porters. It stood to reason he'd have a vested interest in international offerings—most of which weren't for sale yet.

"In that case, why don't we aim for the eighteenth floor today?" I asked.

"Huh?"

Sayama and Urushibara both looked at me.

"We're in a hurry, right?"

The country's magic crystals were disappearing one after another, and our citrus groves were being threatened by a particularly troublesome invader.

It had taken Team Simon nine hours to return to the surface from the eighteenth floor. Even if we couldn't match that with our current team, we could at least get close. If we weren't concerned with appearances, that was...

"Whaaaa?!"

That was all Sayama and Urushibara could manage when I explained how I planned to make it in time.

Dungeon Management Section, JDA

Headquarters, Ichigaya

The JDA Dungeon Management Section had been overwhelmed with work preparing for safe area development and the secondary university entrance exams, but on this morning, all work on those projects had stopped.

"Chief! We're getting multiple reports of explorers clinging to some sort of black monster rushing through the upper floors!"

Only Saiga, who had received Miharu's report yesterday and made his request directly to Terasawa, immediately knew what was going on.

"*Dog*. Clinging to a black *dog.*"

Reaching the twenty-first floor while escorting civilians would normally take three days. But judging from the news reports of magic crystal disappearances, that seemed like time they didn't have, even though MAFF had been working on countermeasures with unusual expediency. He couldn't blame D-Powers if they'd thrown caution to the wind. However...

At least have a little *self-restraint!* he quietly pleaded, feeling a cold sweat coming on.

"Chief! We have inquiries coming in about how to tame one of those 'dogs'!"

"Tell them to ask a pet shop!"

That day the trending topics on every social media platform were filled with photos from the upper floors of Yoyogi.

Yoyogi Dungeon, Seventeenth Floor

Our two guests were snoring soundly on Cavall's back by the time we reached the eighteenth floor. At first they'd been clutching on for dear life, scared they might fall off, but apparently their bout of nerves had subsided. They were nodding off by the time we hit floor ten.

"How exactly are they staying on?" I asked.

Miyoshi occasionally rode on Cavall while keeping up with me on

lower floors. However, her AGI was high enough that this time she'd elected to go on foot.

"It feels like his back has some kind of magic that helps you stay on," she informed me. "You feel some vibrations, but it's basically like riding a train."

"I guess that *would* put you to sleep," I responded. Sayama had been up most of the night, and Urushibara all of it. "Why don't we go straight to the twenty-first floor?" I looked back toward Miyoshi.

It'd been nearly ten hours since we'd entered. We'd taken care at first not to go too fast, out of consideration for Sayama and Urushibara, but had still made impressive time. We could be at the twenty-first floor by 9 p.m.

"Thinking we'd draw too much attention stopping on the eighteenth floor?" Miyoshi asked. We did have two people sleeping on top of a galloping monster, after all.



She had a point. The main path on the eighteenth floor was littered with campsites, and it wouldn't be long before teams out farming started to return to base. We probably didn't want to be seen like this by any of the world's top explorer teams. We might have convinced Shibuya City Hall that hellhounds were dogs, but that wouldn't fly with the world's top dungeon teams. However...

"There is that, but it wasn't my main thought. Probably too late to worry about drawing attention anyway."

Plenty of people had seen us, and even snapped pictures, on our way down. Plus, we hadn't exactly told Cathy to keep quiet about the Arthurs, and Simon knew we had something too.

"I guess there's no way around it," she admitted, "but if anyone probes into it and finds out how our office security system works, it isn't much of a leap to figure out how the Phantom disappears."

"It's not like seeing the dogs gives away anything about Arthur Space. We should still have some room to breathe."

Plus, Rokujo had Darkness Magic (VI) too, so it wasn't like it was one of a kind anymore. Even if our use of it was outed, the Phantom could plausibly be a third user of the skill. My limited dungeon time wasn't a lie, and it was still my best cover. Even if someone got suspicious, G Rank was G Rank.

"Plus, the Hound of Hecate's drop for Darkness Magic (VI) was one in two million, and the barghest's one in 280 million. It'll be a while before anyone else gets that drop, which means even longer to fully figure out how all the hellhounds' powers work."

"You do see how that makes it more suspicious, right? That two people connected to D-Powers would have it?"

"Yeah, but we're the only ones who know how rare those drops actually are."

"Well, all right. We can skip the eighteenth floor, but I feel bad for Kiyomi."

"His fault for falling asleep," I responded. "We'll stop there on the way back."

"Careful, Kei," Miyoshi cautioned. "Don't jinx us."

"O-Okay. *If* everything goes well, we can stop there on the way back. How's that?"

“Still jinxy.”
“It is, huh?”
“It is.”
Grinning, we dashed down the stairs to the eighteenth floor.

Yoyogi Dungeon, Twenty-First Floor

“Sayama. Wakey-wakey!” I called.
“Ngh...huh?”
“We’re here.”
“Here...wh— Huh?!”
Sayama’s eyes went wide as he sat up, beholding a cylindrical building in front of him. But what made his eyes shoot open even wider was the scream that erupted from behind him the next second.
“Gaaaaah! What is *that*?!”
Miyoshi had roused Urushibara, who was also gazing up in shock. He scrambled to his feet, darted forward, and started placing his hands on the walls of Igloo 1.
“What are you doing?” she asked.
“It’s a building! A building, in the dungeon! What, do you expect me to stay *calm*?! What is it made of?! Falcon was developing some kind of porous Styrofoam-like material to put your anti-slime substance into, but all that seemed to do was slow the speed of dissolution, not keep a structure up permanently! If you’ve made something to get around that problem, you’re a shoo-in for the Nobel Dungeon Prize!”
“The Nobel...Dungeon Prize?” Miyoshi asked, bemused.
To be clear, there was no such thing.
“Um, the outer walls are ordinary metal,” Miyoshi said, addressing his question. “Anyway, why don’t we go in and get some rest, Kiyomi?”
“Rest?”
Urushibara was obviously deflated by Miyoshi’s deferral of an answer, but her next words brought him back to his senses.

“Don’t forget that little NDA clause.”

“R-Right!” he responded, stiffening.

Sayama smiled lightly at the proceedings, likely with a sense of déjà vu. He then pulled out a branch, which had been peeking through the zipper of his shoulder-strapped bag.

“Is this really all I need?”

It was the first one he’d cut from the “golden tree” back at NARO.

“Yep,” I responded. “I mean, in principle it should have been the original, but...” The original branch Sayama had cut from the dungeon tree had already regenerated into the larger tree at Tsukuba. There was no separating it now. But as a symbol of his first cutting of a branch from the tree, we figured it would probably work.

“I can’t wait for this to be over with...” he said, voice shaking.

He stared out at the darkened forest below. I understood, but it wouldn’t do him any good to head down right now. Without the Night Vision skill, he was better off waiting for daylight.

“You have to get schooled on the new weaponry from Urushibara first,” Miyoshi pointed out. “No reason to make things extra risky by getting into it tonight.”

“I-I suppose not,” Sayama said, sighing. He stepped into Igloo 1.

***

The central table inside was strewn with different weapons. Urushibara provided Sayama tutelage in their use. Miyoshi stationed herself at the desks along the outer wall, checking the outside camera feeds on desktop monitors. We were pretty sure we were out of the King of the Woods’s range, but we didn’t want him sneaking up, just in case. Occasionally raw gems dropped around her—the Arthurs playing outside.

“Now, keep this in mind. An untrained hand will never hit a moving target with a firearm,” Urushibara explained.

“Right,” Sayama responded.

“That’s why we’re going to need to stop him in his tracks first.”

I sat down next to Miyoshi, listening to the lecture from afar.

“I can’t believe the JSDF even had something like that,” I

commented, gesturing toward the RPG-7 rocket launcher just sitting on our table. "It's Russian-make, right? I thought the JGSDF used Panzerfaust 3s."

Urushibara turned my way.

"Actually, this is all we have."

"Huh?"

According to him, the RPG-7s had originally been experimentally installed in Type 10 tanks.

"The JGSDF uses LAMs—110-millimeter portable anti-tank rocket launchers licensed from the Panzerfaust 3—but those are distributed to infantry and engineer units. They don't come around to us. They're too expensive to let us use for testing. Budget is budget..." he mumbled.

Okay, so RPG-7s were like mopeds, while LAMs were like cars.

"Ah, so you had some testing ones left over at D-Cap?" I asked.

"It's all stuff that's hard to find any use for. We basically just received a bunch of old hand-me-downs when D-Cap was founded."

Huh. Like unloading old furniture. I was sure it involved more complicated paperwork than that, granted—but that was probably how it felt for those involved.

"So you see we have all sorts of, er, refuse that we're unlikely to actually use in dungeon weaponry R&D."

Even to test something's defensive capability, they were unlikely to need anything with the force of a missile launcher. He'd basically gathered up a bunch of surplus collecting dust at ATLA.

"Perfect for this mission though. We're dealing with a twenty-first-floor boss. If you want to take it out in one hit, nothing less than this level of firepower will do."

In addition, he'd determined that it would be too difficult for an amateur to deal with firing multiple rounds from a large caliber rifle. On the other hand, the RPG-7 was the most commonly used anti-tank weaponry in the world for a reason. It was simple enough to be operated by someone with just the slightest amount of training.

"Can't say I'm confident about hitting him though..." Sayama admitted solemnly. Until all this started, he'd never even held a model gun before. "But that's why we stop him first, right?"

I noticed Sayama was holding what looked like a claymore.

"Land mines?!"

Sayama furrowed his brow.

"Antipersonnel mines have been banned for over twenty years. This is apparently an 'antipersonnel obstacle breaching system'—APOBS."

I raised an eyebrow. I didn't get what the difference was.

"There's a Type II breaching system that uses charges similar to claymores," Urushibara explained. "This is based on that, but with size and firepower adjustments."

The system involved two packs connected by a thin wire, with charges bundled along it—apparently three hundred of them. All the charges contained nonlethal rubber projectiles. The size of this version was slightly smaller and lighter than the original Type II.

"At twenty-four kilos per pack, the original would be a bit heavy for ordinary exploration," Urushibara explained.

Right. Just replacing metal buckshot with rubber would probably be a big help on the weight front.

"So you're just planning on launching a ton of these at him and using them like bolos or kusari chains to try to trip him up?"

"The idea first came to us after a request to help take down a humanoid monster that caused JGSDF casualties. Though ultimately the monster never left its spawning area, so it wound up not being needed."

Kei, a humanoid monster and JSDF casualties...

Uh-oh. Yep. It had to have been for the peak on the eighteenth floor.

"Firearms may be reduced in efficiency the further down you go, but that doesn't mean we can't hinder movement."

So basically a physical debuff. An interesting thought, but unlike magic debuffs, which could be cast without extra gear, the space and weight required for these often wouldn't feel worth it for the effect.

"However, there are three problems."

"Problems?"

"First, the nature of the weapon. It's going to be harder to use in

a heavily forested area."

Apparently the woods being the battleground was a concern. It made sense that a weapon designed for Batian Peak wouldn't have been tailored to use in woodlands.

"Next, as this is still in testing, the wire length between each unit differs."

They'd needed a much longer cord for upper body shots intended to wrap around both the torso and the arms, but a far shorter one for leg shots, leading them to test different sizes. They'd narrowed it down to three final candidates, but development had petered out while testing them on different dummies.

"So these have never been field-tested?"

"Th-They've been tested! In...simulations. It should be fine! Probably..."

At least we knew the launching mechanism worked. But the wire length and how well it would work against a moving opponent left a few too many unknowns.

"Finally, we know it'll hinder movement, but *where* you hit will have a big impact on efficacy. Especially for leg shots."

Landing it across both legs would bring the King down no problem, but if we only managed to get one? He'd be slower, for sure, but not grounded.

