DGENESIS

WRITTEN BY
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Three Years after the Dungeons Appeared



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Experience is the best of schoolmasters;

only the school-fees are heavy.

——— *Thomas Carlyle*

Prologue

The Ring, Nevada, United States

The Hanford Site—America's most contaminated location. More than two hundred thousand liters of radioactive waste lay buried under its soil. The risk of leaks continued unabated.

The Handler administration had made it a goal to greatly reduce the cost of its cleanup—down from hundreds of billions to just forty—though privately no one believed such an objective was feasible.

"*Keep 'er coming! Keeeeep 'er coming! Stop!*"

The man driving the truck hit the brakes as instructed. A second man climbed up, grunting slightly, and sat himself in the passenger's seat. He turned to the driver, concern palpable.

"*Is this really...okay? I know it's a dungeon, but...*"

"*Orders are orders. We don't ask. We execute.*" The driver pushed the button to open the truck's tailgate.

"*But still...*" the man in the passenger seat replied.

The contents tumbling from the truck bed looked from the outside like any ordinary oil drums. What no outside observer would have guessed was their contents: a total of a thousand kilograms of radioactive Hanford Site waste.

"*The Hanford waste treatment plant won't even have its furnace running for another few years. Can't do GeoMelt yet.*"

He was referring to a process in which radioactive water and mud were mixed with glass components and vitrified—transformed into glass—inside containers. After thirty years of cold storage, the chunks of glass could be safely buried. There had long been plans to use vitrification for Hanford Site cleanup, but they had repeatedly wound up adorning annual to-do lists produced by the Office of Environmental Management in the US Department of Energy—going

nowhere.

"*Specialist Fennel,*" the driver said, addressing his passenger.

"*Sir.*"

"*That's enough.*" The man in the driver's seat then dumped the contents of the loader.

At first, teams had apparently experimented with dropping in a single dry cask filled with waste then measuring the air dose rate, checking for radiation. After dropping the first cask, the reading had shot up—then, after a moment, disappeared. Several repetitions had yielded the same results. Something was eating through the outer cask, then disposing of the material inside.

Those findings had led to their current operation.

The cans slid off the loader, rolling some 150 meters down a track to a cave-like opening.

Fennel listened to the sounds of their tumbling growing softer, biting his lip in apprehension. He almost felt as if they were being watched—as if *something* down there was looking upward, acutely aware of humanity's trespasses.

New York, United States

The door opened to a room so choked with cigarette smoke it resembled the murky trenches of the ocean floor. The man sauntered forward like an angler fish toward the dark, in search of its next meal. His vision grew more accustomed to the surroundings with each creak of the floorboards, until at last—like a fisherman who had set eyes on some prized target—he spotted his quarry. He reeled himself over to the bar counter.

"Kai, is it? I've been looking for you. You know it isn't a good look for famous environmentalists to be surrounded by so much smoke."

Kai, the man seated at the bar, looked up. The man who had just sat down next to him gave off a powerful odor of Savile Row cologne. He was a slender figure adorned with gaudy cufflinks, and he looked altogether out of place in this establishment.

The man made a peace sign with his right hand, clad in a peccary glove, nodding to the bartender to bring two more drinks.

"Another round, same as him," he said with a nod. He took out a clip of bills, the obverse of which bore the portrait of the sixteenth United States president, and set it on the counter.

"I don't know what country you're a prince of," Kai responded, eyeing the man—who refused to take off his sunglasses in spite of the dimly lit bar—warily. Whoever he was, Kai was surprised he'd deigned to climb down from whatever ivy-bedecked tower he'd been in just to come here. "But you seem lost; you'd better run along home."

It had been a long time since Kai had called himself an "environmentalist." He wasn't sure how this man had heard of him, but to be honest, some part of his curiosity had been piqued—though that kind of curiosity, he tried to remind himself, had been known to kill cats. A conflicted smile crossed his face; he was at least mildly amused at being treated like some kind of celebrity.

The man sitting next to him seemed to have mistaken his expression for one of warmth, and offered a smile of his own in return. The man's thin beard and mustache almost appeared pasted on. They curled upward as his lips did.

"Don't be so hasty," said the man cloyingly. He picked up one of the new drinks which had been delivered, and clinked it down in front of Kai.

Kai raised an eyebrow but took the glass, downing it in one gulp to let the man know he didn't intend to stay long. He set the drink back noisily on the counter. "Thanks for the booze. But I'm gone."

The man with the thin facial hair turned up one more finger toward the bartender—indicating one more round—without bothering to remove his gaze from Kai.

"I was hoping I could ask a *small* favor."

"Hope somewhere else," Kai responded.

Nevertheless, the man took a small, folded piece of paper and slid it across the counter to Kai.

Kai unfolded the paper, his eyes immediately widening. He felt as though all the booze were hitting him at once, but that wasn't the

reason for his surprise. The paper was a check, from an account at one of America's largest financial institutions, to the tune of three million dollars. Kai instinctively checked the signature line: "Alan Smithee."

Oh come on, Kai thought to himself. He half hoped this was every bit the scam it looked like—then it would be easy enough to bow out of whatever conversation lay ahead. If it were real, it meant he was dealing with someone who could manage to open an account at one of America's largest banks with an obvious pseudonym. Whatever followed, it wasn't going to be good.

"Who are you?" Kai asked with some hesitation.

"Think of me as"—the man paused theatrically—"a supporter of your work." He pointed to the check in Kai's hands, then opened his palm as if to imply that nothing more need be said.

Kai felt drawn to the check in front of his eyes by an almost magical, magnetic power. He found it hard to avert his gaze. However, one last trace of resistance remained.

"If this is real," he answered, "it's going to leave a paper trail."

The man grinned.

"I didn't know giving contributions to promising environmentalists was a crime I needed to be wary of."

"If you could find me here," Kai replied, "then you know a little bit about me."

Years ago, an organization Kai had belonged to had been labeled an ecoterrorist group by the FBI. That much was public knowledge. There was no way the man didn't know.

"Do you...have any connections to them *now*?" the man asked after a silence.

"No," Kai answered. The organization had disbanded ten years ago.

"Then we're good."

The man's flat answer caused Kai to lower his guard, and he sighed. At this point, why fight it? As he tapped his cheek, he posed another question to the mysterious stranger, who seemed strangely half interested, half uninterested in concealing his identity.

"All right. So, what do you want me to do?"

Public awareness campaigns and generalized opposition movements were a thing of the past. Modern environmentalist movements were fractured—it was a more fraught realm now. Some were content simply to spread messages like "Be kind to Mother Earth," but others openly advocated human culling. Maybe killing a dozen or a hundred wouldn't make any impact, but reducing the population by a few hundred thousand would help turn back the tide of environmental destruction. In truth, the only reason those more radical plans hadn't been tried was a lack of sponsorship.

If that were what this man was looking for, though, Kai had every intention of bowing out. He wasn't willing to abet genocide, even for three million US dollars.

"I just want you to add another target—another type of item, if you will—to the list of things you've always opposed."

Kai's last period of activism involved attacks on labs researching genetic plant modifications and selective crop breeding. Ultimately things had been carried too far, leading to his group getting labeled as ecoterrorists.

"Target?"

"You're against genetically modified foods, right?"

"I was."

"Why?"

"Because..." Kai's real reason was that, at the time, environmentalist campaigning had proven personally profitable. But he couldn't admit that. "Because...it's not natural."

"Aaah. Riiight. And now there are even more unnatural forces threatening a stranglehold on the Earth."

As unnatural as your whole shtick? Kai thought to himself. Still, as if to chase that very thought away and so he could finish hearing the man out, he brought his drink glass to his lips and took another swig.

He set the glass back down and sighed.

"Don't be obtuse. What is it?"

The bearded man grimaced, apparently finding Kai's demand slightly rude.

"Dungeons," he responded.

"Dungeons?" Kai asked.

Those weren't man-made. They had nothing to do with genetic modification. They'd appeared on their own. You could even interpret them as some sort of bountiful natural provision if you were feeling generous.

"Aren't those the very definition of, you know, 'natural'?"

Up until now, his efforts had focused on turning the "unnatural" label against foods and processes involving human intervention —"playing God." That was how he'd defined "natural" up to now. So how did dungeons, which were basically untouched by human hands, fit into that framework?

"I don't need you to rally against dungeons in general—just dungeon-grown foods. Work up a little furor against those, and as far as I'm concerned, we're square."

Kai blinked. Dungeon-grown foods? This wasn't soybean or corn GMOs. The very concept was foreign to him and, he guessed, to most of the public as well. How was he supposed to drum up opposition to something most people had never even heard of?

"What kinds of food are we talking?"

"So I have your interest?" The man lifted his sunglasses and took a peak at Kai's face.

Kai couldn't see past the dark lenses, but he had the distinct impression he was being sized up by some serpentine predator.

"I-I mean...an anti-dungeon movement? Now?" Dungeons had permeated every aspect of life in the past three years. Many products produced from loot brought back by explorers were now held to be near essentials. While the dungeons themselves posed risks to explorers, their existence otherwise had only proven beneficial to the world. It almost sounded like trying to start a movement against the Amazon River or the continent of Africa just because dangerous animals lived there—that was how far removed the dungeons' dangers felt from the ordinary citizen. "People are going to think we're crazy."

The bearded man shot him an amused look.

"People have *always* thought that."

Kai wanted to argue, but was taken aback by the other man's

tone. It wasn't an accusation, merely a statement of fact. Bakers baked—and environmental activists existed to be objects of ridicule, he seemed to be saying.

There was something uncanny—off-putting—about his presence, his unfettered, almost performatively callous demeanor. Kai got the feeling he was staring down a monster as dangerous as any which lurked in the dungeons.

"I-I can't guarantee any results," Kai responded, letting the perceived slight drop.

Many of his remaining connections were extremists. Most of the environmentalists who had merely been posturing about holding radical beliefs had left their movements when anti-whaling protests had died down. Those still in the game were either unmotivated weekend warriors...or true believers.

"Doesn't matter," the man responded. "You just need to do what you already do. I'm of the mind that if you want a proper cut of steak, you go to a butcher. You're my butcher. I don't need to see what happens behind the counter as long as I get my beef."

Kai nodded nervously, snatched up the check, then got up off his seat as if it were made of hot coal. He looked back behind him just once on his way out the door; the man was still sitting at the counter, smiling and waving at him. Kai began thinking about what might happen to a butcher who couldn't deliver the meat, and suddenly felt nauseous.

He hadn't provided the man his contact information, but part of him knew he didn't need to—not if the man had managed to find him at the bar. Kai would have to start off by reestablishing contact with some old associates, but with the money he'd just been given...he was confident of at least one thing: He could absolutely get an anti-dungeon-grown-food movement off the ground.

He just wished he knew why.

Annotations

***Whatever ivy-bedecked tower*:** An allusion to the Ivy League, a coalition of high-ranking universities in America's northeast. The name stems from actual ivy vines having once adorned their school

walls. Kai's remark shows he's more than a little distrusting of the academic establishment.

***Alan Smithee*:** A pseudonym employed widely from 1968 to 2000 by American directors wishing to disown finished films. Fell out of disuse due to knowledge of its meaning becoming too widespread. Its rumored origin as an anagram of "The Alias Men" is likely a fabricated backstory. After all, the first person to use it would have been alone. Incidentally, this and similar pseudonyms are still used in other countries.

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Message Board [Don't get lost!] Yoyo-D 1428 [Wandering Yoyogi Dungeon]

283: Anonymous Explorer
Hey, did anyone see that crazy black blur running around the third floor yesterday?

284: Anonymous Explorer
Yeah, it was wild >283
And it's all over social media now

285: Anonymous Explorer
So...what was it?

285: Anonymous Explorer
I saw a post from someone who said they called into the JDA Dungeon Management Section. They got told it was...wait for it...a dog.

286: Anonymous Explorer
A dog? I don't care if it's an Irish wolfhound or Great Dane. It was carrying TWO people on its back, and judging from the pictures, it's more than 150 cm tall!

287: Anonymous Explorer
Leave the dog-assessing to me.
That’s no dog.
image: 49978.jpg
image: 49979.jpg
You can tell from the photos. Look, there are only four teeth between the canine teeth. Dogs should have six.
So, as I said: That’s no dog.

289: Anonymous Explorer
Whoa! Pup professor! If it’s not a dog, what is it then?

290: Anonymous Explorer
I don’t know. Aside from the teeth, it certainly looks like a dog to me.

291: Anonymous Explorer
Uh, guys. It’s a hellhound, right?

292: Anonymous Explorer
You might be right, >291

293: Anonymous Explorer
A hellhound *carrying* people? Instead of trying to eat them?

294: Anonymous Explorer
hey, there are tamers and summoners...in fiction

295: Anonymous Explorer
Yeah, and no one’s ever found a skill corresponding to either one

296: Anonymous Explorer
Hold on. Take a look at this.
image: 49990.jpg

297: Anonymous Explorer
Hm?

298: Anonymous Explorer
Huh?

299: Anonymous Explorer
That shape... Hold on, wait!

300: Anonymous Explorer
A Tokyo dog registration tag?!

301: Anonymous Explorer
That thing’s registered?!
Can we find the owner if we have the registration number?

302: Anonymous Explorer
There are a ton of pictures going around, but most of them are taken from a distance. There are a few like the pup professor’s, but it’s like finding a dog hair in a haystack

---

303: Anonymous Explorer
Investigation squad, assemble!

304: Anonymous Explorer
If we could just get the number, we could go into city hall and say we’re looking for a lost pet

---

305: Anonymous Explorer
Except that’s illegal

306: Anonymous Explorer
Jeez, you guys are a pack of hyenas. You’re as bad as pawparazzi.

307: Anonymous Explorer
Come on, we’re not *that* bad. Probably.

308: Anonymous Explorer
What are you planning on doing if you find the owner?

309: Anonymous Explorer
Ask them how to get one! Don’t you wanna know?

310: Anonymous Explorer
Where would you even keep a hellhound though? You’d need a literal mansion

---

311: Anonymous Explorer
I’m not sure even a mansion could contain a full-sized hellhound.

312: Anonymous Explorer
Wait a sec, if they were just walking their pet in through the dungeon entrance, we’d have heard about it before. It’s weird we’ve only seen it now.

313: Anonymous Explorer
There were reports last month of a woman getting chased around the second floor by something that looked like a hellhound. But since there weren’t any pictures, it

just died out as a weird rumor.

314: Anonymous Explorer
That’s right! I remember that.

315: Anonymous Explorer
In other words, it *has* been seen *in* the dungeon before, but no one’s ever seen it enter.

316: Anonymous Explorer
So they must be keeping it in the dungeon? There’s no other explanation.

317: Anonymous Explorer
But then what’s the dog tag for?

318: Anonymous Explorer
Uh...maybe for just in case it ever comes up to the surface, so it doesn’t cause a panic

---

319: Anonymous Explorer
What if...Poké Ball? 0_o

320: Anonymous Explorer
Ah! Maybe! Wait, no way. ...Maybe?

Annotations

***Only four teeth between canine teeth*:** A detail reverse-imported from the manga version of *D-Genesis*.

Chapter 11: Tokiwa in New York

February 20, 2019 (Wednesday)

Dungeon Management Section, JDA Headquarters, Ichigaya

"Morning, Ayatsuki!" Miharu Naruse called out to one Miku Ayatsuki, in a hallway outside the Dungeon Management Section.

Ayatsuki belonged to the Commercial Affairs Section—as what might have ungenerously been called a receptionist.

"Oh, Miharu! Are you sure it's okay for you to not be at Yoyogi today?"

"Says someone else who's hanging around HQ," Miharu responded.

"I guess right now it's all-hands-on-deck for anyone with foreign language skills, huh? Ah, on that note, would it be crazy if I asked a fav— No, come on. You're way too busy." Then Ayatsuki's eyes traced a line to the area just behind Miharu, where a rather mealy looking man was standing. "Who is that?"

"A new recruit. Meet Sayama. He'll be formally moving to the Dungeon Management Department in the coming days."

"H-Hello. The name's Sayama. I'm looking forward to working with you."

"A pleasure. Ayatsuki. But hey, does the JDA even have a system for mid-fiscal-year appointments? Ah, don't tell me, he's someone exceptional!"

It was only two months until the end of the school year, when a wave of new graduates would be hired. The Dungeon Management Section was already planning on taking more this year than ever before. There shouldn't have been any pressing reasons for an

additional hire right now, not with that infusion of new personnel on the horizon.

"Very exceptional," Miharu answered. "By the way, do you know if my section chief is in?"

Ayatsuki stared at Miharu, who had brushed off her question. Apparently Miharu wasn't in the mood to talk. Being able to read people at a glance was an important tool for skilled receptionists. From the odd timing of his hiring and his being brought straight into the JDA by the most famous party's personal handler, Ayatsuki just knew there was more to Sayama than met the eye.

"He's over there, about ready to keel over," Ayatsuki explained.

Miharu followed Ayatsuki's outstretched finger to where Saiga sat, covered by the shadows of massive stacks of paperwork—applications for plots on the safe floor. Sakai was next to him, and Saiga was frantically writing some sort of draft.

"D-Damn... It's already morning. What were we thinking, opening bidding up to foreign companies right from the start?"

"Blame Primary Sales for promoting the safe zone to every dungeon-product developer on the globe."

They could ignore calls that came in outside of working hours, but their email inboxes were overflowing. They'd taken the outdated tack of printing them out and setting up large stacks for staff skilled in foreign languages to pore over—even if it took all night.

"Why do I have to do this, goddamn it! I'm a manager. Yet I have to be buried up to my neck in applications first thing in the morning?"

"We're just shorthanded," Sakai responded flatly. "Everyone's picking up extra roles."

"That's the kind of excuse you usually only hear at companies a few months from bankruptcy."

Sakai looked up, gazing out the window.

"Th-The sun's really come up. Ha ha ha. Morning, Mr. Sunshine!" he muttered deliriously. "How much longer do we have to keep this up?"

"If we aren't through everything by morning the day after tomorrow, we're screwed."

"B-Buy us all dinner when this is over, at least."

"When this is over, won't you still have the Exam Response Committee to handle? Secondary exams are next week."

The Dungeon Management Section dispatched one member as a representative to the JDA committee tasked with overseeing response to university entrance exams and D-Card verifier rentals. As the staff member initially in charge of procurement, Sakai had remained involved.

"Oh, crap! I completely forgot!" Sakai slumped over face-first onto his desk. "I-I can't even rest for one day..."

Saiga tossed him a sardonic grin.

"May god have mercy on your soul."

Sakai sat up.

"Nothing about *bosses* having mercy?"

Ayatsuki watched the two of them from a distance. They continued working at a frantic pace, even while bickering.

"It's nice, you know," she commented. "There's a familial atmosphere here."

"Thanks to our section chief," Miharu responded. "But I hear Commercial Affairs is pretty tight too."

"Sure," Ayatsuki responded, "as long as no one crosses me."

"Naturally."

The two parted ways with broad smiles, and Miharu headed over to her section chief's current battleground.

"Miharu? I don't suppose you're here to be our cavalry."

"I can help out, but before that..." She introduced Saiga to Sayama.

"Ah. N-Nice to meet you," Saiga muttered, stumbling to his feet. "This way..." He gestured Miharu and Sayama toward the windowed partition that served as his office, leaving Sakai alone with the huge stacks of paper.

"H-Hey, is the guy who just went to speak with the chief joining us?" Dungeon Management Section staffers—who, not for nothing, were predominantly women—began to chatter about the mysterious individual who had just gone off for a meeting with their boss.

"I heard we poached him from some national R&D lab. That he's

some real catch. Should we go take a peek?”

“Hmm...” A few moments later, one of the staffers pulled her head away from the chief’s office-partition window. The man inside —slightly gaunt, sullen, and adorned in a ratty old suit and thick glasses—certainly looked the part of an academic, but didn’t exactly inspire confidence. “If he’s a midyear hire, he’s got to have *something* to offer, but he seems somehow, I don’t know...” She paused. “Underwhelming.”

“But Miharu brought him in...”

“Then he’s probably...”

A fire ignited in the eyes of all three women who had gathered near the chief’s office.

“Connected to that superrich party?”

All of a sudden that same man in the ratty old suit seated on the section chief’s reception sofa seemed to glow with an aura he hadn’t possessed moments prior.

“I mean, there’s that other guy in the party who doesn’t look like much either.”

“Sometimes there are diamonds in the rough, you know? And if he’s working with Wiseman or whoever, he’s probably making bank! She’s the number one dungeon celebrity right now! Let’s not judge by appearances.”

“I know! Let’s throw him a welcome party! Really let him get to know everyone!”

“Great idea! When?”