"Don't worry. Between your weapons and our brains, I'm sure we can work something out." Miyoshi pressed a button on the large monitor we had set up on the central table and brought up the layout data on the woods we'd gathered. "Here. This is where we want to aim for the final battle."

She was pointing to a place near the mouth of the woods—a large clearing.

"Now, you'll set up the peach unit..."

"Hold up," I interjected. "Peach unit?"

"Know anything else that can bring a demon down in three shots?" She was referencing the Japanese mythological tale of Izanagi, a god who had thrown three peaches to fend off the Hags of Yomi, demons of the underworld. Between this and the Ukemochi System, she was getting a bit too into the national lore recently.

"Now, Miyoshi," Urushibara countered, "this system has an official name: the APOBS Type II-D. I'd be grateful if you could use—"

"Whoa, whoa! That's way too JSDF for how we do things around here. We keep it light, okay? Light!"

"I may be at a branch agency, but I *am* still JSDF." Urushibara scratched his head and grimaced. "Oh well. So, thinking of the Type II—"

"Peach unit," Miyoshi corrected him.

Urushibara frowned.

"Thinking of the *peach unit's* capabilities, we could set them up here, here, and here. That would give us the best chance."

"Actually, what about these three locations instead?" Miyoshi asked, pointing to three spots on the map, all along the route between the giant orange tree and the clearing.

"What? But the logistical synergy..."

"With your original plan, Sayama's dead if he can't outrun the King on the way from the tree to our chosen battleground."

"Wh-What?!" Sayama shouted, seeming panicked.

We knew from the way the King took—or rather didn't take—Miyoshi's iron balls that he was weak for a twenty-first-floor boss. However, not so weak that Miyoshi's fear wasn't a real possibility. After all, he bore a responsibility—stemming from his origins—to kill the "runaway slave" as part of the rex Nemorensis legend. Keeping that in mind, along with our other observations, he probably had a mechanic scaling his stats so that he was just a bit stronger than whoever had broken off the bough.

We'd noticed it the first time we encountered him through Miyoshi's Appraisal. His stats were slightly different between her first reading of him and one a short while later. She'd scratched her head over it at the time, but later we'd realized that he was probably adjusting himself to his target. It had just taken the dungeon time to sync the King's performance parameters with Sayama.

The King of the Woods was a monster with stats set according to his challenger. That was another factor in us not raising Sayama's stats. Ordinarily we wouldn't worry about a monster's stats rising and would have at least had Sayama pound a few slimes, but in this

particular case there were more effective uses of our time.

After all, we could also have had him form a party with Miyoshi, spread out his stats as well as we could, then had him do the Arthur-style training with Miyoshi all night to get as much experience as he could. But that might have had the effect of not only not helping, but also actively making the situation worse. If he raised his stats too much, the King of the Woods's stats might rise too high in turn for conventional weaponry to have an effect, all while still remaining an impossible opponent for Sayama on his own.

By the same token, that was why we'd given up attempting to have me break off a new bough instead. For starters, there were no tales of the challenger in the rex Nemorensis tradition switching halfway through, so it might not have worked anyway, but even if it had, it might have created an unprecedented terror—one that would make Ngai look like a baby lamb.

"With this placement, however," Miyoshi continued, "we can be almost certain he'll get to the battlefield."

Urushibara pushed his glasses up his nose.

"And once he gets there...then what?"

By that point Sayama would have exhausted his debuff weapons. Unless there was some kind of hole in the ground for the boss to fall in, he didn't have high odds of landing a shot with the RPG.

"That's where our *special* measure comes in! Thanks for making it, Kiyomi!"

"*That?!*" Urushibara gasped, flustered. "But h-how?!"

Miyoshi had requested one very special "weapon" from Urushibara, but even he wasn't aware of how we planned to use it. He'd simply designed it to spec. He leaned forward with interest.

"That answer..." Miyoshi said, drawing all attention toward her, "you can look forward to tomorrow!"

The color drained from Sayama's face.

"I'm not looking *forward* to this, you know?"

"Just a figure of speech! Don't worry. We'll bail you out if there's any real trouble."

"You will? You really will? Th-Thank you! You promise?"

February 17, 2019 (Sunday)

Yoyogi Dungeon, Twenty-First Floor

The fateful day had arrived. The orange grove lay below us, blanketed in a dim fog.

"S-So this is it. Th-The final battleground..." Beads of sweat were pooling on Sayama's forehead as he looked out over the woodlands.

We set off down the hill. We had been slightly worried that the King might attack us as soon as we entered the woods, but thankfully our expectations had been borne out and it seemed like he'd remain at his starting point by the tree until triggered by his target again.

Miyoshi spray-painted circles on the ground as we walked toward the tree from the clearing where Sayama was due to make his last stand, marking target points. She let out a big yawn and blinked quickly as if trying to stay awake.

"What's up?" I asked. "Late night?"

"I had a lot to think over..."

That was fair. Sayama's life was in our hands, after all. That was a lot to grapple with.

"Kei." She looked up at me. "Which is better: Operation Yomotsu Slopes or Operation Okamujimi?"

"*That* was what you were thinking about?!"

The Slopes of Yomotsu was the location in the underworld where Izanagi threw his three peaches to escape the Hags of Yomi. After fending off the demons with the peaches, he declared the fruit divine and bestowed them unto the land. It was a little known element of folklore, but he dubbed the peaches "Okamujimi," raising them to godhood. "Okamujimi" was thus both a god and a peach—the name was a contraction of an original phrase meaning "fruit of the great god."

"There's nothing we can do now anyway..."

"That's true, but..."

What lay ahead was a one-on-one duel between the slave and

the king. There weren't any stories involving outside assistance. In terms of the magic at work, that would be like flipping the whole game board over—it had rules to operate on, which must not be interfered with. There was no telling what could happen if we tried.

"The peaches became 'Okamujimi' *after* the battle on the Yomotsu Slopes," I pointed out.

"Then Operation Yomotsu Slopes it is!"

The golden tree lay on the other side of the lake from where Igloo 1 stood. After getting a third of the way there, Miyoshi sprayed another white circle on the ground, and Sayama began clumsily setting up one of the "peach units" at Urushibara's instruction. Gems continued dropping around Miyoshi here and there—a sign the Arthurs were still on duty.

Stepping back, Urushibara took a look at the peach unit with a film director's scrutiny. Cocking his head to the side, he voiced a lingering doubt.

"Won't the spray paint and peach unit get dissolved by slimes?" he asked.

He knew Igloo 1 was still standing on top of the hill. He was probably fishing for info.

"They'll probably at least last through the encounter," Miyoshi replied. "But..."

"But?"

"If they do get dissolved, oh well! We can just set them again!"

"Whaaat? We only have these three peaches!"

Evidently he'd fallen for Miyoshi's dumb joke. The real answer was that all the markings and peach units would remain under the Arthurs' watchful eyes. Not that we'd tell him that.

"Showtime." Glancing at her tablet, Miyoshi pointed ahead to a curve in our path. "You should see the tree soon. Just around that corner ahead."

Sayama swallowed, eyes fixed forward. Perhaps because of the rising temperature, the fog had lifted, and a blue sky showed itself overhead.

"H-Here I go."

"Careful not to mix up the remote order."

The peach units were remote-triggered, and each had its own activator. If they had been automatic, they would have fit the category for antipersonnel land mines and been banned.

Sayama carefully arranged the three remotes in order of activation. Giving us a weak nod, he raised his face toward the sky as if steeling his resolve and set off down the path toward the tree.

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Sayama moved forward, trembling, feet plodding of their own volition toward the tree. All he could think about as he gazed upon it was how much he wished he hadn't taken one of its branches to start. If he hadn't—if only he hadn't—he wouldn't be here right now. However, he couldn't let Japan's entire citrus industry collapse because of his blunder. Consumed by a mixture of fear, regret, and sense of duty, he marched on, following the winding path.

He saw the great tree before him. And the King of the Woods, the same monster he'd encountered that fateful day, stood defiantly in front of the immense trunk with its feet spread apart.

"Gah!" Sayama swallowed his shock.

The instant he saw the King dart forward, he turned on his heel and ran, sprinting toward the first target mark. He ran as fast as he could but couldn't shake one inescapable thought from his mind—the thundering footsteps behind him came at a faster pace than his own. And it was still a few hundred meters to the main battleground. His stamina wouldn't hold out.



He'd passed the first mark, but he didn't have it in him to look behind him while continuing to run full speed. That was when a guardian angel appeared in the form of a radio exhortation.

"Keep running! Three seconds till the target hits the first mark!"

Sayama gripped the first remote and counted down in his head.

"Now!"

He pressed the button in sync with the instruction.

PWOOM! A small explosion rang out, followed by the King's bellow.

Sayama didn't look back—just kept running toward the next mark. He hadn't even gotten halfway to the clearing and was already running out of breath. His legs were burning too. Though he could feel an almost palpable rage behind him, at least he'd bought himself some distance.

***

"Yes!" Seeing Sayama's first peach unit hit its mark, Urushibara let out a shout, pumping his fist in the air.

The first unit had been the one with the longest wire, and it had tangled itself around the King's body, sending him stumbling forward.

"Though it looks like the three-hundred-link might have been a bit much."

With the longest iteration of the wire, Sayama had only managed to tangle about a fourth of the King's body. The rest of the length had flown behind him, dangling loosely without wrapping around.

"Uuungh, if we'd only reduced the length a bit, we could have increased the efficacy of the stopping power. But no, then it wouldn't work as well against moving opponents. This helps guarantee a landing, to pin them down with follow-up shots. I suppose this was for the best, but... Huh?"

Urushibara looked up to realize he was alone. The two members of D-Powers had moved on to the next mark.

"W-Wait! This is the twenty-first floor!" This was no place to be left alone. He took off in a panic toward where the others had gone.

Aethlem, who had been left behind to guard him, merely hung his head in frustration, sauntering on behind.

It wasn't long before Sayama's sigh of relief gave way once again to ragged breaths. He barreled forward as fast as he could move. But seconds later he once again felt the icy gaze of the King of the Woods creep up his spine.

He was almost at the second target—and unfortunately, almost out of breath too. His legs felt leaden, as if they were embedded in the earth. He thought about simply pushing the second trigger and hoping for the best. But no—he only had one shot. He had to wait until the King was in position. Failure meant death!

What had he done to deserve this?! He wasn't cut out for survival games!

Just up ahead, he spotted it—the second white circle.

"Five seconds!" Urushibara's voice came in over the radio.

F-Five seconds? That meant the King was only five seconds behind him? Five ticks of the clock's fastest hand were all that separated him from safety and a grisly demise?

Sayama counted down three seconds, hands shaking, then jumped forward into a sliding dive. The area up to five centimeters off the ground was a safe zone—at least if everything was set up correctly, according to Urushibara.

"Urushibara?!" Sayama shouted.

"Aaaand, now!"

Sayama pressed the trigger. A small explosion was followed by the twang of a wire slicing the air. A moment later, another sound rose up from the woods—the roar of its so-called monarch.

Sayama looked down at his legs, cracking a mental whip and urging them to push his body up. By this point he was trembling for an entirely different reason than fear.

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"How much longer can he hold out?" I wondered.

"If he can't make it to the next target," Miyoshi replied unusually

coolly, “he’s dead.”

I was shocked speechless. *Whoa, when did* you *get so cavalier about death?!*

Observing from a safe distance away, I watched Sayama stagger to his feet and resume running. The second wire had hit the King’s legs, keeping him down for several seconds.

“Don’t get any bright ideas, Kei.” Miyoshi shot me a glance. “If you go playing hero now, everything Sayama’s done could be for nothing. You might screw up the ritual.”

“I guess with the King’s stats, Sayama *probably* won’t die in one hit, and anyway, we do have fifth-ranked potions...”

The King was hopping along, legs still tied, clawing at the wire like a man—er, monster—possessed.

***

The sun was up—the morning had been so bright. So why did everything look dark? The only sound in Sayama’s ears was that of his own panting. His vision was blurry. His glasses must have flown off.

Just a bit further...just a bit!

He repeated that thought in his head, until he was no longer sure what it meant.

Just a bit further until...what?

“Just a...bit...” he mumbled out loud as at last he saw the final white circle come into view.

“That’s right!”

Having just remembered his mission, Sayama felt a blow to the back. He’d never been hit by a car before, but he imagined this must be what it felt like. He flew forward, rolling several times along the ground until he came to a stop at the roots of an orange tree. Without thinking, he pressed the third switch.

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“Kei!” Miyoshi shouted.

The King of the Woods had landed a savage kick to Sayama's back. The scientist had gone flying, and was now lying at the base of a tree. An instant after he hit the roots, we heard the third peach unit fire. The wire whipped through the air.

The King, having finally caught on, leapt backward. The wire sailed past.

"Damn it!" I cried. "Aw, it's over!"

Just then I felt a tap on my shoulder, followed by ragged breathing belonging to someone other than Sayama.

"How...could you...leave me...like that...on the twenty-first floor?!" Urushibara was red in the face.

"Well, hold on, we didn't exactly leave you al—" I began.

"Sayama's not done yet!" Miyoshi called out from behind us.

"Huh?" I turned around.

Sayama was sitting up. He'd placed his back against the tree.

"There's a reason aramid fiber and ogreskin body armor don't come cheap," Miyoshi noted with satisfaction.

Right. Unlike the two of us with our starter sets, we'd given Sayama proper protective gear.

An ogre's outer hide was composed of small, almost honeycomb-like structures, which helped absorb physical blows. Combine that with aramid fiber and you had a formidable piece of armor. But that wasn't all...

I'd also given him one Physical Resistance orb to use just in case. Luckily it appeared it didn't take any special concentration to activate.

"But he's not moving," Urushibara noted with worry. "The King'll just dodge if he fires the rocket now."

The King seemed to agree. He had unsheathed his sword and was sauntering toward Sayama without a care in the world.

"Don't be so hasty," Miyoshi said with a grin. "This is where the fun begins."

As if he could somehow hear Miyoshi, I could have sworn I saw Sayama's lips curl into a grin.

I spotted a giant shadow in the edges of my vision. Something was moving in—from above.

"Wh-What?!" The force of the object plummeting to the earth had knocked Urushibara's glasses askew. When he straightened them, getting a good look at what lay ahead, his eyes were about ready to pop out.

Miyoshi and I, of course, knew what was happening. We could see the whole thing playing out from our vantage point too. But it must have been one hell of a surprise—and source of confusion—to the King.

He struggled against the object that had fallen on top of him, pinning him to the ground.

"I-I thought you said there couldn't be any outside interference." Urushibara blinked.

"There wasn't," Miyoshi replied. "That's all Sayama."

"Whaaaat?! I-I knew *you* had some kind of item-box skill, but *him*?!"

If we hurried with this mission, we'd be back on the surface by February 18th. Storage's cooldown timer was set to seventy days, and we'd gotten our last copy on December 16th. That meant we could get another after Monday of next week. Thankfully our week's notice policy meant that even if the JDA requested their orb back as soon as we returned to the surface, we'd still be able to replace it in time.

Our plan had hinged on two very special weapons: The first was the JDA's copy of Storage they'd entrusted to us, which we'd given to Sayama. We kept quiet about its auction price, of course. The second was—well, essentially, it was one giant bug-catching net.

That was what we'd had Urushibara up all night working on. The net consisted of a steel frame that we'd specified had to be too heavy to lift even for someone "several times Sayama's strength." Stretched across the top of the frame was a lattice of woven steel wire peppered with small, barbless hooks.

Sayama's training by Edo River had focused on removing objects from Storage at a distance. It required some getting used to. Since Miyoshi had been picking up and dropping buses like they were Lego bricks after only a little practice, we were confident he could develop working proficiency in one night.

Thankfully it had all come together in time.

The more the King struggled, the deeper the hooks on the wire mesh became embedded, further immobilizing him.

"I *really* need to get out more," Urushibara mused. "I didn't realize item-box skills had become so commonplace."

They hadn't. But just in case he were tempted to go telling anyone he *thought* they had, we'd remind him again of our NDA.

"Don't celebrate too early," Miyoshi warned. "The King might have some kind of magic up his sleeve."

I wasn't so concerned.

"We know he does have some magic—at least enough to control weather and plants, but that's all. I doubt he has anything for combat."

The rex Nemorensis of legend didn't, after all.

Urushibara's shoulders drooped.

"Controlling weather and plants, and you brush it off with a '*that's all*'?"

By now, Sayama was holding a rocket launcher. He'd set it up while remaining slouched against the tree.

"Wh-Where did he... Ah well. I guess it's not worth questioning anything anymore." Urushibara adjusted his glasses again, staring out at the ensnared King. "As long as the kickback doesn't throw off his aim, he's got it." Urushibara plopped himself down on the ground and flung out each of his limbs like he was making a snow angel, relieved it was finally over.

As one scientist—Urushibara—went down, another, Sayama, pushed himself up. Holding the rocket launcher, he staggered slowly toward the King, who remained fully pinned.

Urushibara sat back up and stared forward.

"Huh? Didn't I tell him a normal RPG has an explosive radius of seven meters?! Don't get any closer!"

However, Sayama just kept walking. After a certain distance, he crouched down and placed the rocket-launcher on the ground. He held the golden bough over his head. It almost seemed to sparkle in the morning light. *I see.* This was Sayama's regalia—the mark of the king.

“What’s he doing now?” Urushibara asked. It must have seemed weird to him that Sayama wasn’t striking the final blow.

“Probably following the process.”

“The process?”

“The, er, ceremonial process... For the spell.”

Spells were a way of trying to impose order where there was none—an ancient system of science, I supposed. Science had processes. It only seemed fitting that magic should have them too. Maybe that was what we called a “ceremony.”

Even Sayama might not have fully understood what he was doing—only that the process must be followed.

“A magical ceremonial process...” I repeated to myself, almost laughing out loud. If someone had said the same thing to me months ago, I would have laughed in their face. But, when in Rome...

Sayama had extracted the Scimitar of Deserts, which I’d loaned him earlier. From a distance I couldn’t tell if he was crying or laughing. He continued stepping slowly forward.

Just a meter or so away from the King, he stopped, looked up at the sky, then closed his eyes and inhaled slowly, as if in silent prayer. After a moment he opened his eyes, exhaled, looked down again, and brought the sword down with all his might.

The forest was filled with the sound of flapping wings, as if the woods themselves were crying out. The King bellowed, then dispersed into black light, his own roar growing faint. What was left in the aftermath was one floating ball of bright light, which flew forward into Sayama, dissipating into him.

As if to herald the coming of its new lord, the forest reverberated with faint, gentle whispers: “Rex mortuus est, vivat rex.”

“The king is dead, long live the king?” I asked, turning toward Miyoshi.

“Looks like we cleared some kind of event,” she declared. “A new king is born. But...”

“What?”

“Do you think Sayama...will be allowed to leave the woods?”

Uh-oh. I understood her concern. I’d actually been wondering the

same thing. The role of the King of the Woods in ancient Rome *was* to protect Diana's altar at Lake Nemi.

"Hmm..."

"If the alternative is being stuck on the twenty-first floor for the rest of his life, maybe dying would have been...preferable," Miyoshi pointed out.

Not likely, I figured. Whatever the sacrifice, Sayama had seemed committed to righting the wrongs he'd committed against the citrus farmers on the surface, but...

"Ah well, it'll probably be all right," I mused.

"What makes you so sure?" she asked.

"The King protects his domain. And Sayama's is in Tsukuba."

If the place the soul belonged was "the woods," how far did his woods extend? The edges of Tsukuba? Ibaraki? Honshu? Japan? The Earth? Who had the right to tell him where he could or could not go, to decide where the boundary of his arboreal concerns lay?

"Maybe wherever the king is, that's his woods," I said sagely.

"Don't be so proud of yourself for trotting out half-baked truisms, Plato. Or should I say Keito?" Miyoshi folded her hands behind her and leaned back, peeking up at me from below. She stuck out her tongue and smiled.

"Okay." I smiled back. "Maybe I deserved that."

"But...if that's what *you* think," she mused, "it's probably true."

Who's being cryptic now?

Yoyogi Dungeon, Eighteenth Floor

At Urushibara's request, we stopped off at the eighteenth floor base camp on the way back. He was like a kid in a candy shop with all the different companies' porters. He was peppering the engineers there with questions.

"Why didn't you use the RPG in the end?" I asked Sayama, who had seemed down in the dumps ever since the battle that morning. As I spoke, I continued to keep one eye on Urushibara.

"I don't know," he responded after a moment. "It just didn't feel

right.”

The glowing orb the King of the Woods had left had indeed been a skill orb. We knew because the phrase “King of the Woods” had appeared in the skills list on Sayama’s D-Card. Strangely, though, he hadn’t touched the orb himself. It was the first automatic-use skill orb ever reported.

“King of the Woods” was nearly as ambiguous as “Making,” but at least it seemed like it would be useful in undoing the curse of the mikan trees. It could probably also express some influence over climate patterns and plants generally too. Little did I know that was exactly what was eating at him.

“What do you think counts as ‘woods’?” he asked.

If he’d asked Miyoshi, she’d have given a flippant answer like “Any location marked by a sufficient density of trees,” but that didn’t seem like the way to cheer up Sayama.

“I guess we’re not sure. But at least it seems like it’ll let you solve the orange problem, right?”

“Ah...” he replied. “Th-That’s true, but...”

“What?”

Apparently what really had him concerned was his generalized control over plant life, as an agricultural researcher. Most activated skills worked off thought. If King of the Woods worked the same way, accidentally thinking “I hope these get big” or “I hope these bud quickly” around plants in an experiment could influence the results. His mere presence could actually affect the replicability of any project, throwing findings into doubt.

I admit, this *had* been a bit of a blind spot. I hadn’t thought about what a professional hindrance the skill might be.

“Hmm. It’d be an awesome skill as a farmer,” I remarked. “And even as a researcher... Well, using the skill, you can probably run experiments you never could have before, don’t you think?”

“I suppose...”

Apparently he’d gone in ready to accept the risk of not only physical death, but also potential career death. Even so, the reality was harsher than just imagining it.

“In that case, have you thought about changing fields?” Miyoshi

asked.

"Huh?"

I could practically see the question mark floating above his head.

"See, we're still trying to get the Ukemochi System off the ground. A few more people with *your* unique skill set could really help."

King of the Woods was a big deal on its own, but another important skill of Sayama's came from the Storage orb we'd given him.

"Ah, you brought that up a bit earlier, but what exactly *is* the 'Ukemochi System'?" he asked.

Miyoshi filled him in.

"And that system would really work?" he asked.

"You saw for yourself how those oranges respawned," she replied.

"Not just that. Dungeonizing terrestrial plants. You can do that?!"

"Er...probably? We've only tried it with wheat so far..."

"Incredible..."

Miyoshi gave a brief lecture on the finer points of dungeonizing that we'd recently discovered, as well as the remaining unknowns.

"Intriguing. I can see how King of the Woods could be useful in growing the plants to a certain stage for the process, but... Isn't that ability a little *too* unique to rely on? What if something happens to me? You'll need a sustainable method."

I supposed when Sayama got to a ripe old age, he could let some new challenger take the mantle, but— *No, never mind. That would just be murder.*

"Of course, it would raise some sustainability questions, but we'd probably only need it for the initial setup. After that, with enough know-how, we should be able to get more systems going without relying on special skills," Miyoshi responded.