This was the perfect time to get close to him. They started polling dates on the office messenger chat.

Watching from his desk all the while was Sakai, the three staffers’ supervisor, who silently thought that Sayama might already have had a significant other for all they knew, and anyway, they needed to hurry up and get back to work. He grinned bitterly. Still... He couldn’t help but feel a *little* resentment at the fact that none of the messages they were apparently sending had come his way.

“What am I, some kind of pariah?”

The truth was that they *had* considered messaging Sakai, but held off out of consideration for how busy he looked—only for their

would-be kindness to be interpreted the opposite way.

Meanwhile, Sayama felt a chill run up his spine, as if caught in the eyes of some great predator. He frantically looked around the room.

"Something wrong?" Saiga asked.

"N-No. Nothing."

"Well, thank you for coming in on short notice. I've gotten the gist from Naruse, but you're really okay with transferring to the JDA?"

"Yes! Miyoshi was quite persuasive."

"And this all stems from your having acquired...a certain skill."

"Ah, well..." Sayama fumbled for his words.

In reality, the skill primarily behind his decision to transfer was King of the Woods—due to the way it could interfere with his botanical research—not Storage as Saiga had assumed. Nevertheless, attributing Sayama's job change to a skill was correct.

"As you've heard, we're preparing for development of the safe floor," Saiga explained. "Your ability would be both incredibly useful *and* enlightening to observe. However..."

Now a different kind of chill ran up Sayama's spine. Were they not going to take him after all that? He'd already tendered his resignation to Mizuki, his former supervisor. He wasn't sure what he'd do if the JDA turned him away now.

"I-Is there a problem?" Sayama asked Saiga, who had trailed off, seemingly searching for the right words.

"There is..." Saiga responded. "What to do about your salary."

Was that a hint of guilt—or perhaps apology—in the section chief's voice?

"Salary?"

"Sayama," Saiga replied. "Quantifying the skills you're bringing in, do you know how much you're worth? If you worked for us for thirty years, then to make up the value of your orbs by retirement, we'd have to pay you..." Saiga paused, accepting a slip of paper handed to him by Miharu. "125 million yen," he concluded.

"Wh-Wh-What?! O-Over 10 million per month?!"

"That's 125 million *monthly*. 1.5 billion per year."

“Whaaaaat?!”

Sayama, curious about his newfound skills, had checked sales prices after returning from the dungeon—to see just what D-Powers had saddled him with. He couldn’t find any prices for Storage, but there were sales records of Physical Resistance. It had gone for a shocking 2.5 billion yen...

This unpayable debt had been part of why he’d felt obligated to take Miyoshi’s advice and join the JDA. It felt like his responsibility, and besides, his days as a researcher at NARO were over anyway. *Why, a career change could even be refreshing*, he’d thought. But that had been when he was just considering Physical Resistance. Plus, that pay of more than 100 million per year until retirement...

He gulped.

“Needless to say, we don’t have the budget to pay you your full value,” Saiga responded.

Sayama immediately understood the section chief’s concern.

“Of course not.”

“Now, I’ve run this by HR, and unfortunately this is the best we can do.”

Sayama took a contract proffered by Miharu.

“If you’re okay with it, we’d absolutely love to have you at the JDA.”

Sayama looked at the salary written on the paperwork, blinked, then looked again.

The salaries for top administrative positions at NARO were fixed according to laws regarding pay for heads of public research institutions. The chairperson received a fifth-ranked gradational salary in accordance with the law, which was a matter of public record, so Sayama knew how much they made. The salary being offered now was equivalent to two NARO chairpersons. It was enough to poach the CEO of a midsized company.

“If it’s not enough, we may be able to arrange some—” Saiga began.

“N-No, no, no! It’s perfect! This is enough! Really!” Sayama shouted, gesticulating frantically.

Internally, Saiga breathed a deep sigh of relief. The salary

equated to only a fraction of Storage's worth even if Sayama worked for them until retirement. Saiga had planned to offer bonuses for completed transport jobs, but even those would have hardly begun to cover the skill's value.

There had been serious internal discussion about selling the JDA's Storage orb—the very orb Sayama had used—to NASA. In that case, Saiga would have been very curious to see what kind of person NASA would have chosen. The JDA had been deadlocked on the choice of user, after all.

Watching Sayama read over the contract Miharu had given him, Saiga felt a great weight fall from his shoulders.

Of course, now they owed D-Powers. *Again*.

D-Powers had requested that Sayama be involved with the implementation of the Ukemochi System. It made sense, given his previous line of work. He could also be useful for the coordination with the UN Food and Agriculture Organization that the project would require. The JDA would also need to communicate extensively with the WDA Department of Food Administration on this matter. Strong linguistic skills were essential to communicate with both of the aforementioned international agencies.

However, they needed Sayama for building up the safe floor too. Naturally that brought with it a host of other problems, such as how much they could disclose about his abilities. There was a matter of fairness. For example, if Company A received first priority in having a Storage user assist in setting up its plot, what did that mean for Company B waiting in the wings? More and more, Saiga had begun to see the wisdom in Miyoshi turning down all requests as a flat policy.

Not that the JDA could afford to do the same.

"We're going to need some kind of rule," he muttered.

"Sir?"

Saiga grinned, not having expected that Miharu would overhear him. It was nothing, he assured her—a problem for another, less tumultuous, time.

***

Someone called out to Sayama just as he was leaving the Dungeon Management Section office, still dazed from the figure he'd just seen on his contract.

"Yoo-hoo!"

"H-Huh?"

There was a remarkably stylish woman—he couldn't help but notice—standing in front of him, all smiles. Figuring she must have been calling to someone else, he looked left, then right, but saw no one else nearby.

"A-Are you talking to me?" he asked.

His heart started racing. He had no idea what to do when an attractive woman started up a conversation with him! He'd hardly ever interacted with younger women in his previous career. He wasn't used to talking to them.

"Of course! It was nice to meet you today."

"Ah! You're...Ayatsuki?" Sayama asked.

"That's right! Given Naruse brought you in, am I correct in guessing you have something to do with...D-Powers?"

"Y-Yes! Miyoshi from D-Powers recommended I look into a position with the JDA. Why do you ask?"

Ayatsuki had taken it upon herself to clear up one or two rumors the office staff had been chatting about while Sayama was on his way out. A direct recommendation from the Wiseman?! He was an even more promising catch than anyone had guessed.

"Incredible! If you're getting used to the area, I could take you around for some meals sometime. I know plenty of great restaurants."

Sayama wasn't sure what exactly she thought was so incredible, but he knew one thing that was—being invited out to eat by someone like Ayatsuki. And before he'd even had time to recover from her offer, another woman cut in!

"Waaait, wait, wait. Ayatsuki, get in line! He's joining the Dungeon Management Section, not Commercial Affairs."

"We're both under the Dungeon Management Department."

"We're holding a welcome party in the Dungeon Management Section. You'll come, won't you?"

"Uh-huh?"

A welcome party? The only thing Sayama could think of when it came to work parties was sitting around in a restaurant surrounded by older colleagues urging him to drink until he felt sick. He'd never had one positive thought toward such drinking parties, but maybe he'd been too quick to judge. After all, drinking with younger, female coworkers was different from drinking with stuffy old supervisors.

"Of course! I wouldn't miss it! Count me in!" Ayatsuki's hand shot up.

"I wasn't asking *you*!" the Dungeon Management Section woman snapped back.

Sayama wasn't really sure what was going on, but he did his best to offer a tactful response.

"I-If there's a welcome party, absolutely! I'm in."

"Fantastic! Then I'll send you the details. Could I get your contact?"

"G-Gwah!"

Faced with multiple women shoving their cell phones toward him to register contacts, Sayama couldn't help but let out a yelp. He departed the JDA several new chat-app friends later.

Yoyogi-Hachiman, Office

I was beyond put out. Upon seeing that giant thing sitting in the middle of the living room, I'd jumped straight beyond anger and right into a tension headache.

"I know we need a server here with the stat-measuring device going on sale, but... *But*..." I stressed the last word. I thought I'd heard some kind of construction going on, but I hadn't expected to come downstairs and find a whole sound-dampening cubicle partition dead center of our tatami-mat floored sitting room. "Is this *necessary*?!"

Within the makeshift partitioned room was yet another box, some mysterious two-meter-by-two-meter black cube Miyoshi had gotten from who-knows-where.

“It’s a more-or-less cutting-edge Linux system from IBM. Went on sale last September. I was thinking we ought to have the mainframe here at home.”

“Oh, that simple, huh?” I replied caustically.

How exactly the SMD quantified stats was a trade secret. We could have coded everything into the individual devices, but that risked reverse engineering. Instead, we’d have them connect to a server and run the calculations on our end. That was all well and good, but—

“With the device going public, someone could still figure out the formula through inductive reasoning, couldn’t they?”

“Eventually,” she responded. “But unless they have a perfect guinea pig like you who can change their stats one at a time, I’m not sure how practical that would be.”

“Guinea pig? Harsh. But yeah, you’d have to try to drum up a bunch of explorers who all have a difference of just one in each stat to get the same kind of data.” Plus, you wouldn’t have been sure how other individual variables might have been affecting the readings. “What about sending in a bunch of dummy data?”

“It wouldn’t be very efficient. Plus, if we saw a bunch of different inputs coming from the same account that fast, we’d just ban it.”

“Oh,” I responded, not having realized that was possible. “Huh.”

According to Miyoshi, we’d also publish banned unit ID numbers online, which would prevent resale and further discourage misuse. And if someone bought a banned unit without checking? Personal responsibility.

“But if the calculations are easy enough for the devices to have run natively, couldn’t we just have used basically any rack server?” Modern PC calculating power had gotten pretty impressive.

“Yeah, but...that’s boring, right?”

“In other words”—I squinted at her accusingly—“you just wanted an excuse to use higher-end equipment.”

“Wh-Wh-What? Me? Never! B-Better too big than too small, right? Plus, there are tons of advantages to input-output processing. And mainframes win out any day in terms of reliability, flexibility, and maintainability! Right? Plus, it’s... Well, it’s not *cheaper*, but think

about the benefits! A-Anyway! It's not like I just wanted to use it...or replicate the ending of S*ummer Wars*...as a main reason for getting it, anyway!"

"But those *were* reasons." Oh well. If Miyoshi said we needed it, we probably...*probably*...did.

"To tell the truth"—she lowered her voice conspiratorially—"the main reason for getting it was as a bluff."

"A bluff?!"

"Think about it! People can look into our purchase records! It'll help having this state-of-the-art mainframe show up in our transactions!"

"Help what? Impress our neighbors?"

"No." Miyoshi scrunched up her face. "Help throw them off track about the complexity of the calculations and stuff behind the SMD."

"'And stuff.' But okay," I relented. "I see your point. Guess we're lucky you were able to get it in time."

Miyoshi averted her eyes.

"Uh, yeeeaaah..." she mumbled shiftily.

I sighed.

"What did you do?" I asked.

"Ahem."

Apparently she'd pilfered one of two originally intended for delivery to a Vietnamese bank—no doubt by offering a metric ton of cash. I could only hope she hadn't made Japan public enemy number one on the international high-end computer market.

"Okay, well..." I looked pointedly over at the cubicle and mainframe unit. "If I can be so forward as to say—whatever benefits this might have, it's definitely in the way."

It was taking up more than half of our sixteen tatami mats.

"Where else do you want me to put it? I thought about bringing it to Yokohama, but..."

"Right, there are normal businesses operating above us."

Keeping the mainframe there ran the risk of ordinary robberies, of course, but given our profile, there was even a chance of international espionage operations well beyond the scope of private building security staff to handle. We didn't have enough bandwidth

with the Arthurs to leave any on regular guard duty there either. Those same reasons ruled out putting the mainframe in Tokiwa Lab.

"Man, having to think about robberies and international espionage," I responded, "kind of makes you wonder what the hell we're doing with our lives."

"Anyway, this building has a steel frame and is extrareinforceable, so I figured this would be the best location."

Yeah, but if someone cuts the cable outside... I started to worry. But oh well, we had the Arthurs for that. Plus, Miyoshi informed me, we were installing UPS (uninterrupted power supply) units and a personal generator as backups.

Miyoshi tinkered with the unit for a while, finishing the initial setup and booting up the stat-measurement program. Just as she was about to run the test code, we heard our front doorbell ring.

***

"Hey, Azusa..."

Midori had dropped by. Short of her usual confidence, she instead looked like she was about to collapse.

"Hi there," Miyoshi responded, then looked around. "Where's Nakajima?"

"Beats me. I did hear him laughing maniacally this morning while slaving away over soldering irons and diodes. By now, he's probably off in dreamland swimming in piles of money..." She shot us, the instigators of her staff's current predicament, a pointed glance.

Uh, hey. Look at Miyoshi, not me.

"Incidentally," Midori continued, "yesterday we had a bunch of people barge in led by that strange woman shouting, 'Save the world!' They put in a lot of work, but what exactly was their deal?"

Cathy...and others? Ah, right. We'd heard she was recruiting boot camp enrollees from the DSF to help with assembling the D-Card verifiers.

"Simon's going to give us an earful again," Miyoshi remarked.

"Our boot camp's going to catch even more flak for its unreasonable demands," I added. "Though maybe that's good."

"Either way," Midori continued, "at least it seems like we'll meet the production deadline. We should hit the verifier quota today." Her shoulders slumped as if every ounce of strength were leaving her body.

They'd already put in so much work just for the initial two thousand units for the primary entrance tests. Those initial two thousand units had continued to be utilized by large private schools while Tokiwa Lab produced a further two thousand for the upcoming secondary exams. With 173 target schools across the country, the four thousand total units would allow for around twenty at each school. That still left resources a little tight, given the number of prospective students, but at least we'd meet basic demand.

"I don't understand that whole lease system you set up for the units," Midori commented, "but that doesn't affect our contract with you, I suppose."

"Right. Ours was just a basic manufacturing request. We'll have the full payment through soon," Miyoshi responded.

"A pleasure," she responded. "It's still quite a sum for the work we did. I just hope it doesn't come with the obligation to respond to any other sudden requests." And here she'd thought she'd solved all their financial problems so easily when we'd first brought her the offer. Little had she known what that "easy" would wind up looking like. She laughed.

"By the way, Azusa."

"Hmm?"

"That *other* device...it's working just like you thought."

"Heh, heh, heh." A sly grin spread across Miyoshi's face.

"I have *no* idea what you're talking about, but try not to get us into too much trouble, whatever it is," I responded, preemptively washing my hands of the mischief that was surely brewing.

"Of course. Speaking of Cathy, she sent me a picture earlier this morning. She's really getting into it, huh?"

Miyoshi showed me her phone screen. On it was a picture accompanied by a message reading, paraphrased, "*Nakajima's awesome!*" In the photo, Cathy was standing in front of a mountain of completed motherboards, giving a thumbs-up.

"Check this out."

Miyoshi zoomed in on a whiteboard. Just in front of the whiteboard was a table, under which someone appeared to be passed out. I couldn't tell from the angle, but I was guessing it was Nakajima. Staff were gathered around the whiteboard seemingly discussing some handwriting reading, "Etihad, Singapore, Emirates."

"Some kind of weird poem?" I asked.

"That would be the handiwork of one Yukari Tsuzuki. She's the one most excited for the upcoming trip," Midori explained. "She's a real airline maniac."

According to Midori, Yukari was the one who was always stocking the old vending machine in the lab with different exotic beverages. Come to think of it, this was the first time I'd ever seen Tokiwa Lab staffers other than Nakajima.

"Like a train nut but for airplanes? That's an expensive hobby," I mused. The world really did need all kinds.

"Frequent-flier programs help, I'm sure," Midori responded.

Recently there had been ways of accumulating airline miles even without taking flights.

"Those are some luxurious candidates," Miyoshi observed, looking over the suggested routes, "but aren't there probably direct flights? Flying Emirates would probably take you through Dubai, adding more than three hours..."

"I'm pretty sure she knows that," Midori responded.

"Right," I noted. "Train nerds love taking extralong routes just to see certain scenery or to get to be in certain trains. But I feel kind of bad for the rest of the staff having their flight duration extended..."

"I told her to let it go, but she kept insisting, saying she might not get a second chance." Midori grinned resignedly and threw up her hands. "Of course it's not great for the rest of us getting dragged along. Though who knows—to be optimistic, maybe it could spark a similar interest in someone! I've never been one for Toshikoshi Omawari though." She glared at Miyoshi again. Apparently the sense of exhaustion far, far outweighed any feeling of accomplishment.

Toshikoshi Omawari was a once-a-year event train maniacs

looked forward to, during which you could buy a 140-yen commuter ticket from Kitagane to Mabashi, covering a route of more than one thousand kilometers. Only the brave and those least burdened by responsibilities need apply. And since you'd be spending basically the entire day riding a train, it was of interest only to the most dedicated of railway enthusiasts. To those chosen few, though, there could be no greater pleasure.

"Last I heard," Midori informed us, "the conversation is coming down to how to avoid the greater inconveniences of overnight flights. Tsuzuki was muttering something about an Emirates A380."

"What? That's a special flight or something, right?" I asked.

"It's a superluxury aircraft. It comes with equipped showers," Miyoshi informed me.

"Showers?! On a plane?!"

"The airline has an image to maintain. Anyway, it comes equipped with two shower areas in first class."

You could just take a shower after you land... I thought to myself. Maybe it was made for people who just couldn't sleep without one?

"That all sounds pretty luxurious, but..."

"But?" Miyoshi prompted me.

"Cramped rooms and shared showers? That's basically a manga café or capsule hotel, isn't it?"

Miyoshi let out a laugh.

"Well, there is a drink lounge, free reading material, and movies on demand, but..." She shrugged, still smiling. "Take away some beautiful flight attendants, and I guess it's not so different from your average manga café or capsule hotel. But if you think that way, *nothing* will ever qualify as a luxury."

"You're the one who laughed."

"Hrmph."

"Can you even get tickets at this point?" I asked. They'd have to leave tomorrow or the day after.

"For weekday flights to JFK, yeah. There were enough open seats for people in business to upgrade to first class, even. There are apparently forty first-class seats."

"In other words..."

Miyoshi gave a small nod. Apparently she'd already booked the tickets, as soon as the message came through this morning. Plus, you could check nine people in online at once through the Emirates app as long as they were on the same booking.

"They'll leave Narita at 10:30 p.m. It's around a thirty-hour route, so they'll get to New York around 1:55 p.m. the next day."

It would be a roughly twelve-hour flight to Dubai, followed by a five-hour layover, then an eight-and-a-half-hour flight to JFK. Nevertheless, it would only be 1:55 p.m. the following day local time.

"Time zones, huh?" Miyoshi said, passing Midori the reservation number.

Midori nodded thankfully.

"By the way," she added. "Enlighten me. Who *was* that strange woman leading our assembly cavalry squad?"

Cathy had told Midori she was with us, but hadn't bothered with a formal introduction. Considering all the times she'd dropped by the lab recently, I supposed Midori couldn't help but wonder who this American was. Plus, Tokiwa Lab was a research institution. It was probably fairly rare to get any outside visitors. Sure, Cathy and her group stayed out of the building's more sensitive areas, but you'd still wonder about the strange foreigners rolling into your workplace.

"She's our boot camp drill sergeant, on loan from the American Dungeon Strike Force," I explained.

"On loan...from an American military unit?! Wait, isn't the DSF...run directly by the US president?" Midori asked, bewildered.

"Whoa! You're pretty well-informed for someone completely unconnected to the dungeon field!" I observed.

"It doesn't seem like we'll be unconnected for much longer," she responded. "I had to learn about our potential client base."

"Well, we've got certain connections," I said cryptically.

"Connections, hmm?" Midori seemed dissatisfied by my answer, but let the conversation drop. There was too much she still needed to do to get ready for tomorrow's travels.

Annotations

***Pilfered one of two originally intended for delivery to a Vietnamese bank*:** Going by real-life news stories, the other arrived safely. Thank goodness, thank goodness. (Thank goodness for what? This is fiction.)

***140 yen*:** At the time. It's been raised to 150 since. As for why the deal is offered for this particular route, apparently it's because its average commuter fees already made it the cheapest option among JR-East picks.

Dungeon Management Section, JDA Headquarters, Ichigaya

"Sir, may I have a moment?"

Sakai popped into Saiga's office just ahead of the lunch break, looking pale. Paler than he had under their deluge of paperwork that morning, Saiga noted with concern.

"What is it?" Saiga asked. "Did something come up at the exam committee meeting?"

"Thankfully not. We're actually getting the verifiers in ahead of schedule..." Sakai's eyes darted back and forth. Evidently whatever it was he had to say, he found it hard to say here. Saiga invited him out for lunch.