Hold on. Another fearful thought struck my mind. If Sayama got *all* of the original King of the Woods's skills, did that mean...*he's impervious to any attack except from a challenger?!*

"But there's another problem," Sayama responded, still sounding glum. "It's an interesting project, but it doesn't seem like it would make for a long career."

"What?"

"You're setting up infinite crop-spawning systems, right? Once they're in place there's no replacement to do. You sell the units and installations once and it's done."

That was true. That was the one conversation I'd been hoping to avoid for right now. But since it'd been brought up, it seemed best to come up with at least a vague plan.

"Well, we could charge periodically, right?" I suggested. "Won't be much of a business if we don't."

"Nice!" Miyoshi responded. "A subscription service! That makes sense. After we sell the units, the buyers'll be using them for a looong time, right?"

With crop yields this consistent, paying a set cut of profits periodically for use of the system seemed reasonable. If we really wanted to, we could probably even find a way to just charge by hour of machine use without disincentivizing production.

"We've figured right now that the monthly wheat yield from one Ukemochi System would be about 2,628 metric tons. Wheat bushels go for(35) about five to six dollars in the Chicago area, to take an example. Let's say Ukemochi wheat goes on the higher end, since it might affect dungeon stats—six dollars at least. And say it's 110 yen to the dollar..." Miyoshi began vomiting out calculations. I didn't have the heart to tell her I didn't even know how many kilograms a bushel was. "One machine would yield about 63,755,280 yen per month! Even just one percent would be 637,000 yen."

With one hundred units to manage, we'd be raking in more than sixty million yen per month.

"If the system gets adopted more broadly, we could even have the FAO help pick up part of the tab. It'd probably make enough of a dent against world hunger to earn a part of their budget," she added. "Not a bad deal, right?" She turned to Sayama. "Plus, being out in society as a Storage user comes with hurdles. You'll want some cover, some safeguarding."

"H-Hurdles?"

"Suspicion of theft or smuggling, mostly. Plus lots of transport

requests, and a risk of kidnapping at the worst," she added. "At the very least the kidnappers wouldn't be very likely to *kill* you, however."

"Whaaat?!" Sayama let out a disgruntled shout.

"But! Signing on with the JDA to help with projects like this will at least be a lot safer than staying with NARO."

There were already rumors circulating about the JDA having gotten a copy of Storage. People would assume any conspicuous transport as part of dungeon projects had been performed by their Storage user, rather than Sayama as a private citizen.

Although...there would be rumors about who had used the orb. If JDA projects appearing to involve Storage picked up just after Sayama transferred, he'd naturally face scrutiny...especially if no other staff members' schedules or positions changed. In fact, the more I thought about it...

"Hold on, Miyoshi, wouldn't that be the easiest way for his cover to get blown?"

"Basically."

"S-Soooo?! Wait... Don't tell me..." Maybe it was *too* obvious?

"Are you saying it'd be *so* obvious it'd actually throw off suspicion?" I asked.

Eyebrow-raising transfer timing aside, Sayama was a former agricultural researcher, not exactly young, and not in the best of shape either. In other words, not the kind of person anyone would expect the JDA to entrust with a forty-billion-yen skill orb. In fact, the *more* you knew about the JDA and general government policy, the less likely you'd be to put him on your radar.

It might work. It might just work...or not. But it probably would take a while for people to catch on, if they ever did.

"I guess it is safer than just staying out in the private sector without JDA support. And people probably won't peg him as a user right away," I agreed. "Though it's still a bit risky." I smiled, but then remembered something important. "But there's already someone in the JSDF who knows."

A certain bespectacled ATLA employee was currently harassing a nearby Falcon Industries engineer.

"NDA," Miyoshi reminded me.

"That pertained to *D-Powers*," I reminded her back.

"Ah!"

That left Sayama on the hook. Maybe we could claim our *provision* of the skill orb was in the scope of the agreement, but Sayama's simply *having used it* was a more precarious topic. And if word got out that he had Storage, word would probably get out that one of us did too.

"This is a toughie..." I lamented.

"I'll say," Miyoshi concurred.

"Um..." Sayama, who had simply been listening, raised his hand to speak. "I actually really don't mind. You know, if I have to quit NARO, I figured I may as well risk going public with it, spin it into more career opportunities..."

"What?!" Miyoshi shouted. "Weren't you listening to what I just said?!" She lectured him on the dangers of going public with Storage-use again. He listened with a slight grimace. "So," she said when she was finished, "what's it going to be? Risk a life of persecution and pushy offers, or hole up safe and sound working for the JDA?"

He wasn't able to give us an answer at this time. That came later, after we'd returned to the surface and he'd learned the market value of the Storage orb.

February 19, 2019 (Tuesday)

Dungeon Management Section, JDA Headquarters, Ichigaya

It had been three weeks since advertising had started for the safe-area bidding process. The Dungeon Management Section would remain a flurry of activity until selection on the twenty-second. Its workers eyed Miharu Naruse hungrily, like birds of prey ready to swoop in and foist off work, as she cut through the tumult and made

a beeline for the section chief's booth.

She made it safely to the chief's office, quickly knocked, opened the door, and slipped inside.

"Phew."

"As you can see..." Saiga smiled without looking up, continuing to sign paperwork in front of him. "We're swamped. What are D-Powers up to now?"

"They departed the dungeon last night. Sayama achieved his goal thanks to their help and the JSDF's assistance. They wanted me to extend their thanks."

Saiga looked up, then leaned back in his chair.

"The way I see it, we should be thanking them." It wasn't like Saiga had asked the JSDF for help at their request. D-Powers and the JDA simply had a common goal. As for the results of that goal—

"I'll note we haven't heard of any disappearing crystals since the seventeenth," he continued. "Plus..." He searched around on his desk, picking up a certain report. "Word came through from MAFF, via the Dungeon Agency. Apparently the Sakuragawa mikan suddenly vanished overnight. Empty branches; no new growth."

Miharu breathed another sigh of relief.

"That's got the Dungeon Agency and MAFF both scratching their heads, of course, but all's well that ends well, etc."

Since neither the Dungeon Agency nor JDA had any authority over a phenomenon occurring outside of the dungeons, turning to D-Powers had thankfully proven the right choice.

"They paid quite a price for helping us though," Saiga added. Their use of hellhounds was now as good as public knowledge, and he strongly suspected Miyoshi had been forced to reveal a sensitive skill to at least one member of NARO and one member of the JSDF.

"They did have all parties sign an NDA," Miharu pointed out.

"Bah, what has an NDA ever been good for? If someone wants to talk, they'll talk."

Even if they didn't, one member merely knowing of the existence of certain skills could influence organizational decision-making, even if they never disclosed anything in detail. Once out, cats didn't go back into their bags.

Saiga sighed. The JDA's duties were supposed to include management of explorers and their skills. In a sense, protecting D-Powers from society—or protecting society from D-Powers. In this instance, they had failed. They might have made too big of a splash to contain the ripples.

We'll have to keep a closer eye on them than ever, he lamented internally.

"Ah, Miyoshi also said she had something she wanted to run by you," Miharu added.

"By me?"

Saiga braced himself. The look on Miharu's face told him she had just as bad a feeling as he did. She took a step forward and spoke in a hushed tone.

"She wants to know if you'd have any interest in hiring someone who happens to have a certain ill-skay that matches the orb we had in afekeeping-say."

"Wh-What?!"

Saiga leaned back again. With the deluge of work for safe-area development nearing its climax, the Dungeon Management Department director had *just* put all the work for selecting a candidate for that orb back on his plate, and he'd been racking his brain over it.

His eyes couldn't have been wider as Miharu explained the situation.

Epilogue

Terme di Caracalla, Rome, Italy

A certain building stood out against the wide and clear Roman skies—which were kept so by strict building codes. In the time of Mussolini, the building had served as the center for a reckless dream to conquer Africa, housing the Ministry for Italian Africa. Now the souls that bustled through its halls worked in service of an equally reckless but more humanitarian dream—the dream of conquering world hunger.

The headquarters of the FAO—the United Nations Food and Agricultural Organization—looked out over the baths built by the twenty-second Roman emperor, Carcalla.

The director general of the FAO's Agriculture and Consumer Protection (AG) Department, Ambrose Magus, had just received a most interesting report from his secretary, Marie Nakayama, via the WDA's Department of Food Administration.

"*The dungeon-grown wheat respawns?*" Ambrose asked.

A recent patent application which had been circulating the WDA Patent Office crossed his mind.

It had included a thesis titled *The Respawning of Intra-Dungeon Agricultural Crops and the Status Change of Outra-Dungeon Agricultural Crops*. But he hadn't expected actual confirmation so soon. This was going to make waves—big ones.

Ambrose stood up, walked over to the window, and looked out at the ruins below, staring as intently as if there were a Three Tenors concert being conducted on the street. He whirled around, shot his right fist into the air, and with all the bravado of a Pavarotti rendition of "Caruso," sang out, "Veni, Redemptor gentium!"

Marie jumped backward slightly.

Ambrose's namesake was St. Ambrose, who had lived in Milano in the fourth century. "Veni, Redemptor gentium," or "Come, Redeemer of nations," was the name of a hymn he had authored.

The report the Wiseman—as she was humorously known online—had produced was indeed nothing if not that, she supposed. It represented salvation of nations, deliverance for any impoverished nation-state containing a dungeon in its borders.

"*A-According to the report, just one of their farming units, encompassing less than one-tenth of an acre, would be enough to produce 31,536 metric tons of wheat per year,*" Marie explained.

"*Fantastic!*" Ambrose shouted, fist-pumping involuntarily.

Unlike her employer, Marie couldn't let herself be carried away by excitement just yet.

The FAO's mandate was "to improve levels of nutrition, agricultural productivity and sustainability, and the quality of life of rural people, and to ensure global food security." What would happen on each of those fronts with infinitely respawning dungeon agricultural systems?

If it were recognized as guaranteeing "gradual progress toward the right of access to adequate food for all people," it could lead to existing agricultural production being turned toward biofuels and the like, in keeping with the High Level Panel of Experts on Food Security and Nutrition of the Committee on World Food Security's 2013 recommendations.

But in that case, existing food distribution networks would crumble. Would there be enough left in the aftermath to help with what distribution needs remained?

Besides that, humanity didn't fully understand how dungeons worked. It seemed dangerous to fully rely on them, given that. This was on another level from convenient but ultimately inconsequential inventions like powder.

When most people turned a sink knob, or plugged a socket into the wall, they didn't know why water or electricity came out. But humans were there every day maintaining the systems that allowed those conveniences to work. Not so for dungeons, where no human consciousness lurked.

Not even the patent applicants fully understood the mechanics they'd tapped into. It was all primitive trial-and-error, without a complete picture of the forces involved.

Marie couldn't fully trust something she didn't truly understand—not enough to bet humanity's future on it, anyway. But she recognized the potential—and the urgency. Her concerns over dungeon-reliance and distribution networks were hypothetical. There were starving nations *now*, and she knew the latter would take precedence with Ambrose and others like him. He wasn't wrong to be hopeful.

"*Get me an appointment with Gilbert*[(36)]," he demanded. "*We'll need to talk right away. We've got to get this system adopted!*"

"*Wait, sir! Please! There are still too many unknowns. Costs, for example!*" The FAO didn't have the power to support adoption of the system on its own—it would take cooperation with partner organizations, and such coordination required hard details.

"*If it really* does *produce upward of thirty thousand tons off of a small tract of land...*" She quickly ran calculations. "*A ten-acre plot that would normally yield five hundred kilos would be worth the equivalent of 15,600 acres—over sixty square kilometers.*"

Even large American farms only averaged 440 acres. By the time you got up to four thousand acres (roughly sixteen square kilometers), you were in the category of rare agro-giants.

"*If patent holders are charging the same as it would take to set up a conventional farm of that size...*" she trailed off. She needn't have said more about the cost that would involve.