"It's about time to eat. Why don't we have this talk over food?"

"O-Of course, sir."

The two exited Saiga's partitioned office space, making their way toward the door. Just before crossing its threshold, Saya Kujo, who had as of late been crushed under secretarial duties for Section Chief Saiga, called out.

"Sir, Executive Director Makabe is expecting a call from you."

"From me? Not from Tachibana?"

If anyone, Saiga would have expected communication with a top-ranker like Makabe to involve Dungeon Management Department Director Michiyo Tachibana, Saiga's direct supervisor.

"That's right. He said anytime this afternoon."

"Understood."

"Also..."

"When it rains it pours, right?" Saiga said over his shoulder to Sakai.

Saya ignored his dry joke and continued her report

"Section Chief Anderson called too. He wanted to talk about something involving WDA coordination." Demir Anderson was chief of the JDA International Cooperations Section.

"The WDA? What for?"

"Something about a DFA request—looking to work with one Miharu Naruse."

"Huh? A-Ah. That Nathan guy..."

"Chief, manners...?" Saya scrunched her brow.

Saiga rolled his eyes performatively, then gave Saya an apologetic smile.

"Okay... And," she added, "there's a request from Commercial Affairs about the current status of the development project."

"Don't they have anything better to do than to bother me with meetings all day?!" Saiga snapped.

Recently Saiga felt like there'd been nothing on his plate *but* meetings with Commercial Affairs. It had started with the safe floor plans, but they had now been subsumed by discussions regarding the Yoyogi Development Planning Desk Yoyogi Development Plan #6. Long story short, Commercial Affairs had proposed taking lead on the project while the Dungeon Management Section was shorthanded.

When the plan had first reached the Dungeon Management Section, Saiga had advocated postponing enactment, because no slime countermeasure system for non-safe floors had yet been perfected, but somehow photos of a certain base sitting on the twenty-first floor had made their way over to the Tokyo Metropolitan Government. Now he was facing questions about whether the Dungeon Management section was withholding information.

"Withholding" nothing, Saiga thought. He couldn't be responsible for what a private party had set up in the dungeon—nor could he even claim to know entirely how they'd done it. Still, there was the matter of a 405-billion-yen relationship between the JDA and the

base's owner on the books, indicating potential collusion. *If anyone can get those troublemakers to "collude," I'd love to see it*. Of course, he couldn't exactly say that.

Instead of attending to work that needed his attention, he'd been forced to fritter away time explaining the JDA's current limitations. Truth be told, he couldn't wait for Commercial Affairs to take over the entire project's management. There were some voices, both in his own department and next door, reluctant about the JDA's involvement in a plan that seemed so likely to fail, but it had been foisted upon them nonetheless.

Sakai and Saya listened to Saiga's grumblings with some sense of amusement, but managed to keep their faces neutral.

"Okay, okay," Saiga concluded. "That's my afternoon booked full. Go ahead and schedule—" He stopped short, a realization dawning. "No, hold off. Don't book anything yet."

"Why not?" Saya asked.

"All these different meeting requests, but I don't have any details. I can't work out times if I don't even know what we're going to talk about. Go ahead and ask them for specifics first, *then* book."

Muttering about how he'd had it up to here with work, Saiga departed the office with one flustered Sakai in tow.

Suragawa, Ichigaya

Saiga and Sakai grabbed seats at a soba shop not far from the JDA. Saiga put in two orders, then turned to his employee.

"So?"

Sakai appeared to steel himself for a moment, staring at the wall ahead, before speaking up.

"Sir. This has to stay just between us. But I have a suspicion"—he paused for a moment, then spoke at a lower volume—"that one of the devices has been stolen."

"Stolen?" Saiga asked. What proof did Sakai have? "Did the numbers not line up?"

"No," Sakai responded. "The numbers line up. They do, but..."

"Then why do you think one was 'stolen'? Where's the evidence?"

In the month since the National Center Tests, with the JDA being swamped with preparations for developing the safe floor, it had kept its original batch of leased D-Card verifiers on hand. The current collection would be paired with an incoming order for the upcoming secondary exams. As part of preparation, JDA staff had been testing the previously leased devices one by one, to ensure they still worked. One had turned up a dud—never displaying a positive result even when pointed at confirmed D-Card holders. Since the result light not turning on would have just been interpreted as the subject not holding a D-Card, no one had noticed during the tests.

"So I figured there might have been something fixable and got Tokiwa Lab's permission to open the seal. I compared its internal components to a working copy...and they were *completely* different!" Sakai exclaimed, growing paler.

In other words, someone had slipped in a fake, using the same external plastic food-pack casing and identical stickers to seal up the sides.

A thought struck Saiga—D-Powers hadn't had time to file for a patent. If the theft had occurred prior to the Center Tests and someone had filed for the patent first...

"Did you check patent office records?" Saiga asked.

"Just in case," Sakai responded.

However, no patent had been filed. That struck Saiga as equally strange. Neither the thief *nor* D-Powers had applied? Why?

"What did Tokiwa Lab tell you?" Saiga asked.

"'No comment.'" After muttering about how this case just got weirder and weirder, Sakai added, "But wait, there's more..."

Sakai held his phone screen up to Saiga.

It displayed a chart of Goten Industrial's stock prices.

Kabutocho, Nihonbashi

The building, situated eastward of Kayabacho, visible down the length of Heisei-dori, possessed a craggy, brick facade reminiscent of

a certain golem character from a ubiquitous JRPG. Once the site of rapid and rampant bond trading, the Tokyo Stock Exchange now saw more bustling activity from field-trip groups than active traders.

Two men emerged from its doors, in search of afternoon sustenance.

"Where should we go?"

"We could actually do Meitaiken every once in a while," the thinner of the two suggested.

His more corpulent partner laughed.

"Meitaiken? Afternoon on a weekday? You some kind of moneybags tourist?"

"Just a lover of their hayashi rice. Come on, let's go!"

"Bougie, bougie," the rotund man chastised.

"Hey, I'm still eating on the first floor."

Meitaiken, a famous local curry restaurant, maintained separate menus across its two floors, with the upper being the more expensive, by a lot. You could eat a full-course meal at one of the area's spendier French or Italian restaurants for the same price as a meal on the second floor of the seasoned Japanese curry house.

"Still, why's hayashi rice got to be twice as expensive as curry?" the heavier man asked. Moments later, under the bridge by the Edobashi junction, he stopped—looking ahead toward the front door of a Hinoya Curry establishment.

"Because of the demi-glace," the taller, skinnier man answered, casting one eye toward the curry shop as well. He paused, then added under his breath, "RIP Kitchen N."

This site, now housing a restaurant of the Hinoya Curry chain, had until the previous year been occupied by a place called Kitchen N. Their Japanese set meals had been to die for. Plus...

"At half the price of Meitaiken? You can bet I miss it," the heavier man replied.

"Any Japanese set-meal restaurant used to be around the same price. That wasn't just Kitchen N."

The two headed silently down Heiwa-dori, stopping at the base of a large hill for the heavier of the two to catch his breath.

"By the way," he uttered between huffs, "Goten Industrial's stock

was looking kind of funny, wasn't it?"

"Goten? Yeah, that caught my eye as well."

Gotenyama Industrial Manufacturing and Logistics—usually shortened to "Goten Industrial"—was a storied, albeit unremarkable, Japanese electronics manufacturer. It had plenty of stock shares on the market, but its performance hadn't been particularly strong...until recently.

Its share prices had started steadily rising at the end of the previous month, and today had hit a record high. Looking over recent press releases, the company hadn't announced any new projects, nor had any other information come out that would explain the sudden increase. There were no rumors of under-the-table manipulation—nothing. The stockbrokers couldn't even necessarily recommend the stock to their clients—and in fact, no one had done so.

"Whatever led to that sudden rise..." the thinner man mused.

"Sudden? Think again," his thicker companion interjected.

"Think again?"

"I started looking into it recently." The thicker man panted as they worked their way up the hill. They began descending the staircase on the other side. The thinner, taller man couldn't help but wish his colleague would put in a *little* more exercise. At least enough to be able to maintain a conversation while walking.

"So..." the thinner man asked impatiently. "What'd you find?"

"There's been something weird about their stock trading since the end of last year."

"Something weird?"

"Something changed, that's all I can say. Whatever's going on now, it's not sudden."

They turned the corner at Nomura Asset Management, and a restaurant with an unusually large but otherwise simplistic sign reading "Noodles" came into view—Meitaiken's ramen corner.

There was also Tanimasu Ramen situated across from Meitaiken. Neither man was quite sure why it commanded such droves, but there was a long queue of people forming outside, eager for its chicken-stock soy-sauce noodles. Eyeing the long line across the

street, the heavier man opened the door to Meitaiken.

"So I know Goten Industrial's stocks had a lot of long-term holders," the thinner man said to his colleague as he followed him inside. "But I figured they were just being held and ignored, rather than being kept for value—what with the company's hardships and lack of new investors."

"Right. But then at the end of last year, they started moving—720, 740 yen per share."

"Started moving?"

"Yep. No price increases, so it didn't flag much attention. But they were moving by the day."

The server came to take their order, and the thicker man ordered the *Tanpopo* Omurice. In director Juzo Itami's film of the same name, a beggar and child were shown sneaking into the restaurant's kitchen to surreptitiously cook up the dish in question.

"Who's bougie now?" the thinner man asked.

"I'm considering this afternoon sightseeing. Besides, your damn rice is three hundred yen more expensive."

The thicker man smiled, and the thin one shrugged.

"What's the difference?" he asked his chubbier colleague. He brought his cup of water to his mouth, then returned to the conversation. "So why the movement? And why didn't the price go up with all those sales?"

"People couldn't wait to get rid of the shares. But according to one analyst's report, those shares *really* shouldn't have been appraised at more than six hundred, let alone hitting seven hundred yen. So what the heck lit enough of a fire under someone for them to offer more than one hundred yen over the market price? Looks like someone was in a hurry to buy them up."

"How are the sales happening?"

"Through a variety of brokers, and at different prices too. If this really is all one party, they're taking pains to hide it. Stranger and stranger."

"So"—the thinner man rotated his glass as he deliberated—"what's this all about, then? Why Goten?" That was the question. There was still nothing that would explain the flurry of purchases.

"Buybacks, maybe?"

"Don't be an idiot. They're not exactly Panasonic, but they still have a ton of shares. There's not exactly a feasible avenue to try to buy them all back."

Panasonic could have bought back a hundred million of its stocks and still not have to file a new majority shareholder report. Goten wasn't far behind in its number of outstanding shares. It would be a pipe dream to even consider trying to buy back majority ownership. Not unless they issued a TOB, or takeover bid, and even then it seemed unlikely to succeed.

"But someone *is* buying them."

"Someone."

"Even though there's no apparent reason to expect returns."

"Correct."

"And prices wouldn't normally rise without a new appraisal placing them at least twenty percent higher than their current rate."

"Strange, huh?"

What on earth had gotten someone so desperate to collect these shares?

"Oh well." The thicker man shrugged. "But I tell you, if *we've* noticed, other people are gonna catch wind too. We'll start seeing people trying to unload their stocks at slightly elevated prices—750, 760 per share—as market sales."

"Naturally," the thinner man responded. "In fact, we already have. But hardly any have gone through."

"Oh yeah?"

One look at the bulk sales boards would have been enough to make any potential buyer suspicious. Most offers had sat untaken. But if that included whoever had been buying them in the first place...

"Then...maybe the buyer's goal isn't to own a certain percentage of Goten stocks. Otherwise they'd have been jumping on those too. Maybe..." The thicker man paused. "Maybe it's just to get as many as they can at a certain price."

"What for, without immediate prospects?"

"Who knows?"

“And we’re sure this isn’t just the company purchasing their own stocks in order to shore up their value?”

“We’d be able to trace that in a second. Plus, I’m not sure they’d have enough internal reserves. Besides, PER and PBR adjustments aren’t going to fix whatever problems they’d have from dropping stock rates. Not that their value’s even dropped by that much.”

“Ah!” The thinner man seemed to have suddenly had an epiphany. “Someone trying to get ahold of stocks before some big development?”

“Now that...”

It had been a month since the prices had gradually started to rise, before hitting the even more recent bump. If someone were playing the long game, the payoffs must have been certain, and suitably lucrative.

“It’s possible. It makes the most sense. Though illegal. Japan Securities and Exchange Law, Article 159.”

The food arrived. The thicker man stuck his spoon into the fluffy yellow coating of the omurice with gusto.

“It’d never get by the Financial Services Agency. I tell ya, if we’ve noticed it, they’re already investigating. No one would be that stupid,” he mumbled, stuffing his cheeks.

“You’re right,” the thinner man responded. He looked up at the ceiling as his hayashi rice was gingerly set in front of him. He brought a spoonful to his mouth, carried away by the flavors of the demi-glace. He swallowed, a satisfied smile spreading over his face.

Suragawa, Ichigaya

“You’ve been stock trading at work?!” Saiga shouted, looking at Sakai’s proffered phone.

“N-No! Just investigating!” Sakai answered hastily.

“Investigating? What’re you, some kind of financial Sherlock Holmes?” Saiga cocked his head and peered closer. “Still, this is pretty interesting.”

The charts showed a radical spike upward on the right side of the

graph.

"It's that sudden uptick from the end of January," Sakai explained. "The value was steady until then. It hit an end-of-day record yesterday."

Furthermore, there was a daily price-fluctuation limit ranging from, depending on the stock's starting value, fifteen to thirty percent. No fluctuations above or below that limit would be allowed within a single day. If the stock continued to hit its upper or lower limit for three consecutive days, the permitted fluctuation range would be doubled, into a range of thirty to sixty percent. Were the limits not in place, the value might have risen even further.

"I don't really get stocks, but...this is unusual, right?" Saiga asked.

"The value has gone up nearly tenfold compared to last month. If the current trend continues, then by the twenty-fifth..."

"What?"

"It will have increased over seventyfold in a month."

"S-Seventyfold? Now that is something. But what does this have to do with the stolen verifi— Ah! You said this climb started a month ago?!"

That would have been right around exam time, when the device must have been swapped out.

"Sir, there's no official explanation for this stock-price surge."

"None?"

"Nothing. At least not in terms of press releases or any other public information. It should have continued along at its prior value. Doesn't it seem like someone's hiding something?"

Saiga thought back over recent stock news. There was the incident with Softbark Group repurchasing 112 million shares—worth six hundred billion yen—which had led to a seventeen percent increase in value. It had resulted in speculation that the repurchase had been enacted simply to shore up value before selling the stocks back on the market. However, he couldn't think of any other recent incidents that would give him an insight into the present enigma.

"Okay, so something weird is happening with the market. I'm on board. You got more?" Saiga asked, urging Sakai for further

explanation.

Sakai leaned across the table and whispered.

"The main components in the verifier... They're made by Goten Industrial. They own the patent on the inner materials."

Saiga's eyes narrowed.

"You looked this up?"

Sakai quickly sat back in his seat, waving his hands in a protestation of innocence.

"O-Only as part of the investigation! Tokiwa Lab informed me. You can ask them."

"*They* told you who made the components?" Now *that* was another odd wrinkle. Even during an investigation into a malfunctioning product, Saiga normally would've expected the makers of the device to play its workings closer to the chest—*especially* when it hadn't yet been patented.

"Although," Sakai added, "it's not exactly a big secret. All you'd have to do to find out about the components would be to open the lid on one of the devices."

The scanners were ultimately just motherboards and diodes packed into plastic food containers, and the internals were branded. Not exactly top secret protocol. Their normal use didn't require opening the casing, but there was really nothing preventing anyone who wanted to from doing so.

"So you think this has something to do with the stock rise?"

"Most likely, sir."

One month since the theft, and only now this sudden stock price increase—yet still no patent filing from any party. Perhaps the thief hadn't been able to understand the device, but they'd at least noticed that its internals were rather expensive brand-name components with patents held by a single company. Even if there was no guarantee they were looking at the next cell phone, in terms of the scanners' popular demand, it had the potential to get close. It would certainly provide enough motivation for someone to start investing in the maker.

"So you think some part-timer involved in the testing got a look under the hood of a stolen copy and started playing day trader?"

Sakai nodded hesitantly.

"Right in part, but I'm not so sure about them being a part-timer. It would take serious money to make moves like this."

"Then..."

"Maybe D-Powers themselves? If not, someone else with big connections who got ahold of that stolen copy."

Saiga crossed his arms pensively.

"If it *is* D-Powers, then it's not exactly insider trading."

Insider trading involved a high-level administrator buying or selling their own company's stocks based on nonpublic market information obtained through their work. D-Powers' members weren't employed by Goten Industrial, so even if they were to purchase the company's stock, it wouldn't constitute insider trading.

"But setting the insider trading angle aside..." This didn't seem to Saiga like their work. Even removing character assessment from the equation, they didn't have the financial motivation to do something like this. They could make more by auctioning a single orb than they stood to gain from an entire month of careful market manipulation. "Those two aren't the type to play the long game like this."

"You think so? Then...there's only one possibility left. What do we do?"

"Do the stock purchases break any laws?"

"I can't be certain, but it seems unlikely. Though D-Powers may have something to say about a third party getting rich off their backs and our lack of security..."

Goten Industrial's stocks stood to skyrocket once D-Powers submitted a public patent. However, everyone would be fighting for a slice of the same pool of shares then. Without the public patent, at this point potentially a single opportunist with access to early information stood to gain.

"Can we trace the stock buyer?"

"Only if a trade hits the bulk deals boards. But it's going to be hard to buy up five percent of Goten Industrial all at once. And if the buyer wanted to avoid detection, they could just use shell companies."

If this current stock movement truly had started with a leak on

the JDA's end and promised societal ripple effects, it might just have been primed to jump to the number one spot on Saiga's priority list. Not that there was much of anything he could do about the situation now.

"What was our NDA with D-Powers like again?"

"Order's ready." The server arrived with their food—two bowls of cold soba. Cold noodles even on a cold day—a manifestation of Saiga's odd sense of pride, perhaps. If he couldn't control all the forces in his life, he could at least determine whether he gave in to the elements. Still...

"I feel like I've lost my appetite."

"Me too. Let's... Let's hope D-Powers is buying up those stocks," Sakai responded.

"But let's poke around more just in case they aren't."

And so Saiga split his chopsticks—*krak*—while engaged in silent prayer.

Annotations

***Daily price-fluctuation limit*:** Reported as of February 2019. The rules were revised on August 3, 2020, such that ranges would be increased fourfold after two days of continuously hitting limits.

***Softbark Group repurchasing 112 million shares*:** In reality, it was announced on May 30, 2019, that the shares, totaling around five percent of their outstanding shares at the time, would all be extinguished on June 10 of that year. Or, it would have been if this referred to a real company. I remind you again that this is totally a work of fiction. Any similarities to actual parties or persons is purely coincidental.

Shinjuku-sanchome

The recently promoted Lieutenant Colonel Terasawa climbed out of the taxi in front of the Marui Annex office building in Shinjuku-sanchome. From across the street, he gazed up at its dark, red-trimmed facade.

Making his way inside, he rode the elevator up to the second floor and headed into the Coffee King, an ostentatiously named café. From far in back, a man waved to him, drop-dead in the center of a hazy smoking section.

"Ah, Shinozaki!" Terasawa waved back.

The man he addressed was on the thinner side and had a bit of an unkempt beard, but one could nevertheless tell he kept in shape. He cut a sharp profile.

"I have to say, I was a little surprised you reached out. It's been, what? Five years?" Shinozaki replied.

A waiter came to take Terasawa's order—one Colombian. He liked a balance of acidity and sweetness in his coffee, and on those notes this shop's Colombian was unimpeachable.

"Has it been that long already?"

Mitsuru Shinozaki had entered the Japan Self Defense Forces at the same time as Terasawa. After discharge, though, he'd taken up work as a private eye.

"So what's the deal?" Shinozaki asked. "I imagine you didn't call just to catch up."

Unsocial as ever, Terasawa lamented. He spread a handkerchief out on the table, onto which he placed an iron ball just over ten centimeters in diameter.

"I want you to find out where this came from."

"Came from? You mean like the manufacturer?"

"Correct."

Shinozaki frowned.

"Tera, man, I'm running a PI business here. We do individual investigations, not corporate espionage. Nah, information on companies is outside of my job description."

Ultimately this is *to pinpoint an individual*, Terasawa thought to himself, but he opted to try a different tack.

"When companies want to make a deal, they have people investigate credit history."

"They have *credit investigators* investigate credit history. Not regular private detectives."

Okay, so perhaps they are a bit different, Terasawa admitted to

himself. Credit investigators investigated companies, and private eyes individual people. No, to be more to the point, private eyes mostly investigated extramarital affairs.

"They're both covered under the same investigation laws, aren't they?"

Indeed, a 2007 law on investigative firms had placed private investigators and credit investigators under the same umbrella of legal stipulations and protections.

"Yeah. But you ever heard of a term called 'specialization'?"

"Well, don't you have any other...I don't know, connections?" Terasawa asked. "Look, I'm out of my element here. That's why I came to you. I don't know the first thing about how to investigate this, but you might. Come on, I'm begging."

When you needed help outside your field of expertise, you went to another expert. You networked. Otherwise any investigation that started in Okinawa would end if the subject fled to Hokkaido. You'd hook up with a Hokkaido investigator instead.

"'Begging'? Why not ask SDF Intelligence Security Command?"

"After the High Court decision three years ago? You know that would be touch and go."

In 2016, the Sendai High Court had ruled that investigations conducted into bribery on the part of four regional Japanese Communist Party legislators and one Council of Social Welfare member were unlawful, thereby discouraging any future involvement of the SDF Intelligence Security Command in investigating private individuals.

"And how am I supposed to pass along this request when I'm getting this company-investigation help?" Shinozaki asked. "I mean, I got friends on the police force who could help, but what do I say I'm investigating? Just that I got asked by the Ministry of Defense, so it's some big hairy deal, but don't ask more questions than that?"

"Avoid the subject," Terasawa suggested.

"How?!"

"That's up to you. You're the professional."

Shinozaki paused for a moment, rubbing his hands along his cheeks silently, then regained his composure.

"I don't know how things work over at the MOD, but here in the investigative world we've got a little law that requires you to pass along important job details when requesting snooping by proxy."





"You'd be working for the Ministry of Defense. Even if you bent the law a little, who'd try you?"

"Last I checked that question gets left up to the police. I'm not talking civil court penalties here."

Terasawa waved his hand, brushing the statement off.

"You're worrying too much. Come on."

"I am not!" Shinozaki snapped. "I run an investigation firm, not a...not a *spy agency*!"

Terasawa merely smiled, bringing his Colombian coffee to his lips.

"Shinozaki." He set his cup down. "Let's ignore all the potential hurdles. Hypothetically, how *would* you go looking into this, if you wanted to? There are plenty of ironware makers out there."

Shinozaki cocked an eyebrow. However, begrudgingly, he answered.

"An individual bought it, right? Not a company? In that case the maker will probably come up in the top ten results when you type 'iron balls, shopping' into your search bar."

"You don't say..."

Of course. This was the age of the internet. A couple of decades back, they'd have been hitting the phone book instead.

"Unfortunately, if it *isn't* from one of those, you're out of luck. You'd need a police investigation."

"And what would the police do?" Terasawa asked.

"Not too much different but for the manpower—they'd have a team start calling up all the companies one by one. You could cut down on the number of targets if you knew roughly where your buyer lived, which you could probably do by asking some of the few major shipping companies about recent bulk orders."

"Interesting," Terasawa responded. "Well, you'll figure something out!"

"H-Hey!" *Wasn't he listening at all?* Shinozaki thought to himself. His shoulders slumped. "So what is this?" he asked at length. "Is this really a job from the MOD, or are you going rogue, Terasawa? You know someone's got to pay for it either way."

"Of course. Don't worry. We've got a discretionary fund for just this kind of occasion."

"You get to spend discretionary funds? Didn't you *just* become lieutenant colonel?"

"Various past incidents have left those near the top of the Dungeon Attack Group with a level of rather unprecedented flexibility..."

"Past incidents? Never mind, I don't want to know." Shinozaki pointed to the iron ball on the table. "Can I take this?"

"Be my guest."

"You're paying through the nose for this."

"What? No friendship discount?"

"Heh! After all the trouble you're putting me through? The friendship discount is me taking the job at all." Shinozaki grinned, placing the iron ball in his bag.

Terasawa waited until Shinozaki had his belongings packed up before adding one more comment.

"Ah, there's one other thing I'd like you to look into."

"What?"

"I want to know about any companies or individuals who might have been approaching the Ministry of Defense's Bureau of Personnel and Education director."

"Ooh?"

"You don't seem too surprised to hear that."

"Where's the surprise? At least this job is ordinary PI work. In other words you want me to tail this director and make a list of anyone he's meeting with. What am I looking for?" It wouldn't be reasonable to investigate every single person the director spoke with. Shinozaki needed something more specific.

"Looking for? Ah..." Terasawa explained the gist of how Iori had been threatened with a board of inquiry and potential court martial.

"So you want to know whether a third party who wants to identify this Phantom person is meeting with your personnel director."

"Right. Calling a board of inquiry is too drastic a move to explain as mere curiosity. If the director is involved in any untoward collusion, it'll be a bad look for the whole ministry"

"So what? You'd want to deal with it internally before news got out?"

"I just want to put my fears to bed."

"All right. I'll start tailing him this weekend. But I won't be able to keep tabs on his work meetings."

"I'll dig into those through another avenue. Say..." Terasawa cast a glance at Shinozaki. "What about disclosure laws? Do you need to say who you're tailing if anyone asks?"

"Disclosure laws?" Shinozaki laughed. "What, is he a recent death at a home up for sale?"

"All right, all right."

After a bit more banter and catch-up, the two men went their separate ways.

Terasawa had thought about bringing his current request to Agent Tanaka, but he couldn't be sure if someone from Cabinet Intelligence wasn't involved. It was best to look into things on his own for now.

"I can deal with whomever I need to," he muttered to himself. "With the right intel."

He couldn't allow himself to lose a valued subordinate due to a simple slipup. Not now.

JDA Headquarters, Ichigaya

"Executive director, forgive me, but isn't this a little...much?"

Saiga had been handed a seemingly unending list of materials Executive Director Makabe wanted carried down to the safe area during his afternoon meeting with the latter.

"I don't know how you did it, but I heard you lucked into an invaluable personnel pickup." Makabe grinned. "Now, of course it'll depend on requests from our land purchasers, but in the meantime I've taken the liberty of listing just the materials we'll need for the JDA's own initiatives."

"You got me. His ability is impressive, sure, but we haven't conducted detailed testing yet... Amounts, mass limitations, the whole nine yards."

"He'll outperform any porter on the market. Or am I wrong?"

"You're not wrong about that, of course..."

Still, it did strike Saiga as slightly wrong to be comparing a human and a machine—even if both were going to be used as pack mules. Sometimes Makabe's cold business logic was both his greatest strength and greatest flaw.

"But gas turbine generators..." Saiga protested.

"What? It's a Kawasaki MPU Series. Trucks drive them down city streets. It doesn't even weigh twenty-five tons."

Not "even" twenty-five tons. Greeeaaat. Saiga sighed internally. Until now transporting even a few tons of supplies into the dungeons had been a pipe dream.

"And the rest of this?" he asked, gesturing to the list.

"Given we'll have some K2HF support, I did think about just having your man pack up whatever he could and running the rest down with a caravan of porters, but—actually, I realized it would probably be more efficient simply to have him make multiple round trips."

Saiga sighed to himself internally for a second time. Makabe had always possessed a Machiavellian streak. Everything and everyone existed to be used.

However, as a section chief, Saiga's job was to look out for Sayama.

"No matter what, testing of the ability has got to come first," he protested. "After all, what if we make all these preparations and there's something he can't carry?"

In response, Makabe abruptly pivoted the conversation toward another subject—or so it seemed.

"Tell me. Did you know the Americans are bringing all sorts of interesting equipment over to Yokota Air Base? They appear to be building something."

"Excuse me?"

"Most of the parts are coming in from America, but some from within Japan."

"I see."

"Now judging from *what* parts they've ordered, they appear to be getting ready to construct some sort of power plant."

Saiga wasn't sure where the executive director had gotten his information, but if they planned on bringing it all down to the safe area, there were only two possible methods. One was that they would deconstruct it all again and carry it down piece by piece, which Saiga found unlikely. The other...

Shoot. They have *been getting cozy with Simon recently*. Saiga grinned bitterly.

"So you think...?" Saiga began.

"If your recent talent acquisition isn't double-dipping, then I can only imagine the Americans reached a deal with the party who left a certain construct on the twenty-first floor," Makabe responded.

Word about Igloo 1 appeared to have spread quickly. The cat—or perhaps "penguin" was more appropriate—was out of the bag. Even the Sales Department knew. Since Igloo 1 was a private venture, it wasn't the JDA's place to go notifying anyone about it, but word had still traveled up the chain naturally.

Most would have been at a loss for how it had been brought down, and how it was maintained, but of course anyone above Saiga would have been privy to the JDA's Storage...storage. Which naturally meant knowing that Miyoshi had used the orb. That also meant D-Powers had to be the ones working to transport the structure the Americans were building at Yokota.

This had implications for the question of whether Sayama could transport Makabe's laundry list of items. It was plausible to assume he could carry just as much as Miyoshi could—even including large structures like the one the Americans had assembled. However, it also gave them a contingency plan. D-Powers could be plied. If it turned out that there was a difference in Miyoshi's and Sayama's abilities—if there were anything the latter couldn't carry—the JDA needed only to approach the former and request her cooperation. The real question was how to extract a yes from her.

"Say they actually humored a request like that," Saiga replied. "What would we even be paying them?"

The price would at least equal whatever it would have cost to transport the cargo down without Storage, to begin with. Then, accounting for the added expediency and convenience of Storage,

the cost would rise further still.

"You're thinking no amount of *money* would do, right?" Makabe surmised.

"Believe me, if you could move them with money, my job would be a whooooole lot easier."

Saiga was quick to add that if you insulted them once with a lowball figure and a half-hearted appeal to civic duty, they'd probably never lift a finger to help the JDA ever again. He trusted Makabe not to be as brazen as a certain *other* executive director, but when it came to D-Powers, Saiga couldn't be too careful.

"What could have moved them to work for America?" Makabe asked. "Don't you want to find out?"

"Understood. I'll look into it, but don't expect me to be able to spare many resources until all the safe-area land bidding is finished."

"What about their dedicated supervisor?"

"If you want to lodge a complaint about how shorthanded we are, submit it to Sales or Legal Affairs." Saiga began filling Makabe in on their recent predicaments.

"So you've had all that pushed on you? Ah! By the way, did you happen to get roped into an absurd project plan that Sales foisted on you?"

"Yoyogi Development Plan #6?"

"That's the one! So *that's* what it was called."

"It's way too premature. I told Sales as much."

"But they wouldn't budge?"

"You nailed it."

Makabe laughed.

"It's a waste of resources, to be honest. Forget the slime issue—how many people could you gather who would actually be interested in permanently maintaining buildings on non-safe-area floors that deep? That said..."

According to Makabe, a great deal of budget had been allocated toward its success, in anticipation of huge returns. If the installation of a few outposts could be used to convince potential buyers that they'd be able to use a reliable communications network running all the way up to the surface, the land would fetch even higher prices.

Even if the JDA could only maintain a similar base for a short time, utilizing JDA guards, it would probably be worth the investment.

"It could also lead to public distrust in the JDA when it fails," Saiga pointed out.

"Look, we'll just be waving the starting flag. Private companies will decide what to do with the results. Sorry, but I'm going to ask the Dungeon Management Section to not do anything to stop the project from going through."

"Understood."

"Great. Now then, good luck with everything." Makabe waved Saiga off, returning to his own work.

For a third time during their brief conversation, Saiga let out a heavy internal sigh.

Yoyogi-Hachiman, Office

"Kei. I was thinking about starting the next auction soon."

"Right. We've got quite a bit of stock. And we haven't been able to run one recently with that whole King of the Woods scare going on."

"I started our tax filing too."

Come to think of it, we'd gotten tax-reporting documents from the JDA the other day. My eyes almost popped out of my head when I saw the number of zeroes written on it.

"We're *definitely* not going to get any refund. But anyway, remember we still have our salary from Hokkoku Materials from last year mixed in there, so be careful with the math."

"Hah!"

Dungeon-tax reporting at least was fairly straightforward, but since all payments were routed into individual accounts via a party-linked brokerage-style account, you did have to carefully track what payments had come from dungeon-related activities on your own. If you weren't careful you could wind up with average income tax rates applied to all your dungeon earnings. I shuddered to think.

"You know, that thought might actually be scarier than the

Wandering Manor," I added, explaining the risks. "So please, *please* be careful."

The tax agency would be sure to let you know when they didn't get enough, but dead silent if you overpaid. I supposed that was just the way of things. To be fair, their job was to collect revenue, so there probably weren't any double checks when they'd exceeded their quotas.

"Should I just toss the entire thing over to a tax agent?"

"No. Let's try doing it ourselves at least this first time."

The math would be a little tricky with our multiple income sources, but really all we had to look out for were major calculation errors. We'd used our party credit cards for most payments, so we wouldn't have any additional business expenditures to report—just insurance premiums.

Even for things like Sayama's gear, we'd used the party card due to it being too expensive for a personal credit card. Well, there were probably people out there whose personal card limits would have allowed it, but I definitely wasn't one of them. My personal credit card was still the one from back during my company days.

"Got it! No mistakes shall be made!" Miyoshi responded, addressing my concerns. "But never mind that. The auction! What should we put up?"

"Let's see, our current list is..."

```
Super Recovery x5
Water Magic x5
Physical Resistance x6
Appraisal x1
Undeath x1
Life Detection x2
Mining x5
Earth Magic x1
Night Vision x2
Dexterity x2
Support (Cimeies) x1
```

"We may be in a bit of a rut."

Water Magic and Super Recovery were so easy to obtain—thanks to their quick cooldown timers and drop monster being slimes—that we always tried to keep some on hand despite having auctioned or given them away relatively frequently. But due to how busy we'd been, we hadn't had the chance to pick up many new orbs recently.

"We'll probably have some more free time once the New York event is over and the SMD goes on sale," Miyoshi pointed out. "It may not be a bad idea to go do some orb-hunting runs."

"There are still a lot of monsters whose drops we haven't checked out even on the upper floors, huh? You know, a dungeon dive where no one's lives are on the line actually sounds pretty fun for a change."

We'd had *a lot* of close run-ins recently. What happened to our life of relaxation and luxury?

"I'm still not used to hearing you call dungeon dives 'fun,'" Miyoshi teased. "You're almost like a real explorer now!"

"Oh, shut it. But yeah, we could take it easy just hanging around the upper floors for a bit. And we could get Sayama set up tending our field there and leave its management up to him to avoid unnecessary contact with Nathan."

"Good call. He *was* talking about setting up a branch office," Miyoshi observed. "We don't want to give him any excuse to come knocking on our door every day!" She turned back to the orb list. "But setting aside your vague hopes for the future..."

"They were pretty concrete plans, for me!"

"We should probably auction a Mining orb, huh?"

"We're holding one of those for the JDA," I reminded her. We actually owed the JDA both one Mining and a copy of Storage. Though, after using the latter on Sayama, we wouldn't be able to get a new copy until the twenty-fifth. "Anyway," I added, "both Russia and America have a copy of Mining. You think we'll still get major bidders?"

"If anything, it's an orb nations will want as many copies of as they can get. Plus, all the countries that don't have a copy yet are

probably champing at the bit to grab one."

"Good points."

"Otherwise..." She paused, examining the list again. "It looks like all we can offer is a Water Magic and a Physical Resistance."

"With four employees, we probably want at least four copies of Super Recovery on hand..."

"Just four? Are you not counting Cathy in that?"

"It's just that she probably isn't going to sustain any major injuries running the boot camp." Any injuries sustained during an exploration mission would be a matter for the US Dungeon Strike Force, not us. Of course we'd use one of the orbs on her in a heartbeat if her life were ever on the line. "And I'd like to save Dexterity for Saito..."

"Then there's Appraisal. What about unleashing a second Wiseman on the world?"

"We could. But sorry, I'd like to maintain our advantage for just a bit longer, if we could."

"Hmm, right," Miyoshi agreed. "And unlike with Otherworldly Language Comprehension, no international power struggle is hanging in the balance while we wait."

"Right."

"Okay. So let's put up two Mining, one Water Magic, and one Physical Resistance. Though I don't think we'll see returns quite as high as before."

"We should really aim for a more diverse lineup for the auction after this."

"We could always offer Undeath for research purposes."

Premature Birth, an orb with a similarly alarming name, had been tested on an animal. Someone might look at Undeath and at least want to run a similar test to see if it had any effects not covered in its Appraisal description. So there might yet be demand for it.

February 21, 2019 (Thursday)

Akasaka, Minato

"Broooo. This is the stat-measuring thingy?"

Tenko stared with interest at the radar-gun-like object on the table before him. For a moment, the bustle of the chain restaurant faded.

"Apparently," Yoshida answered dismissively.

Their in with Saito had landed the Wiseman as an off-screen supporter of their show, along with her name and branding. Someone named Himuro had come by and dropped off the device even though consumer preorders hadn't even started yet. Who exactly this Himuro was, Yoshida still wasn't sure, but he no doubt had some sort of connection to D-Powers.

"Niiiice score. Now look, man, this is cool, it's cool and all, but..." Tenko paused. "How are we going to work this into the show? There's no reception in the dungeon." The SMD required connection to a server. It wasn't just Wi-Fi or 4G networks; no surface-world signals of any kind entered the subspace of the dungeons.

"That," Yoshida responded, "is where we should thank our lucky stars this isn't a live broadcast."

The handheld SMD came equipped with a module resembling a cheap smartphone camera. It would save a low-resolution photo along with the stat readout. If you weren't in range of a signal to connect to the server when you took the measurement, it would hold the data until you reconnected with a wireless network, then send it and display the reading. They could scan a target, return to the surface and get a wireless connection, then return to the dungeon and "rescan" the same subject and show the still-present results on the screen.

"Bro, that's fraud!"

"We're a variety show, right? It's *acting*," Yoshida responded, taken aback by Tenko's tone.

"Aren't people going to copy us and try to get their own live readings in the dungeons? What do we do when that doesn't work?!"

"We'll add a little disclaimer about those bits of footage being staged recreations. It's fine."

"Okay, but... We also gotta be careful about just showing stats we get from random explorers on TV. That's private info, bro. If it's someone we meet down on the eighteenth floor, it could even be a national secret."

"Come on. We're not going to be measuring explorers."

"We're...not?" Tenko blinked.

"We're going to be measuring *monsters.*"

"Uh, bro... Wait, do monsters even *have* stats?"

"D-Powers was able to get readings."

"What?! That's huge! You mean we can tell how strong monsters are with, like, numbers?!"

Tenko was standing up leaning halfway over the table before he knew it. Yoshida waved his hand, urging him to sit down.

"Chill. Anyway, D-Powers wants us to help make a compendium of monster stats through the show."

"Sounds good, but isn't it too...I don't know, replicable? Once these things get widespread, anyone could go measure a monster. At that point, who needs to watch a show?"

"That's why we're getting in on the action *before* the device becomes widespread. This is our chance. We'll be trendsetters."

There were any number of past examples of fads that had started because someone tried something they'd seen on TV. With networks being even more attuned to social trends now than ever, the deal looked even sweeter for them. They should *hope* for imitators. If anything, they might even get credit from the JDA for starting a data-gathering movement, and who knew where brownie points with the JDA might lead?

"Okay, okay," Tenko relented. "But if anything, this is the kind of stuff I'd rather do on my channel..." He scrunched his brow.

"Just one of those devices runs three million yen," Yoshida responded coldly.

At the very least, that was the value Himuro had quoted him while stressing to Yoshida not to break it.

"Y-You could buy a car for that much." The gusto had gone out of

Tenko's voice.

"Granted, this is a prototype. The mass-produced version is apparently going to be three hundred fifty thousand. But early production runs will still be in limited quantities, so you shouldn't count on getting one."

Demand would far exceed production. Dungeon Association offices, those at other private companies looking to replicate the device, research institutions, and finally a not insignificant number of wealthy and eccentric explorers looking to buy it as an expensive toy would all be competing to get devices from that first, limited run.

"Now, there actually is a certain test with the device I'd like to ask you to run."

"Alone?!"

"We wouldn't be filming. It'd be easier for you without a civilian like me around, right?"

"I thought my job was being your bodyguard!"

"You'll be compensated exorbitantly. Now don't worry. Seriously, don't worry!"

"Somehow I'm getting even more worried about whatever this is." Tenko smirked.

Yoshida leaned forward, speaking at a whisper.

"The truth is, there's an extremely lucrative—probably—job that's come our way."

"Probably? Bro, this is not sounding good."

"Don't worry. It actually has nothing to do with the dungeons, so there's no real danger. You see, someone who knows we have access to the measurement device would like to borrow it for a very specific purpose. That's all."

"Wait, like subleasing?"