"*Hrrmm...*"

Looking at the outline of the system, he couldn't imagine it would incur that high a cost, but there *were* development fees. In addition, given the dungeon systems were designed to be used in perpetuity, the creators wouldn't be selling all that many units. Even if they weren't exactly one-offs, there had to be a way to make ends meet between development and sales, which might be baked into the price. Given that, Marie's worries might have been reasonable. Still...

"*Last year, hard wheat traded at around 210 dollars per ton,*" he

countered. "*Assuming the machines last ten years, over the course of their lives they'd generate 662,256,000 dollars. Even if it costs 25 million to set up, the dividends are far higher than your average ten percent investment return.*"

In addition, operations using the Ukemochi System wouldn't need seed, fertilizer, or major labor costs—just maintenance and salaries for a few explorers running the units in shifts. The profit margins wouldn't be comparable to any existing farms.

The prices of wheat might take a dive with widespread adoption of the system, but even with one hundred units, the increase in global wheat production would only be three million tons. Last year's global wheat production had exceeded 730 million tons. He didn't foresee prices falling significantly, given the relatively small jump in terms of global percentage.

There would be the cost of drying and processing wheat, but one facility could be built to handle harvests from multiple dungeon systems. The costs would be negligible.

"*We probably wouldn't even need to provide financial support, except as loans. Owners could pay us back from the earnings.*"

"*But even for the initial setup... Last year's IFAD grant amounts came to sixty-eight million dollars. If this new system cost as much as a conventional farm of the size we estimated, we couldn't even purchase three units,*" Marie pointed out. There had been past examples of loans approved for up to 1.1 billion, but that had been for twenty-eight different projects receiving forty million apiece—not just one. "*Even if you talk to Gilbert today, it will take time to clear the IFAD. Check the pulse at next month's meeting and then get approval from the board of directors meeting in April. Doesn't that seem safer?"* she asked.

Ambrose closed his eyes, crossed his arms, and nodded. Marie was right. Ordinarily that tack would feel fairly expedient. It was just that this time, nothing seemed expedient enough.

Major agricorps were going to move quickly. And if they couldn't block adoption of the system, they were going to do everything they could to spin the wheels of capitalism against it. The number of spots—regions, countries—where these systems would do the most

good were limited, and easily identifiable. In a war over limited resources, the winner was always either the party who moved first or the one who had more financial means.

Ambrose wanted the FAO spearheading the systems' adoption, no matter what. There was the option of using agricultural or development support systems, but—

"*Going outside the FAO and IDAF will be a gamble. The UNDP and WFP are going to be eager to slow the units' adoption,*" he said, referring to the United Nations Development Program and World Food Program, respectively.

All due to one particular scumbag, Ambrose thought to himself.

"*Why?*" Marie asked.

She'd been transferred to the FAO just recently. As far as she knew, the FAO held forums, gathered data, etc., while all agricultural support initiatives were run through the WFP, and development support through the UNDP.

"*Let's give them a good fight.*"

"*I thought they were partner organizations. Not rivals.*"

"*Oh, we're 'partners,' all right. On the surface.*"

Marie sighed. She decided to move on and deliver the second message she'd received.

"*On that note, Dr. Argyle of the WDA has also requested that management over the initial wheat plot in Yoyogi be transferred to the FAO.*"

Ambrose and Nathan were good friends. Given their geographical distance, they couldn't meet often, but their bond, borne of shared enthusiasm for their field, remained strong.

"*Nathan? So he's found a way to make it interesting.*"

"*He also wants us to bring the owners of Ukemochi System on board.*"

"*The owners? Why?*" Whatever the reason, Ambrose wasn't the kind of man to back down from a challenge. If he had to get involved at Yoyogi, he would.

Marie merely tilted her head to the side. Nathan's message didn't contain an answer to Ambrose's question.

"*Ah well...*" Ambrose mused. "*Yoyogi...*"

"*Now, you can't just go slipping away, sir,*" Marie reminded him.

"*Of course not. I have to get talks going with Gilbert, for one. Incidentally...*" He paused. "*What does 'Ukemochi' mean?*"

It seemed a fair question to pose to Marie, given her Japanese background.

"*It's the name of a Japanese god that distributes food,*" she responded, sparing him the gory details of Ukemochi's expanded lore.

"*I see. A fitting name indeed.*"

A striking one. And if the project was a success—

"*We might just make a real dent in world hunger—a big one.*"

The FAO emblem was prominently displayed on the office wall, emblazoned with its motto in thick letters within the edges of a globe, as if shouting.

"FIAT PANIS," it read.

"Let there be bread."

Yoyogi-Hachiman

It was late afternoon. The sky was cloudy. The living room was filled with pungent cigar smoke.

"Let some air out. You're going to stink up the place."

The door from another room swung open, and a red-haired, dark-eyed woman with a considerable figure strutted through: Isabella.

Waving the smoke away like so much nuisance with one hand, she glowered at the men reclining on the couch as if they were two-day-old trash bags. She made her way to the fridge, pulling out a bottle of water.

"And? How much longer do we have to stay cooped up in this place?" Ratel didn't even normally like cigars—the stench was distracting. But now he blew a thick puff pointedly in the direction of Isabella.

"How should I know?" she spat back. "Ugh, I'm so sick of this shitty country and its shitty winters."

The reason for their confinement lay in footage that had been

taken on the tenth floor of Yoyogi—footage which clearly showed Ratel and his cohort trying to lead a zombie horde up toward a group of strangers. Included in the footage were several relatively high-profile members of the French military, along with Ratel, who had a relatively high profile himself.

Ratel had seen the TV camera in the group they'd been leading the undead up to, but figured neither it nor its owner would make it out. He hadn't been counting, of course, on Mr. "Him that crieth in the wilderness."

"I should've killed the cameraman when I had a chance," Facile grumbled with exactly the same tone as someone saying they wished they'd bought eggs at the store.

"Drop it. Killing civilians would have just made things harder. You're here to make things easier for me, not get in my way." Taking a glass of water with her, Isabella exited the room.

"Getting caught on film, getting caught by that caped savior-complex freak... I'm slipping." Ratel smiled bitterly, and a sympathetic grin crossed Facile's lips.

They'd been lying low for the past month and still hadn't heard a peep from authorities. Maybe nothing was coming.

"Japan really is something," Ratel mused. "Conflict avoidance at all costs. Buncha cowards."

"So? We know where they're based. How about we...?" Facile ran his thumb across his throat, and turned it down at the end.

"Quit it. They might figure whatever happened in the dungeon was a big misunderstanding. Let's leave it there. I don't need to catch more crap from David. He's been acting strange recently."

"Then how about this?" Facile asked. "Ever heard the phrase 'not in our contract'? We're dealing with more than we signed on for. Let's bounce."

Ratel clicked his tongue, removed another cigarillo from the glass case in front of him, and lit it.

"Too bad. I kind of liked the guy. Parading as a religious figure while not giving two shits about religion is my style."

"And the pay isn't bad." Facile shrugged. "But how do you think he's going to react when he gets the full report from the tenth floor?

He's already been going on about getting 'closer to godhood' and all this insane stuff."

"'Closer to godhood'?" Ratel repeated. Was their employer *actually* crazy? "That's it," he concluded. "We're pulling out. Reason: employer violation of contract."

"Now you're talking," Facile replied. "But you'll excuse me if I don't want to leave until I've gotten a taste of that bitch." He gestured to the other room.

"Better lay off," Ratel cautioned.

"Why? You claiming her?"

Ratel leaned back.

"You've never heard her alias?"

"Enlighten me."

"*Nightmare* Isabella. She's chewed up more men than you can count. One night with her and you'll never know peace again. That's how the rumors go."

"Are you *trying* to get me excited?"

"I'm not gonna stop you. But it's your funeral."

Facile crossed his arms and furrowed his brow, staring up at the ceiling. After a moment, he shrugged.

"All right. She's not young enough to risk my life for a one-night stand anyway."

"Smart kid."

"So now what? Back to Libya? I've heard from our men there that Haftar is planning to invade Tripoli."(37)

The Libyan National Army? There were rumors that France was secretly backing them, but they had Chinese weapons provided by the UAE, Javelins originally purchased by France from America, and Russian MiGs and Sukhois in the air. The situation was getting hard to read.

"That doesn't sound too bad, but...I don't love the idea of fighting for that geriatric ego."

"He is over seventy, huh. Still stirring up trouble, though."

"Don't lump him in with grandpas with running habits. No, it's not just that. All the world's wars now—Libya, Iraq, Yemen, Syria,

Afghanistan—it's all Islam, Islam, more Islam." Ratel grimaced. "I miss the old days when we'd get called in to do some killing just because brother didn't want to fire on brother. Now there are all these religious extremists running around."

Maybe it was a result of religious fervor getting mixed into civil wars, or maybe it was all the developed nations using the turmoil as an excuse to come plunder the region's oil, but something had gone sour. And he had no interest in finding himself on the wrong end of a former ally's capricious whims.

"Kurdistan?" Facile suggested.

"With the YPG? A lost cause. Handler's going to withdraw his support, and as soon as he does, Turkey's going to war with Syria. The YPG would back the Syrian army in that case, and sell us out if it helped."

"You don't think America would continue back in the YPG even if they pull out troops? They don't want the area falling under Russian influence."

"You expect an American-backed YPG to fight off a Syrian army backed by Russia and Iran at the same time as it holds off Turkey? I tell you what, I know this is how we make our living, but I'm tired of getting bounced around other people's wars."

"Captain?"

For a small pocketful of gold, today's ally would be tomorrow's enemy. That was the way they had lived. It was strange for Ratel to be expressing such sentiments. Perhaps he himself realized it, because he broke into a small grin.

"Right, right," he mumbled.

"So where next, then? Don't tell me you're getting out of the business?"

"How about," Ratel replied, "the dungeons?"

Facile questioned his hearing for a moment.

"The what?"

"The dungeons."

"You thinking of becoming an explorer?"

"It doesn't sound bad, does it?"

The world of mercenaries was changing—had been for a long

while. It was a world of internet cowboys, blowhards without any real gumption or grit. With regional conflicts growing more complex compared to in the twentieth century, many in the merc field had already switched to dungeons over the last three years.

Facile thought back to that completely ordinary-looking civilian who had managed to dodge his knife. His movements had been untrained, but he'd still dodged the strike as if it were child's play.

"Thinking about it, if dungeons give you abilities like that, they might be worth trying after all," he responded.

"That's the spirit. We've still got a score to settle with Mr. Savior Complex too."

"You still sore about that?" Facile asked.

"Of course. Unfinished business. Plus, look at what came in the other day through the botnet."

Ratel looked around, then put his finger up to his lips, pointing to the nearby door with his thumb. Someone might be listening. Facile cautiously looked over his shoulder, and nodded. Ratel then took a smartphone out of his pocket, handing the device to Facile.

"What is this?" He took a look at it and gulped. "Captain, this is..."

"What do you think?"

"This is dangerous even for us."

"I'm having some people investigate the client. But the money's out of this world."

"As long as they don't stiff us." About half of all jobs in their industry that weren't charged up front ultimately went unpaid—most of them due to fighting for a client who was on the losing side. "Plus," Facile added, "the area they want us to go to is a JDA prohibited entry zone."

"And who's enforcing it?" Ratel countered. It wasn't like the JDA had armed security in the dungeon. "Prohibited" just meant you were taking your life into your own hands. Limits were only meaningful to those who limited themselves.

"Weapons?" Facile asked.

"We have what David got us through the official channels. Though I'd like a TAC-50 for if I run into Mr. Savior again." Something told Ratel that against a target like that, 7.62-millimeter

rounds might not do the trick.