"Tenko, Tenko. Please. This is an item we were given for work. We can't go subleasing it."

"Y-Yeah? Right. Okay."

"But that's why you'll go along with it! Then it won't be 'subleasing.'"

"Bro. This is some whacked-out sophistry."

"This is how the tit-for-tat world works. Listen." Yoshida explained

the proposal, which a certain acquaintance had brought him.

"You're serious about this?" Tenko asked.

"Relax. No one's going to know."

"I-I suppose..."

Yoshida's Dungeon Exploration Squad was scheduled to air in April. They had enough footage from the other day's expedition and the incident with the Wandering Manor on the first floor to put together a pilot episode. As long as they could start filming their monster-scanning footage by early March, they'd still be on schedule. Yoshida's acquaintance's proposal wouldn't result in any useful footage for the show, but...

"After all we've been through, we deserve a little perk, don't we?" Yoshida smiled.

JGSDF Camp Narashino, Funabashi, Chiba Prefecture

First Lieutenant Iori Kimitsu was speaking with Master Sergeant Hirohide Hagane about their next mission, prior to a briefing with Terasawa.

"Escort duty down to the thirty-second floor?" Hagane asked.

"It's already been scheduled for next week," she responded.

The safe area had already been divvied up into districts following its discovery last month, and bidding for their use was set to occur tomorrow.

With the theory being that finders' rights applied to dungeon floors, and the finders being members of the US Dungeon Strike Force and Japanese Dungeon Attack Group, the area had been divided between America and Japan. Iori's team had just returned from escorting the first convoy of porters down.

"The tough part is going to be the night section from the twenty-eighth floor to the thirtieth," she added.

The dungeon environment grew steadily darker from the twenty-eighth floor through the thirtieth—breaking down rather neatly into "twilight," "night," and "total darkness." Technically there was a

fourth night floor—the thirty-first floor, where the boss Cimeies had lurked, had been truly pitch-black, darker than even the thirtieth—but they knew the route and could pass through it without any risk of monster encounters now.

"Those trapdoor spiders are probably our biggest worry." She looked up at Hagane with an expression of concern.

Across the three floors of the night section lurked creatures resembling large trapdoor spiders. "Trapdoors" were what the team had taken to calling them. They lurked in nests under the floor and darted out to seize prey, gripping victims with their giant maws and dragging them under. Truth be told, they made the jumping spiders on the first floor of Yokohama look like garden pests.

"At least there are no death mantises running around on the thirty-first floor anymore," Hagane offered by way of consolation. "So we don't have to worry about suddenly losing any limbs. The trapdoors aren't so tough as long as you get a chance to unload on them. We'll be all right with the spiders as long as the scouts do their jobs."

Thankfully the trapdoors didn't appear to be smart enough to ignore scouts and lie in wait for actual convoys to come through. They'd attempt to attack anything nearby that moved.

"Still, we can't be too careful. The last time we had to fight one off, it bit through a level III ballistic shield."

"So, who are we escorting?" Hagane asked, changing the subject.

"We won't know for sure until bidding is concluded, but a request from at least one of the winning companies is sure to come our way via the JDA."

"Jeez—we really are like a naval escort fleet. You know, depending on the scale of the convoy, our team might not be enough."

There were plenty of plots up for grabs in the safe area. Even with as little as one porter per plot—and development would certainly require far more—the resulting caravan would be too long for a single party to protect, even one as elite as the JDAG.

"All we can do is encourage them to break things up into small enough convoys that we can safely cover them," Iori responded.

The other day the DSF team had escorted a caravan of just four Falcon porters and two engineers down to the eighteenth floor. That alone had taken a party of eight DSF members, including Simon Gershwin.

"If we're taking down K2HF porters," Hagane observed, "then our limit would probably be eight—no, maybe just six."

He was invoking the acronym for the joint development initiative involving Kawasaki Heavy Industries, KYB, Honda, and FANUC. The resulting K2HF designs were on the large side as dungeon porters went. Plus— "I know they're in a hurry to pick up the slack with everyone showing off their porters on the eighteenth floor, but..." He trailed off.

The K2HF porters were still in the prototype phase and came in a variety of shapes and styles. The ones they'd escorted down the other day had been cylindrical, spiderlike units equipped with drones meant for searching out enemies.

"It's like they're prioritizing showing off Japanese ingenuity by working in all this cutting-edge technology, but when it comes to practical use..." he lamented, scratching the back of his head.

"It might be a little too hasty to assess their performance yet," Iori countered. "I figured they were just field-testing things as part of the development process."

"No, they really plan to deploy those, or so I hear. They're called prototypes, but they're basically the final models, with just a few kinks left to work out before going into mass production. They're already seeing use around the safe area."

"That's true. We've already gotten provisional, near-complete maps and monster data for the floor."

The drone-carrier porters were each equipped with a large inverter generator, and had been sitting snugly in the safe area flying drones across the expanse of the thirty-second floor, mapping out the regions beyond the safe area. The generators, of course, produced noise—ordinarily undesirable in dungeons because it drew monsters. Most international porters had prioritized cutting down noise as much as possible, which meant sacrifices in functionality. In contrast, Japan's K2HF project had focused on adding features that

required a noisy generator, but tried to include noise-dampening materials to compensate. Trying to have it all had led to horribly inefficient porters whose usefulness had been questionable at best. However, being able to park them in the safe area had cleared up the question of practicality. They could not only shed the heavy and costly sound-dampening equipment, but didn't even need to worry about protection from slimes, since they'd stay parked in the safe area.

"Finally found a use for the AW3D system, huh?" Hagane asked.

AW3D was a mapping analysis system developed by NTT Data. It allowed for the production of extremely detailed maps from low-altitude images. It had seemed promising at the beginning of dungeon exploration, but explorers had quickly found that in practice, the drones had proven hard to fly, especially within cavernous areas, and had no practical way to recharge. The system had gone unimplemented until now—yet another safe-area shake-up.

"Right. They've said they're still testing it, but the maps and monster data will come in handy. We can't have anyone wandering out from the safe area unprepared."

The safe area was situated on the thirty-second floor—outside it were monsters that would give even the world's top teams difficulty. It was certain death unless you were in the double digits of explorer rankings, and even the bottom half of that group would be in for the fights of their lives. Hence the drone exploration. To their good fortune, the floor didn't appear to feature any flying monsters.

"Still..." Iori put her hand to her chin.

"Is there something else?" Hagane asked.

As team captain, there was certain information to which only Iori was privy. However, she'd generally share all but the most confidential of details with Hagane.

"The whole floor's been mapped...but no one's found a staircase down."

"You're kidding. So we've got escort *and* stair-searching duty?" Hagane asked. "Is it possible the thirty-second floor's the last one?"

"We haven't encountered a dungeon boss yet. The prevailing

theory is still that there's something lower."

"There was that knight-thing on the thirty-first..."

"He was certainly a boss, but he dropped a key to the next floor. If anything, he was more like a...midpoint guardian. Plus," she pointed out, "Yoyogi Dungeon is still standing."

When a dungeon's boss monster was defeated, the dungeon was supposed to disappear. If the rules up to now still held, Yoyogi's continued existence was proof enough that there were still more floors further down.

"Anyway," Iori said, pivoting to address at least one of Hagane's concerns, "we don't know for sure that they'll be using K2HF porters for the escort mission."

"You think? This whole thing is a government initiative. They're not going to let it go without pushing homegrown Japanese goods, no matter how much more inconvenient they are."

"Perhaps, but the K2HF units don't have gun turrets."

They were truly designed only for transport, which made them a bit hard to compare against international offerings like Falcon's armed porters.

"They're probably thinking about exports, which would be a problem for armed porters..."

"Right, the arms-export ban..."

"Though they could probably get around the export ban on armed porters," Hagane speculated, "by classifying them as noncombat vehicles meant for rescue, transport, escort, and cleanup operations, and argue that in dungeons, the weaponry is simply essential for such noncombat operations, but..."

"That's going to take more political cooperation than even the majority party currently has among its own members, right?" Iori grimaced.

If Japanese manufacturers were forbidden to export armed porters, it would force them to push up prices on domestic sales in order to compensate for the limited market. Japanese porter manufacturing was going to be in a bad way if something didn't change. When it came to dungeon gear procurement, price and availability were already pushing the JSDF to the budgetary brink. It

might not be long before even the JDAG started relying on imported products produced by Falcon. Even so, it seemed unlikely that the initial safe-area development caravans would use anything other than K2HF porters.

"Price aside, apparently the K2HF models' balance specs are the best in the world," Iori remarked.

"Ah, right. That ASIMO tech..."

The unarmed K2HF porters boasted tremendous load-bearing capabilities, and that alone might allow them to compete against Falcon's armed porters on the global market.

"And there are some people speculating that the best weapons used by Japanese teams on lower floors might not take the form of traditional firepower at all..." Hagane added.

Small arms had already proven less effective past floor twenty. As exploration continued downward into the thirties—or sixties—it was possible nothing less than some sort of sci-fi laser or rail gun would suffice. So instead there was a slightly eccentric push among certain Japanese researchers to turn toward *other* kinds of offense—namely, augmenting the abilities already buffed by dungeons.

"I wouldn't get my hopes up for any kind of psy-expander though," Iori responded, shaking her head.

Early on, she'd been subjected to numerous tests trying to measure her abilities, but the field had proven about as fruitful as looking into so-called magicules. She'd gotten the suspicion that the researchers had had no idea what they were even looking for.

And she hadn't been alone. The entire field had largely been written off—but recently, a certain party had started steadily auctioning skill orbs and dropping crazy revelations about stats. There was renewed interest now—it seemed like a dungeon-research sea change might be at hand.

"It would be fantastic, of course, if they could invent some sort of ability-enhancers, but..."

"Honestly, it'd probably be more practical to start packing C4 into something like Ghost Robotics' Minitaurs and sending out suicide bomber units. Might be cheaper too."

"Controlling them from a porter?" Iori asked.

"Maybe. Though if you could only pack a porter-load, you'd probably need to save them for boss fights."

"In that case, why not just load a Javelin onto a porter?"

The FGM-148 Javelin was a portable multipurpose missile. It was powerful enough to even be used as anti-tank weaponry.

"You forget what country you're in? The best we could manage would be an LMAT or 84."

The LMAT was the common name for the Type 01 light anti-tank guided missile. It had been adopted in Japan instead of the Javelin, but was useless against targets without heat signatures. To make up for that weakness, a variant of the Carl Gustaf M3 recoilless rifle had been reintroduced as the 84 mm.

"Maybe we can get some domestic firepower on a porter, but don't expect any of the most expensive types to be in our budget. Drones with C4 or Semtex are going to be more cost-effective."

A single Javelin cost nearly forty thousand dollars. The JDAG wouldn't get budget approval for that type of weaponry to be used against common enemies, even down on the thirty-second floor.

"It's a tough road ahead." Iori sighed.

"You're telling me. Either way, we're going to need to totally reevaluate what kind of equipment we require on the deeper levels, in light of how our fight with Cimeies went."

The two continued to rack their brains on how best to approach the lower floors, their confidence in the size of the convoys they could safely escort steadily dropping.

Annotations

***Level III ballistic shield*:** Designated by the Japan Institute of Justice as the standard bulletproof shield for police and military use. Stops up to 7.62-mm rounds.

February 22, 2019 (Friday)

Yoyogi-Hachiman, Office

"I can't thank you enough for the other day."

Sayama had come over to fill us in on his decision to sign a contract with the JDA. He was sitting on our sofa, head lowered into a deep bow.

He also let us know what had come of the mikan panic. Apparently all the magic-grown unshu mikan at Sakuragawa and elsewhere had disappeared just as suddenly as they'd come, leaving behind ordinary mikan trees. The affected groves would remain under observation for a while, but no one expected anything else unusual to occur. The magic crystal market had also dropped back down, with their main value driver disappearing. A few sovereign wealth funds stood poised to take major hits.

"Thankfully no one outside the organization, yourselves, and the JDA knew about the tree at NARO, but news about the twenty-first-floor orange trees did get out via the JDA. Some of the groups who were hoping to get rich off the mikans may be sending explorers down there to retrieve samples."

However, there were no more special trees like the one Sayama had cut the branch from on the twenty-first floor. They could try bringing back branches from the other trees and grafting them, but that was unlikely to work. How did we know? Well, we couldn't be sure about how it would have gone previously, but we had it on good authority that the current King of the Woods would use his power to ensure that nothing happened.

"We heard from Naruse that the Guild has also established a rule banning requests for an escort down to the twenty-first floor to collect branches," I responded, using the nickname for the JDA's Commercial Affairs Section, which handled job assignments.

"But governments betting big on the magic oranges probably won't give up just like that. There are already groups of explorers from different nations stationed on the eighteenth floor..." Sayama put his head in his hands, frowning.

Even if there were rules in place against *cutting* branches, some people would probably try to get around them by digging up whole trees by their roots. That is, if they could. It wasn't always clear how the dungeon floors' indestructible properties would apply. But even if

digging up entire trees worked, if anything seemed like it posed the risk of magic contagion again, the King of the Woods would shut it right down.

"By the way, do I really not need to pay you back for the gear?" Sayama asked.

"Of course. You'll probably be heading down into dungeons a lot more moving forward. Better to keep and get use out of it."

King of the Woods though he might have been, Sayama's true selling point for the JDA was Storage. That was the skill Miyoshi had emphasized when promoting him to our JDA connections, of course, but it was also more relevant with safe-area development ramping up.

"Very well then. I'll keep the gear. Thank you." He bowed his head in a small nod of appreciation, before bringing a freshly poured cup of Miyoshi's coffee to his lips. "That's actually a relief. I was thinking I'd pay you back, but I just about fainted when I looked in a catalogue and saw the price of the gear came to forty-eight million yen." He added that that was far more than he had in savings.

"Hey, don't worry!" I replied. "If anything, what we gave you isn't *enough* of a reward for secretly saving the world!"

"I might have believed that if I hadn't also looked up the value of Physical Resistance." He stared off into the distance, whatever numbers he'd seen apparently still haunting him.

The winning bids from our auctions were public. A quick search of "Physical Resistance orb" on the net would have pulled up our sales figures right away. Our auctions had had an effect on the general orb market too, by establishing market values that anyone else trying to sell an orb could reference.

"It's far, far too large a reward for anything I've done."

"Now that's not true." Miyoshi jumped in, taking out her tablet and quickly running some searches online. "There were six hundred ninety thousand tons of unshu mikan shipped last year. That means annual earnings of around 138 to 207 billion yen."

Fund managers usually took performance cuts of around twenty percent. For saving an industry worth 138 billion yen at the lowest, that meant Sayama was entitled to around 27.6 billion yen. Although

that still wouldn't quite earn him Storage.

"Thinking about it that way, 2.5 billion for Physical Resistance and some chump change for some gear was actually a total steal!" I said, glossing over the matter of the second orb.

"I don't know about 'total.'" He smiled.

Okay, if you added Storage onto that, we had *slightly*(?) overpaid him, but he'd been the only one who could have done the job. It was supply and demand.

"So is that why you sold your soul to the JDA? A roundabout repayment?" Miyoshi put the tablet down with a shrug.

He'd seemed unsure about the whole thing when Miyoshi had first suggested joining.

"That was part of it, I won't lie..." he responded.

His whole career had been in botanical research. It was a dramatic shift to suddenly move into the field of dungeon exploration—probably so extreme it felt like waking up in an isekai. Hey, he even had a god-mode cheat and everything!

"But I'm starting to genuinely think the work will be interesting too," he added.

"How so?" I asked.

"Well, think about all the wonderful new citrus fruits we could find! It's a whole new world of plants no one's ever seen before, and I get to explore it! Like Tomitaro Makino or Joseph Banks exploring the South Seas!"

Ah, well. You could take the researcher out of the citrus field, but you couldn't take the citrus field out of the researcher...or something like that. Sayama, apparently fired up, was clenching his fists in anticipation.

"I guess that makes you Captain Cook, Kei," Miyoshi commented with a smile. "All aboard the *HMS Endeavour*!"

Joseph Banks was a famous botanist who had been aboard James Cook's inaugural expedition to the South Seas.

"Thanks, but 'endeavoring' isn't my style. At least I'm confident about my ability to prevent scurvy." All it took was a little vitamin C, after all, and we weren't exactly hurting for ascorbic acid in this day and age. All it would take would be half a lemon per day. Preventing

scurvy at sea had been one of Captain Cook's claims to fame, but if one knew the method, even a child could manage it.

"One would hope," Miyoshi agreed. "Well, anyway, the Dungeon Management Section seems like a great place to work. I'm glad it worked out!"

"Thanks!" Sayama responded with a smile. "Ah, that's right! They're actually throwing me a welcome party tonight!"

"A welcome party!"

According to Sayama, when he'd dropped by the other day to sign his contract, he'd been approached by a gaggle of female staffers and invited out. His old workplace had mostly been middle-aged men, so he wasn't used to cross-gender workplace interactions at all—not that he minded it.

That was all well and good, but, uh...tomorrow was the bidding day for the safe area. Could the Dungeon Management Section really afford to be throwing parties?

"Was Naruse the one showing you around the other day?" Miyoshi asked.

"Huh? Oh. Yes," Sayama responded.

"Aha, aha..." Miyoshi grinned.

Apparently seeing Naruse getting alone time with the new big department catch had spurred a competitive streak in the other staffers. Sayama being single, that wasn't necessarily a problem, I supposed, but...

"I know you're feeling high on that Tomitaro Makino kite right now, but don't go dropping lines like 'He who does not use his sexual proclivities is as good as the living dead,' okay?"

"Wh-What?! No way I'm saying that!" Sayama turned beet red.

Apparently the Japanese botanist Tomitaro Makino had had a *biiit* of a womanizing streak. Well, I say apparently, but given that quote was on the record, it was all but a certainty. Feeling like an explorer botanist was all well and good, but yeah, lines like that *would* have a tendency to not go over well in the workplace...

At any rate, Sayama seemed to be enjoying himself, which was good.

"You know, it really struck me again when I was signing my

contract, but the whole dungeon field has a strange view of money."

There were the branch-office setup fees Nathan had casually floated, Sayama's own salary, the expenses we'd paid to solve the citrus crisis—he was watching huge sums fly around like they were so much spare laundromat change. It was all the more shocking given his background at a public research institute, where every scrap of budget was hard-won.

"So then I'm guessing you got a pretty big bump in pay compared to NARO, huh?" Miyoshi commented.

"A 'big bump' doesn't even cover it. It's almost five times as much."

"Wait," she replied. "Only five times? Not fifty?"

"Oh, shush. I wouldn't even know what to do with that much money."

Miyoshi played off her question as a joke, but knowing what she did about public employee salaries, even a fiftyfold increase wouldn't have covered the full market value of Storage. If the JDA tried to resell the Storage orb they currently had in our safekeeping, in light of acquiring Sayama, they'd make out like bandits.

Sayama seemed satisfied with his pay, but the Queen of the Merchants couldn't help but mutter "cheapskates" under her breath. I wondered if Sayama had heard.

Oh well. No organization could really hope to function throwing that much salary behind a single employee anyway, so there was probably no use crying over it.

"So what kind of work does the JDA plan to have you do?" I asked. We'd figured the bulk of his work would consist of running liaison with the FAO concerning the Ukemochi System and aiding transport operations down to the safe area.

As soon as I finished the question, it was like a light bulb went off over Sayama's head.

"Ah, that's right! They gave me something to pass on to you two!"

He pulled out an envelope, handing it to Miyoshi.

"An envelope?" she asked. "That certainly is...antiquated of them." Nevertheless, she gamely picked up a nearby box cutter and

slit the envelope.

"Not a very antiquated way of opening it, though," I commented.

"Well, we don't have any proper letter openers on hand, and how often would we even use them anyway? About the only sealed envelopes we get are notices from city hall. These open envelopes just as well as they open boxes." With a huff, she extracted the contents of the envelope. A strange smirk crossed her face.

"What is it?"

"Here." She handed me the paper inside, still grinning.

To sum up the contents of the letter: The JDA had hired Sayama, but before the safe area opened, we were requested to prep him on maintenance of the second-floor field and help catalogue his abilities.

"Uh, what is this?" I looked up.

The Dungeon Management Section should have wanted everyone and their cat helping prep for auctioning plots in the safe area. Why were they basically letting Sayama play around? Maybe it was because they didn't want to scare away their valuable new hire by making themselves seem like some kind of toxic work environment. Or maybe they were so shorthanded they didn't even have time to bother bringing him up to speed. Either explanation seemed plausible. What was certain, however, was— "They seriously just passed the buck to us, huh?" Miyoshi asked, after noticing I was done reading.

"The buck, the doe, and the little fawn too."