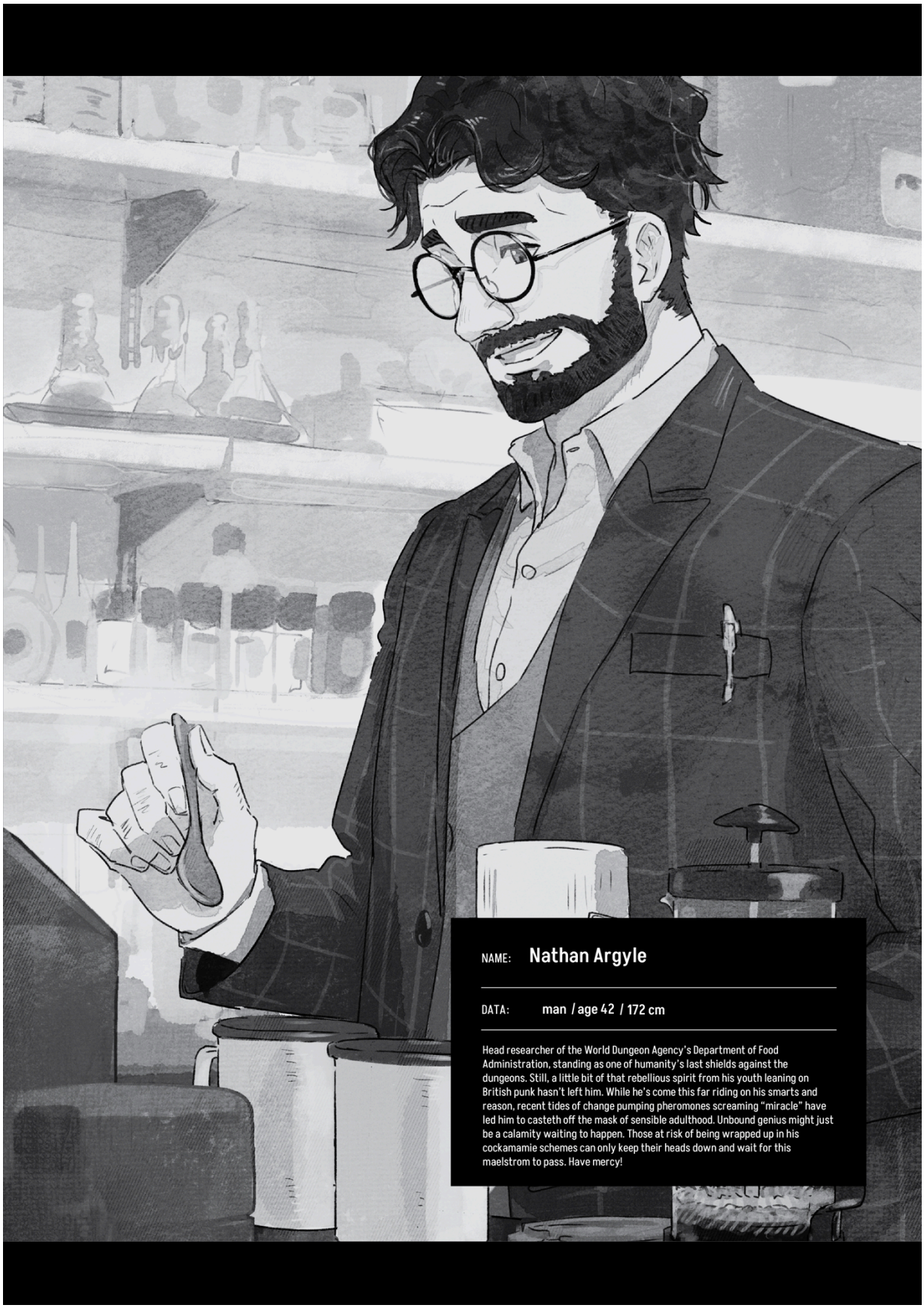
"We could do it through the Syrian channel, but getting things out will be tough," Facile responded.

Plus, long-range rifles would stand out too much in a dungeon. They were ammo-inefficient, heavy, and had relatively few uses. In almost every circumstance, you'd be better off with a porter-mounted turret firing the same caliber.

"I'm just saying, if it's possible. Our bigger concern is..."

"This?" Facile pointed to a list on the screen. There were several items the team would need to procure on their own for the job.

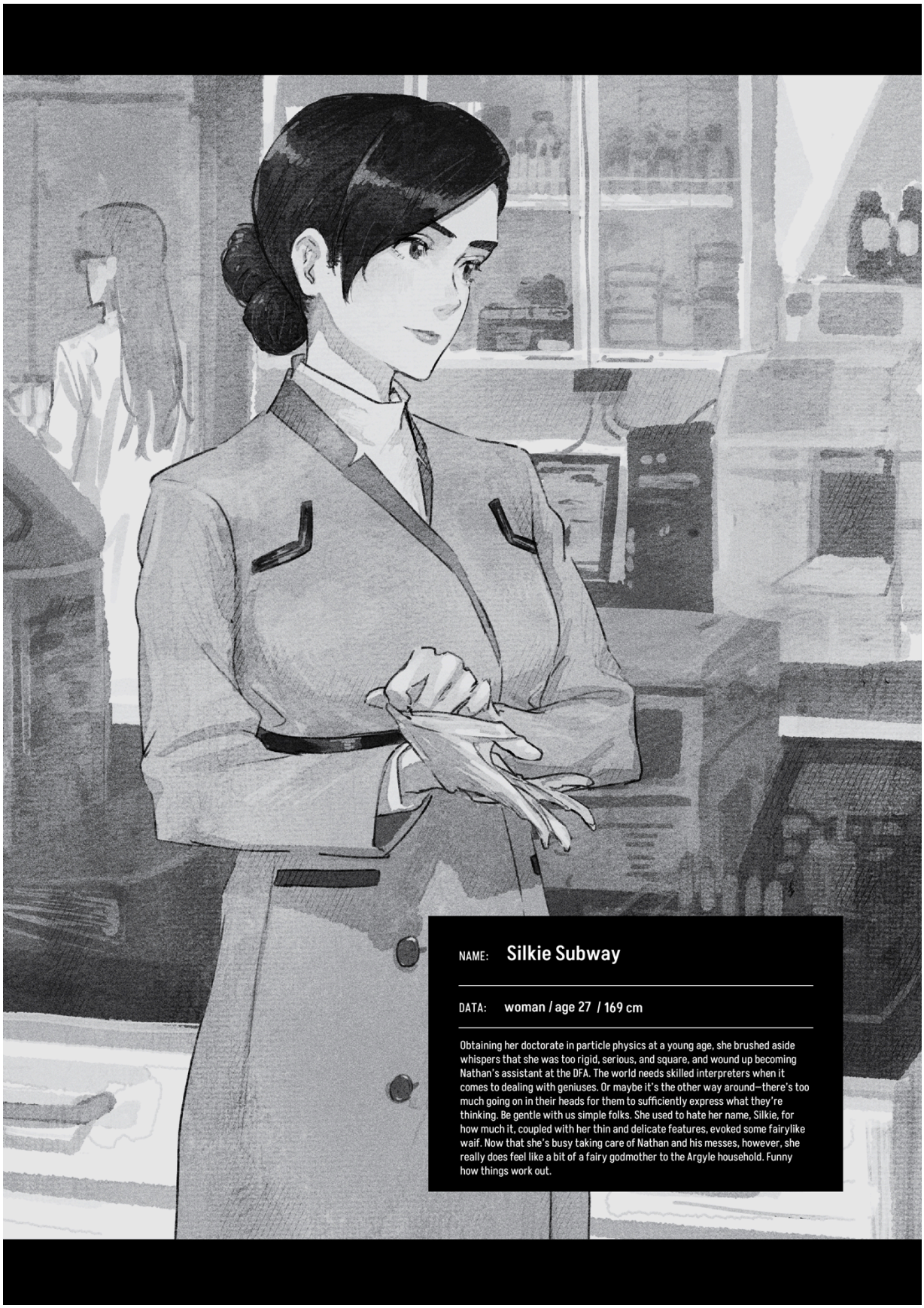
In the middle of the list was one word: "Mining."



NAME: **Nathan Argyle**

DATA: **man / age 42 / 172 cm**

Head researcher of the World Dungeon Agency's Department of Food Administration, standing as one of humanity's last shields against the dungeons. Still, a little bit of that rebellious spirit from his youth leaning on British punk hasn't left him. While he's come this far riding on his smarts and reason, recent tides of change pumping pheromones screaming "miracle" have led him to casteth off the mask of sensible adulthood. Unbound genius might just be a calamity waiting to happen. Those at risk of being wrapped up in his cockamamie schemes can only keep their heads down and wait for this maelstrom to pass. Have mercy!



NAME: **Silkie Subway**

DATA: **woman / age 27 / 169 cm**

Obtaining her doctorate in particle physics at a young age, she brushed aside whispers that she was too rigid, serious, and square, and wound up becoming Nathan's assistant at the DFA. The world needs skilled interpreters when it comes to dealing with geniuses. Or maybe it's the other way around—there's too much going on in their heads for them to sufficiently express what they're thinking. Be gentle with us simple folks. She used to hate her name, Silkie, for how much it, coupled with her thin and delicate features, evoked some fairylike waif. Now that she's busy taking care of Nathan and his messes, however, she really does feel like a bit of a fairy godmother to the Argyle household. Funny how things work out.

Annotations

1. *BPTD*: Breezy Point Tip Dungeon. A dungeon in the borough of Queens on Long Island. Controlled by New York City, it offers one of the preeminent examples of successful dungeon monetization.
2. *Sasha*: Russian names come paired with a number of standard nicknames, such that when reading Russian literature, you could be forgiven for thinking the number of characters in a scene has doubled. "Who are all these people?!" E.g., (full name followed by nickname): Alexander: Sasha; Valery: Lerochka; Sergei: Seryozha; Dorofey: Doronya; Leonid: Lyonya
3. *Mitrokhin incident*: An incident involving a former KGB agent turning over scores of sensitive documents to the UK in 1991 in exchange for arranging his defection.
4. *Kefir*: I'd thought this was just a fermented lactic drink à la Calpis in Japan, but it turns out it's achieved by adding kefir grains, then fermenting. Thinking about the name, that makes sense.
5. *Sbiten*: A spiced, hot beverage made with honey, water, and jam. Sometimes also contains fruit juice or red wine.
6. *The Brothers Karamazov*: A novel by Dostoyevsky in which Dmitrij, the older and more emotional of the titular brothers, goes by the nickname Mitya. Sentenced to twenty-one years of hard labor in Siberia as a result of false charges.
7. *Molson*: Molson Canadian. Originally a Canadian working-class lager beer, by the time of this story (early 2019), Molson Brewing had merged with American beer maker Coors, then further swallowed up Miller to become the United States' largest brewing company. A Japanese branch—Molson Coors Japan—maintained a market niche for a while, but shuttered in 2020, leading to the discontinuation of Zima and Blue Moon in Japan.

Likely another casualty of COVID.