"This is all your fault for tutoring Naruse in the art of buck-passing. She's out for revenge. How's it feel to be on the receiving end?"

"I never taught her that!"

"The clever disciple learns by observing, in all moments, the master."

"Who are you, Saito? Am I everybody's 'coach' now?"

"Oh well. I suppose it makes sense for us to help get him acquainted with our field, but looking into his skill application should really be the JDA's work. I suppose it's just been kicked over to us since we used it to recommend him. It's basically like asking for

extra details left off of his resume and CV, I suppose...”

“Okay, but familiarizing him with the field is hardly a multiday project.” It wasn’t like we actively managed it or really knew anything about agriculture. We basically just let it sit and checked in on it from time to time.

Miyoshi crossed her arms and cocked her head.

“What are you supposed to do with the field?” she asked.

“That’s actually what I’d like to ask,” Sayama responded, looking at us with concern. “What field are we even talking about, to begin with?”

Ah, right! He hadn’t been around when Nathan had visited the field, so he didn’t know about our little three-square-meter plot.

“It’s on the second floor of the dungeon,” I replied, “ and it’s a little out of the ordinary.”

“The second floor...of the dungeon?” Sayama scrunched his face.

Obviously he knew about the oranges growing lower down, but he seemed perplexed to hear there was any sort of deliberate agriculture.

“Kei, that WDA report probably hasn’t reached NARO,” Miyoshi pointed out.

Of course. Spreading around too much information before food safety had been ascertained would only have invited confusion. Still...

“But weren’t other organizations running tests to replicate our dungeonization findings?”

“Probably only ones directly involved in dungeon research.”

It was probably too early to publish any findings. That meant that right now the only organizations that should have known would have been the kinds of international research outlets with direct ties to Nathan. We’d been hearing rumblings about environmentalist protests targeting dungeon-grown foods, which meant there had must have been some sort of leak in that communication pipeline. But that was a problem for another time.

“Either way,” I said, turning to Sayama, “there isn’t much to get you familiar with. We really just mostly ignore it.”

“Huh?”

"We'll show you where it is, and then you can use it for whatever you want after that."

"Understood. I'll check in with Chief Saiga about what he wants me to do."

Sayama pulled out a notepad and jotted a reminder down.

"The real problem is going to be documenting your abilities," I observed.

"My...abilities?"

"They want us to find out what you can do with your skills, right?"

"Ah, like a curriculum vitae for skills."

When you wanted research funding, you listed your accomplishments. When you wanted Dungeon Management Section funding on the grounds of having a skill, apparently you enumerated what it could do.

"Yeah," I responded. "Although in this case it's all about what your abilities are as a living organism, so emphasis on the 'vitae' I guess."

"Okay, well," he began, "I have done some experimenting on my own. I seem to be able to influence plant growth speed, and"—he paused dramatically—"I can control the weather."

"You can *control the weather*?" I stammered.

"Huh, I suspected as much." Miyoshi looked up with just the faintest hint of surprise in her voice.

The role of the King of the Woods was, in a sense, management of said woods. That would, I supposed, include charge of all manner of things which might affect growth of its flora and fauna. I mean, I guessed.

"But can he really go writing that in a CV?" Miyoshi asked. "Worst-case scenario, they'll use the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification to ship him off to Africa!"

Relying on one person's dungeon skill to combat desertification? I guess I'd heard of crazier things.

"You're kind of like some rain-dance shaman, huh?" I smiled.

"The problem is in his case, the rain actually comes." Miyoshi frowned.

"Ah, well, they *do* say arid regions account for about forty percent of the world's geography," Sayama said with a laugh, as if it were someone else's problem entirely.

Uh, buddy, this is your *life on the line.* But wait. He was King of "the Woods."

"Do you think Sayama's 'woods' even include Africa?" I asked Miyoshi.

"Hard to say," she responded.

With the travel ban hanging over our heads, it wasn't like we had any way to check.

And Sayama wouldn't have much more freedom either. It was our fault, but for now—until and if the JDA decided to use its copy of Storage on someone—he was as far as anyone knew the world's only user of Storage besides Miyoshi. Just like with us, the government wouldn't be keen to let him run off to any dangerous regions on his own. The chances of being kidnapped, forced to undergo facial reconstructive surgery, and being squirreled away by some clandestine organization were too high. Was I getting carried away?

That said, the original King of the Woods hadn't been able to leave his domain. Maybe that meant that *anywhere* Sayama went counted as his "woods." It wasn't like he'd bumped up against any invisible barriers yet. Yeah, a roaming forest. That might be it.

"Let's just leave the skill write-up as 'demonstrates influence over the growth of dungeon-affected flora,'" I suggested. "That's just the right amount of ambiguity." It would also cause more than enough of a stir on its own. "Plus, it's common knowledge that skills can change and grow with use. So even if you get called out for having some unreported ability later, you can claim it just developed."

"Understood." He nodded, then took out a notepad and started scribbling something down with a look of concentration on his face.

Uh, hey, maybe don't leave evidence?

"That just leaves the matter of your Storage capacity, right?" I asked.

"I tried out a few things when I got back to Tsukuba," he began sheepishly. Apparently he hadn't been able to find the right type of

object to really give him a proper gauge, but... "I was pretty startled when I first saw an entire car disappear." He grinned and scratched his head, adding that full parking lots made for convenient practice spots.

Full parking lots?! That's just asking to get caught! This was trouble. It seemed like our cavalier attitudes toward skill use were starting to rub off on Sayama. And he used to be such a nice boy too...

"Let's...give up on cars and try a little secret," I suggested. "Iron balls."

As far as we'd been able to tell, Storage's capacity depended more on mass than volume. The easiest way to get a firm estimate of how much Sayama could hold would be to use a *lot* of something relatively uniform and sufficiently heavy, so that we could measure in small increments while still hitting the maximum before long. A load of iron balls with uniform diameters would do the trick.

"We've only got ten thousand eight-centimeter balls," Miyoshi commented, "so we'll only be able to test up to twenty tonnes."

We just had to start by having him store some huge object we knew the weight of, and add iron balls in measured increments to try to get a rough estimate of the maximum capacity. But what would work?

"Buses?" I asked.

"I tried those, remember? I had to give up on them since I wasn't hitting the limit," Miyoshi responded.

Plus we didn't really know how much a bus weighed.

"Hmm..."

There was water, but large bodies of liquid had proven hard to store, probably because the user couldn't fully differentiate what was the target—how much to store—and what wasn't. We'd already failed in a brief coastline experiment trying to store water from the sea. Of course we couldn't store the whole ocean! And Storage probably couldn't register a more granular target than that.

However, storing water in containers worked, so if you could just narrow down the target somehow...

"If only we could somehow store water straight from the pipes," I

lamented.

Storage and Vault both depended on direct contact with the object. Although Miyoshi had developed her ability to the point where she could store and launch objects from a short distance away, provided there were no obstructions.

"If we just used a sink..." Miyoshi ran some math. "A household faucet with a thirteen millimeter diameter would only let out about twenty liters a minute. We'd only get about thirty cubic meters letting it run all day."

Yikes. Standing around all day just for thirty cubic meters of water definitely wasn't an efficient use of time...

"What about dipping meter-long containers in the ocean, then storing those?"

"And if his Storage capacity is one thousand tonnes? Where are you going to get a thousand boxes that large?"

"Couldn't you just eject the box from Storage afterward, and keep using the same one?"

"Eject *just* the box?"

Storing huge quantities of water on its own might have been hard, but if you could just temporarily contain them, then remove the container afterward...

"Why don't we give it a try? In micro-mode," Miyoshi suggested. She ran into the kitchen, returning a minute later with a glass of water. "Behold!" she proclaimed to us, her captive audience. "What you see before you is one ordinary glass of water! It has not been tampered with in any way!"

"Um..."

What kind of magic show are we about to sit through?

"Now watch closely!"

She picked up a magazine, unfolded it, and set it down in front of the glass as a cover. She waved her hands theatrically as if doing some sort of spell and then— "One, two, three! Voila!" She lifted the magazine. There sat an empty glass. "What could have happened to the water?"

So she'd stored the water and glass, then ejected just the glass?

"I did it," she said, finally speaking like a normal person again.

"All I had to do was concentrate."

"So wait," I responded. "If you can do that, do you think you could store an unopened bottle, take out just the contents, then eject the empty bottle again?"

"Oooh! That'd be cool! Hold on, let's try, let's try!" Miyoshi pulled an unopened bottle of mineral water out of the fridge. She secreted the bottle into Storage, then took it out again, and—"Damn. Looks like that was too much to hope for. I'm not a human Coravin yet."

The bottle glistened on the table, H2O still inside.

A Coravin (a trademarked term) was a tool for pouring wine without undoing the cork. It inserted a thin needle into the cork and used pressurized gas to force the wine out.

"I wouldn't have even needed a needle! I could have revolutionized wine!" she cried.

"Hold on, if it takes gas out every time...won't that depressurize the bottle?" I asked.

"Hm... Yeah, and wine does boil at only thirty degrees when the air pressure is reduced to one-tenth..." She added that in that case, you might as well just drink it before it ever became a problem.

But in that case you wouldn't need a Coravin in the first place...

"Do you think you couldn't pull the water out of the bottle because you *thought* you might not be able to?" I asked.

"You mean it's a mind-over-matter issue? That's certainly possible. In that case, I could probably do it with just a little more practi—"

"On second thought, knowing you, it's best to pretend we never had this conversation."

"Whaaat?"

"And that's not all. If word got out that Storage users could pull off a stunt like that, no one would ever trust them around a locked safe again."

"Ooooh."

Storage already threatened to put its users in the sights of the world's crime-fighting organizations thanks to its applications in smuggling. No reason to add fuel to the fire.

"But...it'd be *awesome* if I could do it, right?"

"Awesome? Who would you show it off to?" The only long-term outcome of showing off a use of Storage like that was never being allowed near an object in a glass case again. Forget wine looters or bank robbers, Storage-users would make the world's greatest phantom thieves.

"It's just human nature." She shrugged. "Tell someone the impossible is doable, and they're going to want to try it out—no matter the danger."

"You're putting Storage in the same category as guns and nuclear bombs now, I see..."

Sayama proved capable of replicating Miyoshi's water-glass trick, but I wasn't able to do it with Vault. Thankfully, the silent nature of the skill let me try it without alerting the other two. I would have to live with my secret in shame. It felt bad to be the only one left out!

It might have been the same factor that we suspected prevented me from firing iron balls like Miyoshi—time didn't pass in Vault, which probably limited my ability to influence objects stored within. Or maybe it was exactly that kind of assumption that was preventing me from doing it. *Argh, dungeon skills are so hard.*

"Hey, what do you think happens to the liquid inside Storage?" I asked.

"What do you mean?" Miyoshi replied.

"I mean if you store two water cups and take the cups back out afterward, does the water all...mix together? Or do you still think of it as being two separate objects?"

If you stored a bunch of water and could only extract it all at once... You'd have to be pretty careful about where you took it back out, that was for sure. It might have been a problem of awareness again—but how was one person supposed to keep in mind that two liters had come from Container A, three from Container B, etc.? Maybe if they were different *types* of water? Rainwater and tap water? Would you be able to distinguish between two different brands of bottled water? What about contextual factors? Like, for tap water, could you keep it separated into different categories like scooped, boiled, and freshly poured? I supposed if you just had some way of drawing distinctions like that, dealing with separate

quantities of water wouldn't be any different from other Storage extractions... Right?

"This is just my personal case, but I see the names displayed as things like, 'Water, 173.2 grams' and 'Water, 802.4 grams,'" Miyoshi replied.

"Like item names?!" And down to the decimal point? *Weird*. "Guess that takes care of the need for measuring cups while cooking," I suggested.

So apparently Storage gave the user names that helped them distinguish between different objects. But if that distinction were mass, what if they'd stored the same amounts?

"That's not necessarily true," she responded. "For example, when I'm making coffee, I can't adjust how much water I take out, so I still need to measure. And if I store more than two quantities of flour, it's not always the amount that gets displayed..."

"It's not?"

"Forgive the interruption, but I've also been running some tests, so if I may..." Sayama raised his hand. "See, I seem to see a date and time next to different sources of water I've stored, down to the second."

"Whoa, whoa, like computer files?!" What if he took it out and then restored it? But wait, more importantly... "Wait, what happens when you store a bunch of iron balls at once?" I looked at Miyoshi.

There wouldn't be a time-stamp differentiator, and having to sift through a mental menu of iron balls all with weights off by fractions of a gram seemed way too cumbersome.

"I just see 'Iron Ball (8 cm),'" she replied. "Probably because there's no need to differentiate."

"Huh," I grunted. "Mind over matter *again*?"

"Perhaps."

Say, how's it work for you? Miyoshi asked via telepathy, inquiring about Vault.

I haven't tried storing too many overlapping objects to begin with, but I definitely don't get the granular item names you guys do. When there are similar objects, they all kind of get lumped together. The only thing that really pops into my brain is, like, general nouns.

I guess since time doesn't pass, there's no need to think about anything going bad faster. Maybe that's the difference? she suggested.

*Might be mind over matter...*yet again*. I'll try thinking about needing different distinctions and let you know the results.*

"Well at least we know skills can be personalized to the user now," I concluded.

"We've known that about skills from unnumbered orbs for a while," Miyoshi reminded me.

Right. Skills from orbs without numerals on them had demonstrated a broad range of flexibility. We still probably didn't know all the abilities most could grant, as users were hesitant to come forward and give away their secrets.

"This is all a lot to chew on." Sayama crossed his arms and looked down, deep in thought.

As a researcher, he was probably already thinking about all the tests he wanted to put his abilities through.

"Well, hey, if nothing else, at least we've worked out a good way to measure your Storage capacity," I pointed out.

We could dip the aforementioned meter-long box under water, have Sayama store it, then extract only the box and repeat. We'd have a clear mass indicator that would allow us to hit the maximum fairly quickly.

"Not bad," Miyoshi agreed. "All you'd be doing would be storing the box and taking it back out in the water. No need to do any heaving lifting! Nice, Kei!" She set about ordering twenty-millimeter-thick acrylic panels and some acrylic adhesive.

Of course, it hadn't crossed our minds at the time just how much trouble we were going to have to go through to make sure that Sayama, who couldn't store or take out objects at a distance yet, would be able to actually *touch* a sunken meter-long container over and over. That trouble lay ahead.

***

In the afternoon, after Sayama had left, we had a meeting with

Miharu Naruse to discuss the JDA's installation of one of our pro stat-measuring devices. The installation was scheduled for the next day, Saturday, and with Nakajima in NYC, we'd be assisting the installation ourselves. Since we didn't expect Naruse to be in over the weekend, we'd called her over for a Friday prep meeting.

"I haven't seen you two in a bit!" Naruse said, stepping in.

"Sorry to bother you when you're so swamped," I responded.

We knew the situation was tense at the JDA with all the work relating to the safe area, but according to Naruse, we didn't know the half of it. That was why we'd seen so little of her recently.

"I'm actually grateful you gave me an excuse to get out of there," she informed us with a weary smile. "It's like a bad joke. We're stuck sorting applications sunup till the following sunup. We haven't been able to get to our normal work at all." They hadn't been able to limit the initial bidding to Japanese companies, which meant they were now inundated by time-consuming international requests, all easily submitted via the online application. "And a lot of these companies are putting in a bid for *every* block. It's a nightmare. What do they even plan to do if they win?"

"Sell off the excess space?" I suggested.

"There's a rule against title transfers," Naruse informed me.

"Eh, they could probably offer spots to researchers from other institutions, for a fee. They'd find *some* way of making their money back."

"I suppose..."

It would only take a little networking. There was probably no foolproof way to prevent deals like that.

"But it's an auction, right? Isn't it as simple as going with the highest bidder?"

"If that were our only policy, all the blocks would go to China and America, and maybe a few to major corporate alliances or press outlets."

"Press outlets?"

"Certain people seem to be treating safe-area spaces like they're bidding for broadcast rights to the Olympic Games." She rolled her eyes, but I could tell it was no joke. "Some major streaming studios

with deep pockets are in the running too."

"Like Netflix?" I guessed they were kind of a press outlet. Sort of. They might have wanted space to help film documentaries.

"You got it. So we've set industry and company limits, but..."

"Everyone's trying to bend the rules and get around them?"

Naruse nodded, then let her whole body go slack on our sofa as she stared up at the ceiling.

"We have a deposit requirement, which we thought might be a deterrent, but it's been about as effective as trying to put out a forest fire with a squirt gun."

There weren't that many blocks to bid on. Even if it took a one-million-yen deposit for each—even paying a hundred million total for a chance across each of one hundred blocks—major companies wouldn't even blink before ponying up for this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity.

"We need to pore over company data to help determine who gets priority if we hit industry or country limits," Naruse explained.

I figured a raffle would have been easier, but... Ah, you wouldn't want to accidentally let a terrorist group get space in the dungeon or something. Worst-case scenario, you might end up taking the "safe" out of the term "safe area."

The sheer number of applications and number of foreign companies that needed vetting meant the JDA was in an all-hands-on-deck situation for the next several days until all the winners were determined.

"But we heard Sayama was having a welcome party tonight," I said.

"Oh, that..." Naruse trailed off.

Apparently several Dungeon Management section staffers had all been putting in absurd overtime for several days to be able to take just today off, saying it would help them refresh and refocus for the main winner-selection work set to begin tomorrow—and all of them were women.

"The chief begrudgingly approved their vacation requests. I never would have guessed it was for a welcome party."

"Huh? You didn't know about it, Naruse?"

"Not until just a little while ago." Apparently several competitive spirits had flared up in the Dungeon Management Section and were threatening to combust.

"Sayama sure is popular, huh?" I offered tactfully.

"And they don't even know about Storage yet," she replied. "Just that he probably has some sort of connection to D-Powers." It figured that, with Naruse showing him around, people would have assumed he had a link to us.

"But wait, how does being linked to us connect to his popularity?" I asked.

"We're the Dungeon Management Section. We know how much you're making."

"Oh, right. I guess you could just calculate it off our service fees."

"Sorry." Naruse smirked.

Our earnings were private info, but anyone could do the math off the service fees. With the amount of attention our sales had generated, it was inevitable that curious staff members with access to said fees would check. Oh well. It wasn't like they were leaking our info to the media.

"Couldn't you ask Legal Affairs or someone to vet the foreign companies?"

"We got a flat refusal to the tune of 'Not our area and we have our hands full here too,'" Naruse explained.

What? Is the Dungeon Management Section just getting bullied? Is this how they do things at proper government-adjacent organizations?

"So what are you supposed to do?" I asked.

"Put in requests with third-party credit-checking companies. That's all Legal Affairs would do anyway."

"Like Teikoku Databank or Tokyo Shoko Research?"

"Or Creditsafe, Experian, or D&B."

But before even getting to that step, there was a tome of foreign-language material on each foreign bidder to go through, which was exhausting the staff.

"Say, Yoshimura, you and Miyoshi are pretty good at English, right? I don't suppose you'd want some part-time w—"

“No way! There’s a solar system between carrying on conversations and reading legal documents. No way!”

Plus, how was she planning to clear two private citizens working on a tightly controlled secret process like the safe-area bidding? Naruse usually had her act together. The fact that she’d even suggested it was probably a sign of how overworked she was.

Her lips were curled downward into a pronounced, childish frown—she was going through the wringer, no doubt about it. Still, no way!

“By the way,” she said, abruptly pivoting to another subject, “Saiga told me to ask you something.”

“What is it?”

Apparently we didn’t even have time for segues now. Or maybe this was just the real Naruse coming out, her usual deferential demeanor slipping with the busy schedule.

“Do you have any connection with Goten Industrial?”

“Goten?”

We’d heard of them, of course—they were a long-standing industrial manufacturing company. But we’d never done business together, if that was what she meant. The most our paths had crossed was my buying an old tube TV they’d made, back when that was still cutting-edge technology.

“Miyoshi, ring any bells?”

“I miiight know maybe a little,” she answered.

“Out with it...”

Miyoshi came out of the kitchen, where she’d been listening, with a set of mugs on a tray. She was wearing a sly grin.

“Don’t look at me. I haven’t bought nearly enough stock to shoot their prices up that high.”

“You’ve been buying stock?” I asked.

“Just a bit.”

She set the cups on the table then sat down next to me.

“You remember the D132?” she asked.

“Right...that outdated sensor you and Nakajima settled on?”

“It’s a Goten Industrial product.”

“Then...when you were looking for a sensor ‘with its IP tied up in

an older company that had fallen on slightly hard times'..."

"That was Goten?" Naruse interjected.