8. *On first review*: The ’99 Cariad received ninety-one points from influential wine critic Robert Parker when reviewed upon release. It received ninety-four when reviewed again in 2011.
9. *Operation Tomodachi*: The name of a US military support and reconstruction operation following the 2011 Tohoku earthquake and tsunami, taken from the Japanese word for “friend.”
10. *Restaurant with its name taken straight from a certain children’s TV show*: Cribbing its name wholesale from a long-running Japanese equivalent to *Sesame Street*, this restaurant really exists. Despite its namesake, it adorns its logo and plates with a certain famous cartoon mouse. A copyright disaster waiting to happen indeed! Nevertheless, this is a work of fiction.
11. *Overstimulating*: Apparently renovated in July 2019 to feature decor more focused on comfort than getting down, so anyone making their *D-Genesis* IRL location food tour may be a bit disappointed at how tame it’s become. Nevertheless, apparently lunch and dinner services are included with the room fee on weekdays. Modern love hotels—paragons of consumer advocacy!
12. *What he told us*: The volume 7 side story includes a scene where Miyoshi and Yoshimura discover the side effect of eating the dungeon-grown wheat. Since I didn’t want to confuse anyone who had only read the main volumes, I added this explanation here. I’m sorry! Please pretend the side story doesn’t contain the scene in question. (*Bow.*) If it’s ever reprinted, I promise to take that scene out!
13. *“Bio City”*: A Daijiro Morohoshi short manga which won him the coveted Tezuka Award. Many anecdotes swirl around it, such as it being suspected of plagiarism due to its extreme high quality as the work of a (at the time) new author. In it, an infection from space causes living creatures to get jumbled up together with machines they touch—including being mentally jumbled up with anyone else who has touched the same device. Poor Hiroaki, the protagonist, never gets to see the spaceship his father, an aerospace worker, has invited him to come see...

14. *"Rare geniuses and the foolish"*: Simply one fictional food scientist's beliefs. Theoretical mathematicians, don't be mad!
15. *Don Quixote*: The famous seventeenth-century comedy that regales the reader with the exploits of one Alonso Quijano, who drowns himself in so many stories of chivalry that he goes mad and adopts the knightly persona of Don Quixote, adventuring across the Spanish countryside. In chapter 64 of the second volume, Samson Carrasco, a friend and neighbor from his village, challenges Quixote to a duel under the guise of the Knight of the White Moon. If Quixote loses, he must return to the village and live peacefully for a year. Carrasco emerges the victor. All involved expect this loss and subsequent downtime will cure Quixote of his madness, but in the following chapter, another character, Antonio, expresses his regret and proposes the same theory as Nathan. Don Quixote's first volume was an explosive hit, but author Miguel de Cervantes had sold the manuscript rights and remained in relative poverty. Undeterred, he penned the second volume ten years later, after which he shuffled off this mortal coil. Incidentally, differences in the Gregorian and Julian calendars led to a long-standing misconception that he and Shakespeare died the same day.
16. *Nat Geo*: *National Geographic* magazine. In Japan, it's usually shortened to "Natio (Nasho) Geo," but in its native land it takes on a different abbreviation. The news that it was laying off all its staff writers and switching away from the newsstand model in June 2023 might have fit with the trends of the times, but still came as a shock.
17. *Screaming Eagle*: A storied wine produced in upper Napa Valley in California. It produces very little per year (about five to seven thousand bottles), resulting in bottles being very hard to obtain. Both its inaugural vintage in 1992 and its 1997 vintage received 100 Parker points.
18. *DRC*: Domaine de la Romanée-Conti, one of the world's most preeminent wine domaines. That said, it produces around 450 cases per year of its Romanée-Conti label (about six thousand bottles, though there are leaner years), and 250 cases of its

Montrachet. Though most wines produced at under five hundred cases won't just show up in your average shops, with enough money to throw around, they're not unobtainable. Incidentally, the Domaine Leflaive Montrachet produces only twenty-five annual cases—one tenth of DRC's. And only half of those hit the market. Which tastes better? Well, that's a matter of preference. At least it's easy to say which is more scarce (though the number of fields each domaine owns plays most of the role in that).

19. *About six hundred bottles*: 683 bottles of the exceptional Leflaive Montrachet 2016 vintage went on sale in 2019. Leflaive itself contributed enough grapes for 57 bottles, DRC the most at 280, and Comtes Lafon in second with 139. Bottles sold straight from the vendor for 5,550 euros apiece, and even then, they weren't sold via avenues accessible to most buyers. Including this author (sob).
20. *"Co-Op Goes to the Moon"*: A short work by provocateur and science-fiction writer Yasutaka Tsutsui about a bunch of moneyed agricultural townies who hitch an off-planet tour out of a mix of curiosity and vanity, horrifying other guests. Kind of cruel, kind of hilarious depending on how you read it.
21. *Peconic Bay*: A bay off the coast of Long Island.
22. *Even larger halibut*: The largest species of flatfish, commonly referred to as halibut, typically live in cold waters. Though technically they're variants of flounders too. For whatever reason, "halibut" tends to be more commonly used for cuisine. The "flukes" referenced in this story are also called "summer flounders." It's a world full of flatfish out there.
23. *"Toby or not Toby."*: Who was it who first made this lure-based Shakespeare pun? An ABU Garcia executive? Whatever the case, it's also referenced in Takeshi Kaiko's fiction.
24. *IAAF*: The International Association of Athletics Federations (at the time). Recently changed its name to "World Athletics."
25. *"Is that fast?"*: The real-world record, set by Usain Bolt, is 9.58 seconds. So yeah, it's fast.
26. *Dr. Weyand*: Dr. Peter Weyand, director of Southern Methodist

University (SMU)'s Locomotor Performance Laboratory, and a leading expert in human mechanical performance.

27. *SUB2*: The Sub-2-Hour marathon project. A coordinated effort based in England to see the world marathon record brought down to under two hours. Dr. Weyand is also involved. Site: https://www.sub2hrs.com/
28. *Hoichi the Earless*: A blind minstrel tricked by spirits into performing in a graveyard each night, from a classic Japanese tale. A priest agrees to paint a heart sutra across his body to render him invisible to the spirit, but forgets to write the sutra over his ears. When a spirit arrives that night to take Hoichi back to the graveyard, he can see only the minstrel's ears, and tears them off to prove to the others that he was unable to find the rest of Hoichi. Hoichi is nevertheless freed from the spirits' grasp and is able to continue his work as a minstrel. The heel anecdote is, needless to say, Achilles. The leaf refers to Siegfried of Norse mythology.
29. *EB-1EA green card*: An EB-1EA category green card is granted to American visa applicants demonstrating "Extraordinary Ability" (the "EA" portion). Reserved for Nobel Prize winners, world-record athletes, and the like. Ostensibly "Employment-Based" ("EB"), the category doesn't actually require official employment arrangements at all. Individuals can apply, with turnaround times as fast as half a month. Incredible.
30. *Fruit-topped American cake*: The "ambrosia cake" is one such regional dessert genre.
31. *Great Oxidation Event*: An environmental sea change in Earth's ancient history in which oxygen started to accumulate on Earth's surface, leading to the oxidation of Earth's atmosphere and seas and the emergence of eukaryotic cells. The emergence of a great number of aerobic organisms, capable of utilizing hitherto toxic oxygen, led to a substantial increase in the efficiency of cellular respiration, increasing both the size and diversity of Earth's life-forms. The exact period of this event is unknown, but cyanobacteria, a linchpin catalyst in the development of oxygen-producing photosynthesis, are thought to have emerged

about three billion years ago.

32. *Jingming*: "Seimei" in Japanese. An acupressure point just next to the corners of the eyes, by the bridge of the nose; pressure applied there is said to improve vision health.
33. *"Most famous New York chocolatiers' chocolates can be purchased in Japan too."*: As of the in-story perspective of February 2019.
34. *TPP*: Trans-Pacific Partnership Agreement—formally the TPP12 prior to America's withdrawal, the CPTPP or TPP11 following it, but still easier to abbreviate simply as "TPP." Its contents remain largely unchanged. Japan and America ratified the US-Japan Trade Agreement in September 2019, outlining customs taxes broadly in keeping with the TPP. The decision to abolish citrus customs taxes occurred at the same time.
35. *Wheat bushels go for*: All based on values for one month's worth of wheat harvests as of February 2019. May differ greatly from current prices, so don't go running off to market using this book as a guide. The value of the yen has gone down; the value of wheat has gone up. Incidentally, originally bushels—a unit of volume measurement consisting of cylindrical bundles of grain stalks—varied by country, with differences between the imperial and US Customary system. The standard "bushel" volume units used now come out to about 27.2 kilograms of wheat—though only 25.4 kilograms of corn, owing to its large kernels creating more space between stalks.
36. *Gilbert*: Gilbert Houngbo, President of the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD). While he is real, this is a work of fiction.
37. *Haftar is planning to invade Tripoli*: Khalifa Haftar, the commander of the Libyan National Army, was a former Libyan military officer under Gaddafi. The conversation in question concerns the Second Libyan Civil War. He advanced on Tripoli on April 4, 2019.

Afterword

It is I, Kono, once again. I'm writing to you while melting at the height of summer, suffering day after day of heat. (Don't go telling me about how cool it is by the time you're reading this!)

Ah, summer! When you can sidle up to the bar, act all cool and confident, and order a gin rickey—hold the gin. How have you spent this fine season?

Spring was difficult—I'd planned on being able to bring you this volume by summer, but life finds a way of derailing the best-laid plans. I'm sorry for its late arrival.

Next time! For sure!

Even as the writer, I hadn't really thought about the hurdle having a skill orb could pose as a researcher. But you definitely couldn't produce replicable experiments if they depended on your superhuman abilities. Claims of falsified results would come in left, right, and center. Writing down your own name as a piece of experimental equipment in the report would get you laughed out of the field.

I'm so sorry, Sayama. It's my fault. I'll have something good happen to you next time, I promise.

This volume was based heavily on James Frazer's *The Golden Bough* mythography, and the stories of the Cult of Diana and rex Nemorensis within it. The quote at the beginning of this book is originally just "They lure"—no parenthetical—but it doesn't work well without context! Don't @ me for being inaccurate!

Time flies like an arrow. The grains of sand slip away. Before I've had time to say "tempus fugit," the initial setting of *D-Genesis*—2018—is already ancient history. Yet here we are at the end of volume 8, all thanks to you. I hope to see you again next volume.

KONO Tsuranori
Autumn 2023

NEXT VOLUME



Miyoooshi! The only thing that came true from our preview last time was the King of the Woods...



Well, we can't have a preview page that just says "Content TBD." It'd be one sentence long! We're doing everyone a favor.



Nicely covered... Anyway, we kind of went overboard with our response to the King of the Woods, huh? Think we let the cat out of the bag?



It does seem like someone might be closing in on our secrets any day now.



I'm worried about those mercenaries, for one.



Ah, right! Seems like we might be about to learn more of David's true nature and goals!



Finally...?