"At first this was just a bit of insurance," Miyoshi explained. There'd been something fishy from the start about the number of inquiries we'd gotten about a verifier from universities prior to National Center Tests—almost like someone had leaked information about our capabilities specifically to get us to rush a product out and release it into the wild before securing patent rights.

Not one to settle for being made to dance in the palm of someone's hand, Miyoshi had hatched a scheme. The goal: Make whoever was behind the attempted technology theft pay—in this case literally. I could only stand by and pray for the safety of everyone caught in the cross fire. She had a habit of taking things too far.

"I figured that even if whoever is behind it didn't take the bait and the stock's prices just moved as the analyst reports predicted, I'd only be looking at a twenty percent loss," she explained. "Plus, the entertainment sector's doing well. I could probably break even if I held on to my shares long-term."

However, someone had taken the bait—hook, line, and sinker. Apparently one of the verifiers we'd lent to the JDA had been stolen and swapped out with a fake.

"So *that's* what you and Midori were talking about!" Suddenly it was starting to make sense.

"Then that strange clause in the lease agreement about leaks...?" Naruse started.

Miyoshi nodded.

"I didn't want to cause any trouble for you guys," Miyoshi responded. "Pretty nice of me, huh?" It would have seemed almost cruel to hold the JDA responsible if anything were leaked in a situation that seemed designed to guarantee a leak happened. "I'd have liked them to have brought the stolen device to the patent office already, but I guess analyzing it and drafting patent plans that quickly proved a little too tough."

Plus, applying for a patent hastily would have incurred more risk. If it came to a lawsuit and they were asked to present early R&D

documents, they'd either have to scramble to forge some or accept defeat.

"The stock prices started rising one week after the National Center tests. If that was when they swapped the verifier out, they probably spent the intervening days looking over the components and identifying the right piece to target."

The D132 sensor would have been just the right component. It played a key role in the device, only one company made it, ample time remained on its patent, and the company's stocks were currently at a low. All by Miyoshi's design.

"If the verifiers really depended on Goten sensors, they'd stand to turn quite a profit just off of the existing units, given global demand. But more than that, the patent fees for follow-up products could get truly exorbitant."

That's what our mysterious adversary would have been thinking, anyway. Thus their rush to buy up stocks, driving the prices upward.

"See? I told you the whole verifier-order timeline was fishy. Now with the timing of the theft and rise in stock prices, we've basically all but confirmed it."

"So the entire push for us to provide the verifiers by the test date was due to someone trying to get ahold of the tech?"

"Yep. I don't know who's doing this, but judging from how relentless they are in the pursuit of profit, they might even have ties to organized crime."

"Then are you sure you should be provoking them like this?"

"Kei, what are you talking about? This is nothing. We've had international spies *shoot at us* before."

Oh. That was true. There probably weren't many people in Japan who could claim a foreign sniper had tried to assassinate them. Scratch that. There probably weren't many people worldwide.

Anyway, to help set up the coup de grâce, Miyoshi had apparently been quietly buying up Goten stocks put up for sale since the end of last year—though not at a rate to draw attention. With the stock's outlook seeming grim, most people had been more than happy to part with it for twenty percent over evaluation.

"I'm pretty sure I bought up most of the shares owners were

eager to get rid of within the first month. If our opponent was hoping to get shares at their market price, they probably had a harder time than expected."

Miyoshi pulled out a tablet with a certain chart on the screen, which she tapped with her index finger.

"So that's where it landed in the first half of the month?" I asked.

The stock prices weren't hitting the upper limits, but had continued to rise steadily.

"The real make-or-break moment is going to be when verifier sales start on the twenty-fifth!" she explained. She'd already started selling some of her shares to our opponent—for the right asking price. "Still, Goten Industrial has a ton of shares on the market. Trying to buy them up like this... Are they stupid?"

"It's a once-in-a-millennia chance. By the way, just how many shares did *you* buy?"

Miyoshi stuck out her tongue.

"I miiiiight have gotten fifty billion yen's worth."

If you came into possession of more than five percent of a company's issued shares, you'd have to turn in a Large Shareholding Report. Apparently Miyoshi had been aiming to buy up as many shares as she could while staying just under that line.

Naruse nearly spit out her drink.

"A t-twenty percent loss on fifty billion?!" I shouted. "You were willing to throw away ten billion yen?!" If our opponent hadn't bitten, she'd have incurred a twenty percent loss on her investment.

"You've said it before, haven't you? That there isn't really a difference between amounts like forty and fifty billion? That it's all just 'a lot' past a certain point?"

That was true. I'd been focusing on the loss, but thinking of the remainder... It didn't really matter if we had forty or fifty billion in the bank.

"I guess it isn't really that different."

"See?!"

"We really are still ordinary middle-class folk at heart, huh?" There was no way we ordinary folk could appreciate the difference between fifty and forty billion.

"Well said," Miyoshi agreed.

"Um...I don't think there are too many 'ordinary middle-class folk' who can afford to buy fifty billion yen worth of anything," Naruse timidly pointed out.

That... She had a point. But I couldn't change how it *felt*. It was like how using a credit card could shield you from the psychic effects of overspending. As long as your remaining credit was still more than you'd ever need, you wouldn't really feel a loss.

"And don't worry; I've already sold off enough at profit to avoid any actual loss. After closing today, I'll let the rest go at market price. That way next week if they go looking to buy any..."

"They'll see that the prices have already collapsed."

"They might try to shore them back up with their own deals. Either way, you have to give people like this a lesson they won't forget! Buckle up, Mr. Tech Pirate. Class with the Queen of the Merchants is in session!" She clenched her hands into fists.

I rolled my eyes.

"Okay, hope all that goes well."

Even if our opponent was able to shore the stock value back up for a bit, the D132 wasn't actually going to be used in our patented production units. Too bad for them.

"Wait, won't some ordinary investors get caught up in all this?" I asked.

"I haven't seen any other transactions happening at market value, so there probably aren't many other investors hopping on board," she noted. "However, if someone just got swept up in the trend and was buying at these inflated prices without any basis... Well, then I can't be held responsible for their loss." Public information did point to the stock value *declining*, if anything, after all. "This would definitely be a fun situation to kick back and observe objectively." She grinned.

"Is the Securities and Exchange Surveillance Commission going to like this?" I asked.

"I haven't done *anything* illegal! I haven't spread any rumors. Just bought some stocks."

"If you say so..." A thought struck me. "Hold on, how much did

you buy your shares for?”

“Um, 720 to 750 a share. I think I had about sixty-three million shares at my highest.”

“Give me that tablet.”

I took a look at the chart on Miyoshi’s screen, refreshing it to the current numbers.

“And now they’re worth 14,700 yen?!”

“The markets haven’t closed for the day yet.” The Tokyo Stock Exchange closed at 3 p.m.

“That’s a twenty-one-times increase!”

Of course, we couldn’t guarantee every share would move at this price, but sixty-three million shares still meant roughly 926 billion yen. That was even more than we’d made off of Otherworldly Language Comprehension.

“Stock market, am I right?” Miyoshi responded.

I silently handed the tablet back to her, half wishing I hadn’t seen it.

This wasn’t party money, which meant it wasn’t mine. It was company money, if anything. Company money. *Out of sight, out of mind.*

“Um, there’s something I’d still like to ask.” Naruse interjected hesitantly. “Wh-What in the world am I supposed to tell Saiga?”

Miyoshi didn’t miss a beat.

“Just tell him the stock’s rise isn’t due to D-Powers’ purchases. Isn’t that enough?”

“Yeah,” I agreed. “I mean, it’s not like it’s a lie.”

“Exactly!” Miyoshi agreed. “It’s not like it’s a lie!”

“Uhhh...” Naruse’s response was half groan.

“So, should we get to tomorrow’s installation?” I asked.

“Ah, one more thing,” Naruse responded.

“What?”

Naruse looked at Miyoshi.

“What did America give you to get you to agree to do a transport run?”

“Now, now. That’s a trade secret,” I said, answering for Miyoshi.

Although, it wasn’t as if we’d entered into an NDA. The whole

deal had consisted of a verbal agreement with Simon. He hadn't even told us to keep it under wraps.

"So then you *did* make a deal with America!"

"Wait, what?"

"All we knew was that it seemed like they were doing some unusual construction at Yokota Air Base, so we suspected you were involved."

Unusual construction... They were already building something that large?

"We'd like to be able to put in a request with D-Powers if there's anything too big for Sayama. We weren't sure about how to approach it, but if there's already been a success case..."

No one knew how much Sayama could carry yet, but given how much longer Miyoshi had been using the skill, it wouldn't be as much as she could.

"Then you're supposed to find out how they managed to convince us?" I asked.

Naruse nodded.

Unfortunately it wasn't a matter of money, but of playing to Miyoshi's specialized interests. I wasn't sure getting the real answer would actually help the JDA at all in this case.

Just then, the buzzer rang. It wasn't the buzzer by our front door, but rather the one outside the outer gate at the edge of the property. Miyoshi went to check the camera.

"Kei, there's a really pompous looking car outside."

"Pompous? A car?"

Naruse went to look out the window, then let out a gasp.

"That's a diplomatic license plate!"

"What?"

Diplomatic missions in Japan used license plates with the character for "foreign" in a circle to the left of the actual number. And the flag on the license plate was America's.

"Then that must be Hagerty's." In comparison to the sputtering Naruse, Miyoshi seemed unfazed.

"Hagerty?" I asked.

"The American ambassador."

"Say whaaaat?!"

I took another look at the car parked outside.

According to Miyoshi, the diplomatic license plates were reserved for only the topmost officials.

"Isn't it dangerous to draw a distinction like that?" I asked. "It makes them easier targets."

Apparently when the US president visited, they'd at least prepare two cars using the same number, but at that point, why have a separate type of license plate at all?

"What about those other vans behind it?"

"Looks like climate-controlled transport vehicles," Miyoshi responded.

"What are you two standing around for?!" Naruse snapped. "Hurry up and answer the door!"

Miyoshi pressed the button by the buzzer, and the gate door swung open.

"Huh. Might be the first time I've ever seen anything like that," I responded.

"Yoshimura..." Naruse flagged my attention again, her expression posing the unspoken but nonetheless very loud question of *What the* heck *did they promise you?!*

I turned back to Miyoshi.

"Assuming this is the drop-off for the goods, why'd they need to send the ambassador?"

"Hm. Maybe to show who's in charge." She cast a meaningful look to the apartment building behind us. If it was full of foreign spies, as we suspected, then America was making quite a bold play, flaunting its relationship with us by sending its ambassador to pay us a courtesy call. I could only imagine the tizzy foreign intelligence networks must have been in right now.

"To show who's in charge, huh?" That'd certainly do it. Then the thought struck me that we might have been a little underdressed. "Uh-oh. Think it's okay to meet an ambassador like this?" I gestured to my everyday clothes.

"Compared to wearing nothing at all?" Miyoshi raised an eyebrow.

In other words, she didn't have anything else she was ready to

quickly change into.

Same. Unfortunately all I had was a dusty old suit upstairs that probably wouldn't have put a dent in the formality gap.

"I guess it beats being naked."

"Damn straight."

It turned out the ambassador's team had indeed brought over the viticultural items Simon had promised. The convoy was basically acting as a glorified delivery service—bringing the goods straight over after they'd arrived at Yokota via Patriot Express this morning. We exchanged brief introductions, signed a formal written agreement based on the one we'd made with Simon, received hearty handshakes, then saw the whole team off. The entire visit took less than ten minutes.

"Jeez, it was like they literally didn't have a second to spare," I pointed out. "I feel bad about making such busy people play courier."

"At least give them the dignity of calling it 'fostering international amity' or something." Miyoshi laughed. "Anyway, that was a crazy simple contract, huh?"

"Aren't you the one always going on about how you won't sign anything complicated? They probably dumbed it down for you."

"Yeah, but Kei, this is the USA—Land of the Lawsuits."

"You think maybe they had a bunch of superfine print hidden on the back of the sheet they were hoping you wouldn't read?"

"Or maybe invisible ink."

"What are you two going on about? And what is *that*?" an exasperated Naruse asked, pointing to a crate on the floor.

"Ah, that would be the, er, payment..."

"Payment?"

"You were asking how they got our transport services..." I responded.

"Don't tell me that's filled with gold bars!"

Gold bars? No, but...

"'Gold' isn't entirely wrong, from a certain point of view. It is from Côte d'Or."

Côte d'Or was a region renowned for fine wines whose name translated to "golden slopes." It was the region Miyoshi's Montrachet

had come from.

"Wait, then..."

"You can take a look," Miyoshi replied. "It's got to go straight into the cellar anyway."

She pried open the box and started extracting the contents, mouth literally watering.

"To think all it takes to buy the world's richest party is a little fine wine." Naruse watched Miyoshi walk off toward the cellar, bottles clinking in her hands.

I understood her surprise, but hobbyists would be hobbyists...

"I-It's 2016 Montrachet!" Miyoshi protested. "How was I supposed to say no?!"

At least this would answer all the JDA's questions. Not the answer would do them any good.

"Well, if that's all taken care of, why don't we go over the setup for tomorrow," I suggested.

Naruse sighed.

"Looks like I'm going to be working through the weekend no matter what."

"Uh, h-hey, if you're really swamped maybe we can help out...a little!"

I felt like we could at least throw them a proverbial lifeboat, if there were any work we could take. We were the ones who had sent them Sayama, after all, thereby increasing Naruse's workload.

"Really?" Naruse asked, eyes sparkling.

"I-I mean just a bit," I emphasized, pretending to not notice Miyoshi giving me a death glare from near the cellar entrance.

"We're going to have to do something about your weakness for pretty women," Miyoshi said to me down in the cellar, where I'd joined her before our next discussion with Naruse. "You're way too sweet with them."

"*My* weakness?" I asked, gesturing around the room at someone's weakness. "Anyway, 'too sweet,' you say?"

I handed her a bottle of 1996 Château d'Yquem I'd brought with me.

Miyoshi inhaled. It was a wine that had featured in the movie

We're No Angels. The vintage: Miyoshi's birth year.

"Whaaat? Kei, you remembered!"

"Of course."

Today, February 22, was Miyoshi's birthday. I decided to keep it a secret that the other day Saito had jabbed me in the side with her recurve bow, reminding me that a special day for Miyoshi was coming up.

"Who's too sweet now?" I asked.

"Kei. Did you get me a Sauternes just so you could make that joke?"

She turned around happily and started placing bottles into the rack.

Annotations:

***Coravin*:** Proper Coravins use argon gas, but at the time of this story, argon gas wasn't yet approved as a food additive, leading to the use of pressurized oxygen in Japan. Or rather, the Food Sanitation Act amendment to allow the use of argon had been announced in June 2018, but its enactment didn't come until June 2019.

***"That strange clause in the lease agreement about leaks"*:** A callback to *D-Genesis* volume 4, "[The JDA] must endeavor to prevent the leak of information regarding the device to third parties."

***The American ambassador*:** Bill Hagerty, at the time. Resigned on July 22, 2019, leaving the post empty for some time, until Joseph M. Young stepped in as interim ambassador. Rahm Israel Emanuel assumed the post on March 25, 2022, and continues to serve at the time of this printing.

***2016 Montrachet*:** As dutifully reported in volume 7, printed under the temporary brand of "L'Exceptionnelle Vendage Des Sept Domaines," though no such company officially exists. Must have been confusing for consumers at the time—not that any ordinary consumers could have bought it, with bottles only going to those with existing close ties to the Seven Domaines. Still, some bottles have made their way into the hands of general consumers since then, and you occasionally see them pop up at auction—though

whether they're the real deal, it's impossible to tell. Going rate: about ten million yen per bottle as of 2024, LOL.

February 23, 2019 (Saturday)

Yoyogi Dungeon Innergate Facility

Yoyogi Dungeon was abustle. Not deep within the dungeon itself, but in a room just past its main entry gate. It was the first day of the official, open-call boot camp.

Seven trainees—chosen by our tried-and-true "lottery" system—ran in and out of one of the rooms connected to the main dungeon-entrance hallway. At the end of several repetitions, plaintive screams filled the air.

We were in the next room getting the stat-measuring device ready.

"Cathy's really going at it," I noted.

"It *is* our grand opening," Miyoshi observed.

"Apparently Cathy's convinced she could take up to fourteen participants at a pass using child parties, but the problem is shared stat goals."

Too many people wanting the same build would lead to waiting times with course equipment. We'd tried to render all the...experiences...fairly quick, but that didn't mean they were instantaneous. They would still take some time.

We knew we could manipulate stats up through grandchild parties, so theoretically it wouldn't be a problem, but we also had the neighboring room hosting the large-scale stat-measuring device now. Space was limited too.

"We'll just have to see how it goes." I shrugged.

I finished connecting the machine, then gave Miyoshi an "OK" hand sign with my index finger and thumb.

Miyoshi, who had been setting up the control unit computer, immediately started running tests.

"Remember, Kei, today's the big New York event! We've got to finish up!"

"Why?" I asked. "You have something to prepare for it?"

"Of course I do," she responded. "My emotional state! Who knows what kind of findings I need to be prepared for?"

I raised an eyebrow. In the meantime, I took out a tablet and started going through the stat requests of all the enrollees, adjusting them in Making as I did.

"Wait, what's this?" I asked, looking at one of the boot camp members. "Dennis Takaoka?"

"He was one of the JDA-nominations."

"Isn't he a member of Shibu T? That Japanese-Lithuanian guy? We met him on the eighteenth floor." As expected of someone on the cusp of the triple-digit rankings, he had plenty of SP stored up. "Hey, wait a second!" I'd stopped cold while looking over his stat requests. "He wants each stat raised evenly? He'll hardly feel a difference in any area like that."

"Hm," Miyoshi murmured, peering at the results. "Team Simon divided that role among their whole team."

"What role?" I asked.

"Program scouting."

"Ah."

Shibu T might have done the same, dividing the course experiences among their whole team, if they'd been able to have more members participate. But the only one they could get in via the nomination framework had been Dennis. In other words, they wanted to know what our course looked like, and their best shot at doing so was to have Dennis try all of it. That meant six whole rounds.

Then again, Team Simon had done eight rounds during the pre-boot-camp trial session, so that wasn't impossible given high-enough starting stats.

"You think he's a spy for a copycat program?" I asked.

"Simon did say people would probably try to ape our curriculum."

"I've heard arcade-machine exports are picking up recently. Wonder if the DSF is trying to run its own course."

"Our little program is headed out across the world. I feel like such a proud parent." Miyoshi feigned a sniff.

Smug grin on my face, I finished setting up the machine.

Dungeon Management Section, JDA Headquarters, Ichigaya

"Yes. Yes, that's right. Thank you."

Naruse put down the phone. She'd just gotten word that Yoshimura had finished setting up the stat-measurement device. Even though it was Saturday, she was at work to help with the safe-area bidding. She headed over to Saiga's office.

"Naruse? What is it?"

"Word from Yoyogi Dungeon that the stat-measuring device is set up."

"Ah. Thanks. Especially considering it's a weekend."

"You wouldn't know that from looking around here."

"I don't know when exactly we became one of those toxic workplaces you hear about, but"—Saiga looked plaintively through his window out toward the main staff room—"here we are." Stretching, he added that hopefully this state of affairs would only last until the safe-area preparations and secondary exams were finished.

"I also got answers to those questions you had," Naruse began.

"Wow. I knew I was right to make you their dedicated supervisor."

"Yesterday, when I was over at the office, the US ambassador to Japan stopped by."

"Ambassador? American?"

"Yes. And by chance, I happened to see him drop off the reward for that job they're doing for America."

"It wasn't money, was it?" Saiga frowned.

"D-Powers was bought...with wine."

"Wine?" Saiga blinked. He'd been prepared for *something* nonmonetary, but not mere wine.

"It's Miyoshi's hobby. She got some rare vintages from President

Handler's collection."

"Getting bought with the US president's personal wine collection? Talk about well-connected."

"The DSF probably served as go-betweens." The DSF did report directly to the president, after all. It stood to reason that they'd have been the ones to have conveyed the initial offer to D-Powers.

"So you think America's getting tight with D-Powers? They were drinking with Simon the other day."

"I'm not sure. But they know how to pander to Miyoshi."

"Unfortunately we don't have the means to match a payment like that." Even if they somehow got clearance to purchase wines to use as leverage with D-Powers, there was no way they could buy the kind of bottle only found in a president's personal collection. No need to even look into it. That was the kind of wine that money couldn't buy.

"The department director or Executive Director Makabe might have something."

"Not as far as I've heard," Saiga responded.

Plus, it was unheard of to use private collections of anything for business-related payments in Japan. Sometimes owners of private management businesses would take a pay cut to keep the company afloat, but that was about it.