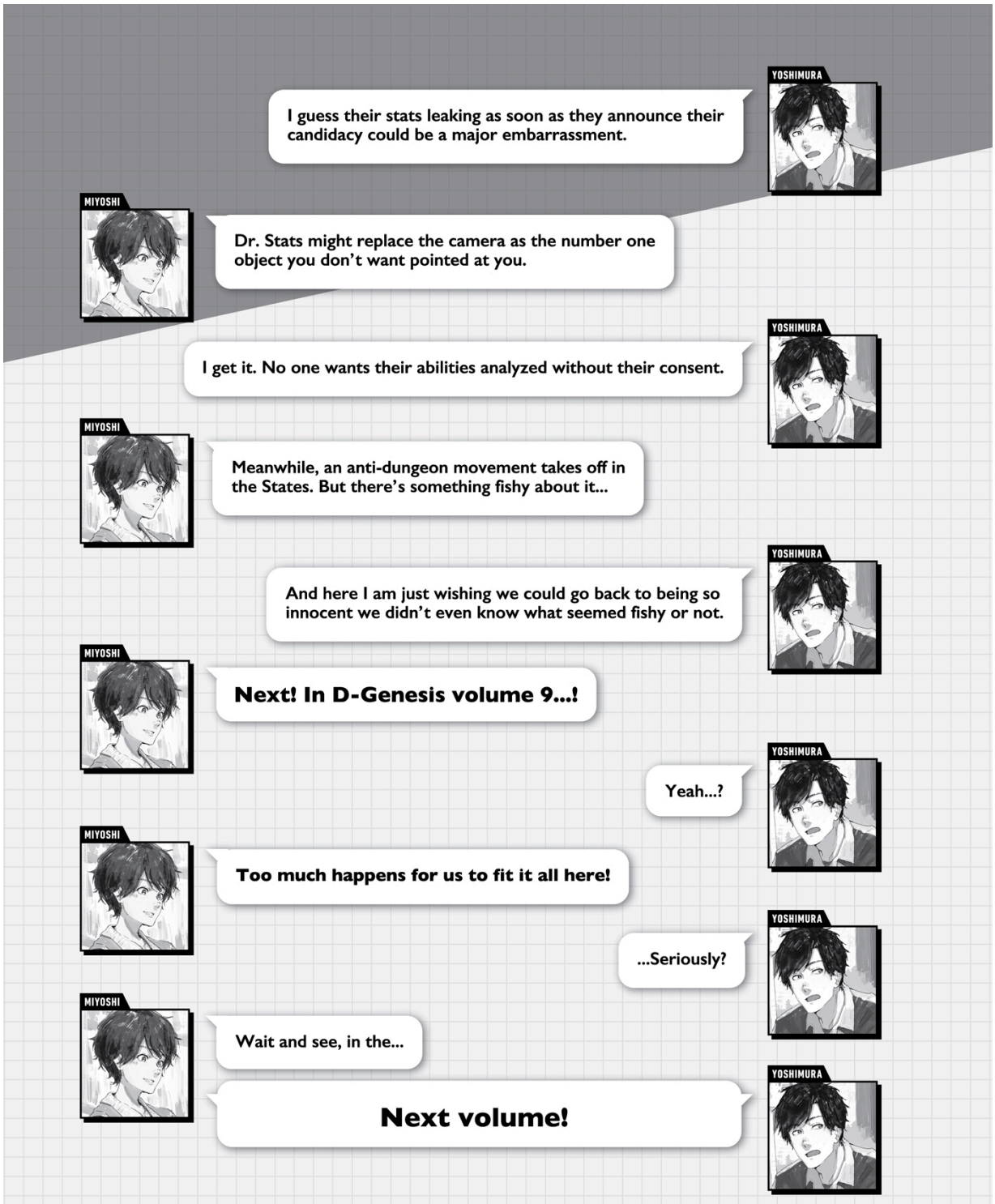
Oh, shut it!



So what, is that going to be the focus of the next volume?



More like more repercussions from this volume. Dungeon developments are really getting out of hand. Plus, with the advent of Dr. Stats comes "I measured so-and-so and you'll never believe the results!" YouTube trends! Politicians are in an uproar!



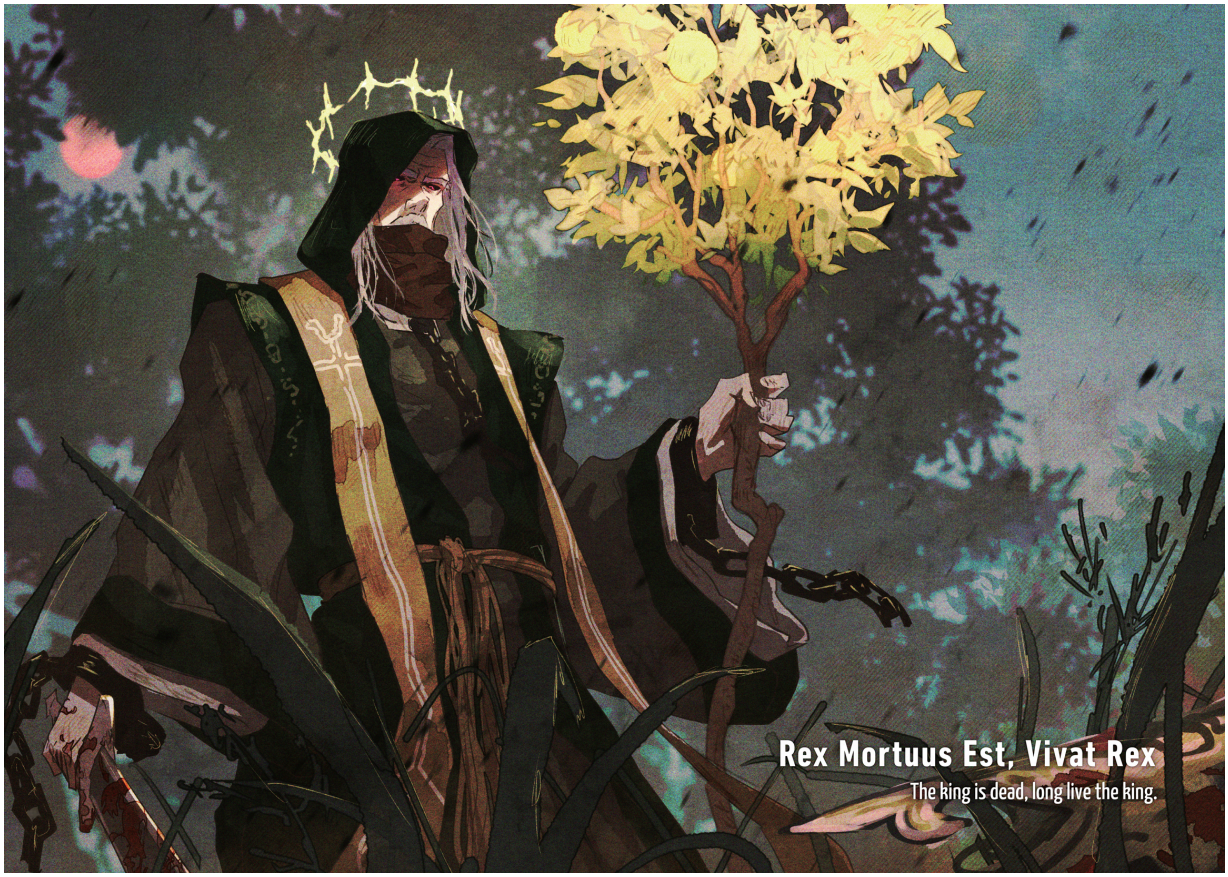
D-Genesis Volume 9

TO BE CONTINUED...


GENESIS


“Gentlemen! May our wishes and means be in sync,
such that all our desires come true!”




Rex Mortuus Est, Vivat Rex
The king is dead, long live the king.

Translator's Notes

Ian here, the translator of volume 8! With so much fruit, so many government organization names, and so few new terms to coin this volume, there isn't quite as much to talk about!

However, there are a lot of Japanese legends. First, there's the Ukemochi System. Ukemochi, a goddess of food security, is documented in the Japanese *Kojiki*, an early chronicle of folklore and myths from 712 AD. From this volume come the bulk of what are held to be the more or less "canonical" (commonly recognized) gods of Shinto—Japanese regional religion and mythology.

According to one legend, whose "gruesome details" Ambrose's assistant at the World Food Organization chooses to spare him, Ukemochi provides sustenance for a banished Susanoo by producing foodstuffs from her rectum, nose, and mouth. After her death, various crops grew from different parts of her deceased body, including wheat from her...nether realm.

Later, the descriptions of Izanagi and the Hags of Yomi are entirely an addition to the English version, as Japanese readers could be assumed to have at least minimal knowledge of the myth behind the three weaponized peaches. Don't go confusing this with Momotaro!

There is precious little written on Okamujimi, the peach-deity appointed to divinity by Izanagi. It is both a god and a representation of the fruit, collectively given a status of divinity. Okamujimi's Japanese Wikipedia page (at the time of this writing) humorously(?) notes that it is both "a god and a peach." 'Nuff said!

Finally, the restaurant Sayama mentions with questionable copyright liability in Okitsu is real. A suspiciously familiar cartoon mouse adorns its logo while its name is a lift of the back half of *Hirake! Ponkikki*, a long-running educational children's television show with costumed monster characters in the vein of *Sesame*

Street. Don’t tell Disney or Fuji TV.

DGENESIS

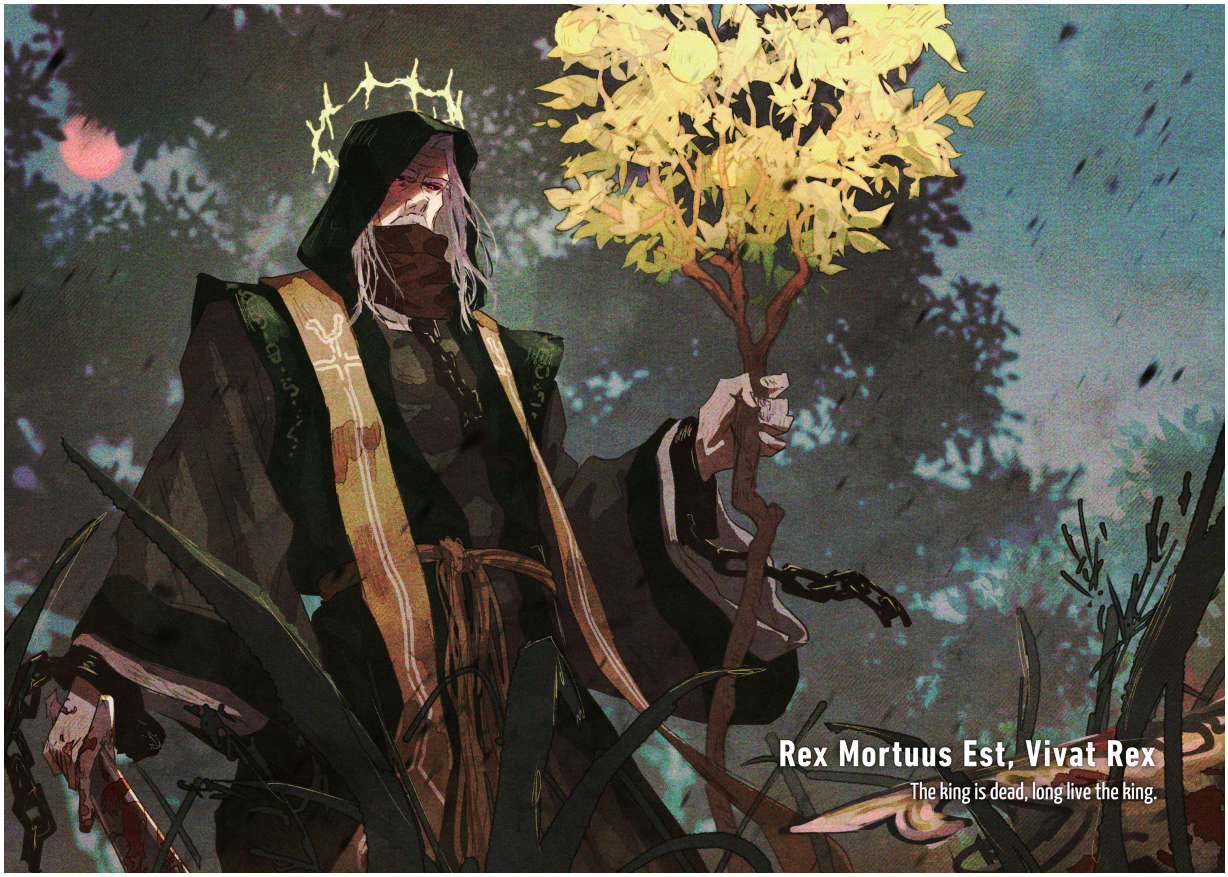
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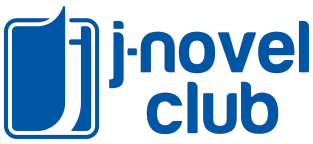
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“Gentlemen! May our wishes and means be in sync,
such that all our desires come true!”




Rex Mortuus Est, Vivat Rex
The king is dead, long live the king.



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by KONO Tsuranori
Illustrations by ttl

Translated by Ian Sacks Edited by Jonathan Engel

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D GENESIS DUNGEON GA DEKITE 3 NEN Vol.8
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