"I guess that's it for us. Unless..." Saiga lowered his head and folded his arms, as if waiting for Naruse to lift him up with good news.

Fighting the urge to laugh at her chief's obvious ploy, she obliged.

"They did say they could help, just a little."

"There it is!" He uncrossed his arms. "It pays to have a dedicated supervisor getting tight with them."

"Moving on, about the stock incident..."

"Ah."

"To quote Miyoshi, 'Goten Industrial's rising prices have nothing to do with the fact that D-Powers bought stock.'"

"And?"

"It isn't untrue."

Saiga raised an eyebrow at Naruse's roundabout choice of words.

Earlier he'd scrunched his brow just hoping to have Naruse provide good news, but now it was wrinkled in genuine concern. If D-Powers' actions had nothing to do with the rise in stock value, then it must have been whoever had stolen one of the D-Card verifiers while they had been leased to the JDA. And from Naruse's careful choice of words, she appeared to be aware of this.

"So someone's trying to pull one over on us. Does this buck up against any trading laws?"

"I don't think that's the JDA's place to determine. Regardless, based on my talks with D-Powers, we don't have anything to worry about. The situation should work itself out."

"Hm. Very well. Then I suppose it's best to wash our hands of it for now."

The entire incident had started with the theft of a D-Card verifier, prepatent, while under JDA lease. If D-Powers was willing to let it be water under the bridge, the JDA wasn't going to argue.

Saiga wasn't sure what the mysterious stock manipulator behind this unprecedented price increase intended. For now he could only close his eyes and hope that whatever societal ripples followed wouldn't build into tidal waves.

Javits Center, Manhattan, New York

"Whoa! It's jumping." Nakajima was busying himself with equipment setup, occasionally looking up to gaze at the throngs of people pouring in.

"Keigo 'No Sense of Money' Yoshimura is footing the bill for the venue and the hotel fees for everyone participating in the stat-reading experiments. There was never any chance of it winding up small-scale," Midori replied.

Technically, Miyoshi had been the one to suggest footing the hotel bills, but the one to bring the drafted plan to Tokiwa Labs had been Yoshimura, whose financial know-how Midori already doubted. She decided not to bring up the fact that she and her staff were all staying in New York on D-Powers' dime too—and at the St. Regis no

less.

"New York hotel fees are something. Then again, even at the rate of four hundred dollars a night across one thousand participants, that kind of money is probably chump change compared to what they rake in," Nakajima noted.

"And here I had to fight tooth and nail just to raise a few tens of thousands for business." Midori stuck her hands in her lab coat pocket, thinking back on her own hardships and peering out over the crowd. "Ah, well. D-Powers were still ordinary people just a few months back. Their sense probably hasn't caught up with their bank book."

"Are we really any different?" Nakajima smiled. Just last month, he'd been running himself ragged for the promise of a twenty-thousand-yen kickback per completed verifier. Now D-Powers was investing ten billion yen into their company. It was like taking someone who had never even seen a lake to the sea. Maybe it would be easier to imagine it as 55,555,505 Cup Noodle ramens lined up, or—no, actually that wasn't easier at all. "Still, it's nice that we just get to enjoy ourselves after helping out with the experiment. Ah, hold this for me, would you?"

Midori held on to the cable as instructed.

"Remember that this is principally a staff trip," she reminded him. "We've earned as much. The work is something we agreed to do on the side. We can spare Miyoshi two days, but don't wear yourself down for them."

"Our flights here and back are first-class," he protested. "Taking that as part-time work payment, the expectations are *pretty* high."

You could take the man out of the exploitative work, but you couldn't take the exploited worker out of the man.

Nakajima connected the cables.

"*Hey doc!*" Nakajima turned around at the sound of a voice behind him.

"Doc?" Midori wondered aloud.

"It's gotta be us. That lab coat of yours. Come on, surely you don't need to wear it at a recreational event like this."

"I...wouldn't know who I am without it."

"*Are you guys with the Wiseman?*"

A slightly round man with strawberry blond hair had come up, speaking excitedly. He was wearing a simple hoodie.

"*We are,*" Midori answered, "*and...you are?*"

"*Ah, sorry. I'm the event organizer. Dean McNamara. Call me Dean. And this is my assistant, Paul Atkins.*"

"*I'm Paul. Nice to meet you. I was so excited for this, I could hardly sleep last night.*"

Paul was a lean man with dark gray hair and gray eyes—which, despite his apparent exhaustion, practically shone as he talked.

"*I'm Midori Naruse. That's Haruo Nakajima. 'Midori' and 'Haru' will be fine.*"

"*Yo!*" Nakajima called.

"*N-Nice to meet you, Haru. So, is this the status-measuring device?*"

"*Yep. Dr. Stats.*"

"*Does it...doctor them?*"

Nakajima explained how the name had been worked backward from "SMD," with the Wiseman herself landing on the personified nickname. He could see faint question marks floating above their heads.

"*Um, but we've just been calling it SMD ourselves anyway,*" he added. "*Maybe go ahead and keep the name's origin and Wiseman's involvement to yourselves.*"

"*Got it!*"

"*Pretty big turnout, huh?*" Nakajima said, looking out over the crowd again. The event had been billed as a gathering for explorers. Seeing just how many people were pouring in, he began to understand exactly how commonplace dungeon crawling had started to become.

"*With a lot of...characters,*" Dean remarked as he watched Kick Ass and Hit Girl walk past. He gave Nakajima a shrug.

"*There was a Spider-Man and a Wolverine earlier too,*" Paul added.

"*I guess since it's in the same venue, maybe some people have conflated this event with Comic Con. Though that's in October...*"

"*Ha ha. Well, the Wiseman did say this was supposed to be kind of like a festival for explorers. Some cosplay's probably not going to do any harm,*" Nakajima replied.

Seeming relieved by his response, the two hosts responded with smiles. Nakajima extended his right hand for a fist bump.

"*Okay! Count on us for anything you need help with today,*" Dean replied. "*I've got the table for the context-based readings you wanted to run...*"

The two of them stepped aside to begin an earnest meeting about corralling explorers for the tests.

Two peas in a pod, Midori thought, watching them. Looking around for something to eat, she decided to head off toward the Crystal Palace, the glass-paneled Javits Center entryway, to join the rest of her staff.

There was a lounge in the entryway, with a number of catering tables—seemingly no rhyme or reason to their placement. Nathan's Famous sat next to Mandarin Oriental, their respective smells intertwining in the air.

"Azusa... You seriously just booked every famous New York catering option you could, didn't you?" Midori muttered to herself.

Celestial Touch fruit towers, Viva Events, Clarendon Cuisine hors d'oeuvres... A bouquet of pleasant scents mixed in the air.

"The catering's all free! Can you believe it?" Yukari shouted, sinking a toothpick into a fruit-platter slice of pineapple.

"Free?! You've *really* gone too far," Midori uttered to invisible Miyoshi, before turning to the vendor and ordering two Nathan's hot dogs.

Annotations:

***55,555,505 Cup Noodle ramens*:** Price per cup at the time: around 180 yen. Regrettably, it was raised to 190 yen in June 2019.

Yoyogi-Hachiman, Office

"Ah. Are we live?"

“We read you loud and clear, Nakajima.”

It was after 11 p.m. in Japan. We were gathered in front of our living room TV doing a video call with Nakajima. The New York event was set to start just as the date rolled over in Japan.

They were already letting in guests, and on the official venue stream, we could see people gathering around the many catering carts Miyoshi had arranged.

In addition to the stream, all of the Tokiwa Lab staff other than Midori were wearing clip-on action cameras, the feeds of which we were having sent to the same video-call platform we were using to talk to Nakajima.

“Almost done with setup here,” he informed us.

“Great. Good luck out there today,” Miyoshi replied.

“Roger.”

Miyoshi set herself on mute and leaned back to watch the stream. The Tokiwa staff didn’t have a video feed of us, only our disembodied voices. It felt a little like being an air traffic controller.

“Jeez, it’s already almost twelve.”

“Getting too old to burn the midnight oil, gramps?”

“Hush. I’ve got Super Recovery just as much as you.”

“So no disputing the part about being too old then.”

“I just don’t waste breath on arguments that don’t need making. That’s all.”

Nine different squares filled the video-call software on our screen—five feeds from the Tokiwa Lab staff, our own square, unused, and three that seemed to be pulling from stationary venue cameras.

“Huh? Weren’t there supposed to be six Tokiwa staffers?”

“Midori didn’t want one. She said it would cramp her style. But we’ll still get her audio.”

The name of each staffer was written by their feed—Nakajima; Yukari Tsuzuki, the air-travel otaku we’d seen in the lab photo the other day; Shiho Onodera, who purchased all those strange juices for the lab vending machine; her friend, Ayano Sakuragi; and Nakajima’s friend, Ryosuke Takara.

Even though this was ostensibly a vacation for Tokiwa Lab staff as much as it was a work trip, everyone was busy talking to venue

officiators. Every once in a while you could see Nakajima running around, popping in and out of different feeds as he made final preparations.

"Wild times that we can stream it like this and feel like we're actually at the event," I pointed out.

"Another groundbreaking comment from gramps. Care to join us in this century?"

Rosary let out a trill.

"See?" Miyoshi added. "Even the bird thinks so."

"When did you become fluent in robin?"

"Okay, looks like we'll be parked here for a while. If you don't have anything better to do, how about helping with some document prep?"

"In the middle of the night?" *When did we become the kind of toxic workplace we were always criticizing?*

"We'll be watching this until morning anyway," Miyoshi responded as if it were the most obvious thing in the world.

"All right..."

I stood up and sat myself in front of the computer. The civilized world ran on documents. I just wished that it didn't. All the unbelievable situations we'd been dealing with recently had left us with little time for deskwork. Our to-do list just kept growing.

"Wait, hold on. I'm not an employee. I'm an executive officer. Why do I have to do grunt work like th—"

Miyoshi swiftly cut me off.

"If you have time to volunteer our services as part-time workers, you have time to write some reports. Now..." She put the edge of her right hand on her left palm. "Chop chop."

D-Damn. What happened to the easy life we were supposed to be living?

Glas and Gleisad were curled up into balls on the couch, sleeping soundly in the faint glow of the TV. It looked like all my dreams had truly gone to the dogs.

Now, onward to the paperwork. Still casting a jealous eye toward Miyoshi and the pups on the couch, I turned toward the work desk, ready to dive into whatever filing work Miyoshi was expecting of me.

The end of the Japanese fiscal year was coming up, and with all our recent misadventures, we'd hardly had time to prepare.

Still, we didn't have meeting minutes to keep, client databases to maintain, or intercompany projects to report on. Even our sales data was sparse. It wasn't like we were clearing hundreds of orbs per day. I imagined our filing workload should have been fairly light. And yet...

"Hey, Miyoshi. I didn't get the sense we should have that much work to do, but..."

In front of me were piles—mountains—of stacked up papers, binders, and file folders.

"What the heck is all this?"

"Orders and instructions with subcontractors. Various projects here and there."

"You were wading through all of this?"

"Are you praising my work ethic for a change?"

"I am," I admitted.

I cracked open one of the binders. It was mostly filled with reports related to the Ukemochi System. I flipped through further. Could this have been for the endowment for dungeon-related research Nathan had joked about?

"Are they really doing that endowment?" I asked.

"They're thinking about it, apparently."

"Huh. O-Okay. I'll get through whatever I can," I said, looking over the ocean of unfamiliar projects. Had I really been that removed from our day-to-day administration?

"Godspeed," Miyoshi called back.

I'd always intended to have Miyoshi handle the nitty-gritty office work, but I'd thought it was a reasonable amount. She was in deeper than I'd imagined.

"Maybe we should hire a secretary," I mused, cracking open the next file.

"With all our secrets? Only if we wanted to go full isekai and basically have a slave."

I grimaced.

"I don't think slaves are going to fly in modern-day Japan. Except

wage ones."

"Then it's out. Loose lips sink ships, and workaday secretaries have the loosest."

"What's a little confidentiality clause against the need for external validation, you mean?"

I was sorting through papers the whole time we were chatting. After a bit, I opened up new documents on the computer to begin working on next steps. Occasionally Rosary fluttered down and perched on my shoulder, glancing back and forth between the keyboard and screen.

I was glad she picked my shoulder and not my head, but the effect of feeling like I was being watched was the same. It made it hard to concentrate. At the end of the day, Rosary was kind of an "eye" of Cimeies, whose mission was to find hidden objects. You try to ignore the feeling that something's watching you when it has that kind of backstory attached. Actually, observation might have been Rosary's work, just like this paperwork was now mine.

"See anything interesting?" I asked her, as if she understood perfect Japanese.

She'd been born from a human(?) spirit—kind of. It wouldn't have been totally strange for her to understand human speech. Rosary jumped down and started pecking at the keyboard.

"Huh?"

Even if I hadn't actually seen what followed, the timing would have been too odd to write off as mere coincidence. A group of letters pregnant with meaning sat lined up on the top of the new document I had opened. Rosary had just typed the letters I-N-T-E-R-E-S-T-I-N-G.

"Uh, M-Miyoshi...!" I called out.

"What is it?"

Seeing me seize up like some kind of rusty automaton, she got up and came over, taking a look at the screen.

"What's interesting?" she asked.

Without missing a beat, Rosary started pecking at the keyboard again, as if the question had been directed at her: P-E-O-P-L-E-'-S B-U-S-I-N-E-S-S.

"O-Okay?"

Judging from her reaction, not even Miyoshi had been prepared to see an American robin hopping around a keyboard writing words on the screen.

"So, uh, what do you make of this?" I asked my wide-eyed business partner.

"I think... I think I've realized just how hard it's going to be to actually keep any secrets around here."

"That's a pretty levelheaded assessment for someone who just watched a robin type."

"I've already heard Anubis talk. I think I'm through being surprised by animals with the gift of gab."

"Yeah, but dogs have way bigger brains than robins," I protested, tapping my finger against my own skull.

"You think *brain size* has anything to do with this? Familiar-style monsters probably just link up to Ms. Maker's collective consciousness."

"Then why are the Arthurs always cocking their heads like they have no idea what we're talking about whenever we ask a question?"

Drudwyn popped his nose out of the shadows by my feet, nudging the back of my heel. Maybe he understood more than he let on.

Rosary flitted down, but just when I thought she was going to come to my aid and deliver Drudwyn a sharp peck on the nose, instead she paused by the pup for a moment, then flew back up to the keyboard and started typing again.

"You've...never...asked...about...people," I read aloud. "Huh?"

"Come to think of it, we've only ever asked them about the dungeon, right? The collective consciousness Ms. Maker accesses would contain knowledge *people* have. We've only asked the Arthurs about themselves."

Drudwyn nodded his head up and down vigorously.

"Miyoshi, we basically just confirmed Rosary and the Arthurs share some sort of telepathic connection. Couldn't you act a little more surprised?"

"Surprised?" she asked. "At this point?"

Point taken, but this was still 2019 Japan. I wasn't exactly prepared to accept birds and dogs sharing thoughts, let alone expressing them in writing.

Up until just recently, I'd have told you the most linguistic interaction you could have with a dog would be asking how its day was and having it tell you *ruff*.

If we tried to tell anyone about this, they'd throw us in a madhouse. No mistake. Still, supposing this wasn't all some fever dream my sleep-addled brain had cooked up...

"So, Drudwyn," I said, addressing my shadow, "are you some kind of, like, tangible D-Factor link to a collective consciousness—or maybe database?—used by the dungeons?"

True to form, he cocked his head to the side. But after a moment, he started nodding.

"Seems like the answer is...maybe?" I said.

"Hm." Miyoshi looked down at Drudwyn. "It's probably like if we had external hard drives connected to our brains. If we had to recall something, we wouldn't really know if it was coming from our own brains or the add-on hard drive."

To put a culinary spin on it, if someone asked you to pinpoint the part of your tongue delivering a salty taste to your brain while eating, you wouldn't be able to do so.

"I guess it's not like we could answer questions about how our own brains function either. So they're just seamlessly connected to this external database then?"

"That may be it. Seems like there'd be a lot of info to sift through though." Miyoshi looked at Drudwyn pitifully.

That *would* explain, at least, why they'd been able to understand Japanese. I'd been imagining something a little more...I don't know...fantasy-flavored, like a mental link to their original summoner, but this did fit with the dungeons' generally scientific, or scientif-esque, way of doing things. Not that it made much difference. "Any sufficiently advanced technology," and all that...

"Hold on. Connection to the collective consciousness? D-Cards are linked to the dungeon network too! And most dungeon researchers

have them!" I shouted. "Th-These things could be the greatest corporate espionage tools ever invented."

A database wouldn't differentiate between private information and public. It would simply provide output based on queries. There was probably nothing off-limits with them.

"You wouldn't be planning anything underhanded, would you?" Miyoshi glared.

"N-No. And don't worry. Without already having an idea what kind of research people were doing to help narrow down your question, you probably wouldn't get anything useful returned anyway. It'd be like a search engine—you'd need to refine your search techniques. It's a literally endless ocean of data."

I looked back down at Drudwyn. He'd cocked his head again and was panting energetically, looking for all the world like an ordinary canine.

Hold on, do you guys need to regulate body heat? Somehow I got the feeling that recently they'd been becoming more and more like normal household pets too. *Uh-oh.* What were we going to do if they started marking territory?

"Kei, maybe we should drop this whole train of thought for right now," Miyoshi suggested.

"Drop a chance at corporate espionage? Forgo a capitalistic advantage? This isn't like you." I squinted. "Plus, I was just hypothesizing. We could probably use this discovery to get about any answer to any question we wanted."

If anything, it was a little like Appraisal. In fact, that probably worked the same way—only instead of addressing a familiar as the interface, you were sending your query directly to the database through a skill.

"It's just...if humanity gets access to such an easy interface for accessing the whole of human knowledge, we can probably kiss the very idea of 'secrets' goodbye."

"Interface?"

I looked down at Drudwyn one more time. Then at Rosary—still hopping around on the desk. Finally, I looked at the words she'd typed on the screen. I let out a sigh.

"O-Okay. I guess, on that note, let's avoid selling any summoning orbs for now."

"It's a shame, but..." Miyoshi threw up her hands in a defeated shrug.

There were some things society wasn't quite ready for, and this was definitely one of them. Actually, I wasn't sure if society would *ever* be. Not that it mattered much—we didn't have any extra summoning skills in our current stock.

"Hold on, what was the drop rate on Darkness Magic (VI) again?" I asked, suddenly breaking a sweat.

"One in 280 million, I think," Miyoshi responded.

It would be a while before humanity took out another 280 million Barghests, if we were playing the odds. At least we'd be safe for now.

"Plus, Anubis is solidly in the realm of anomaly, right? Not the kind of thing most people would summon even if they got their hands on the orb?"

"I'd think so," Miyoshi answered. "As long as no one who's a fan of Dean Koontz's Einstein or Hokazono's 23 tries summoning anything."

"Ugh..." So a summon skill was only safe outside of the hands of fiction lovers?! We...might seriously be in trouble. Nothing drew fans like linguistically gifted dogs.

"I don't know how long we have, but someone else is going to get their hands on summoning skills eventually," Miyoshi added. "And when they figure out how to use it, you're going to see an evolution in the realm of information access that makes the speed of internet adoption look like a Segway at a NASCAR race."

It had taken nine years following psychologist and computer scientist J.C.R. Licklider's publishing of "Man-Computer Symbiosis" for UCLA's SDS Sigma 7 to be connected to the ARPANET, and a further twenty-one before Vinton Cerf penned the same system's requiem, but only another five before its successor NSFNet was in the hands of consumers—and the general public knows the rest.

And now Miyoshi was predicting a growth of knowledge reform even more exponential than that?

"The internet's development was mostly linear. Plus, it required sites to be built and knowledge to be deposited. Think about what happens when people get their hands on a preestablished collective consciousness. Your first experience with broadband won't compare," she explained.

"Uh-oh. Yeah. And you could think of every single explorer as an internet node—their own site, own entry. And with the race to start food drops, the number of explorers is going to increase rapidly too."

"Plus there's the push to increase all sorts of personal attributes via stat training. The stars are aligning to push every man, woman, and child toward dungeon interaction. You've seen how many applicants we've been getting for the boot camp. Everyone's aiming to be at the top of the whole human pyramid."

"Now, come on. Stats are idiosyncratic. I don't think anyone can claim to be at the top..."

"Easy for *someone* to say."

Okay. I guessed that wasn't very convincing coming from the world's accidental Rank 1.

Just then some sort of fanfare started playing from the NYC event stream.

"Finally starting?" I glanced over at the screen.

"Damn. And just when we'd discovered birds and dogs could talk to one another and that we're looking at a whole new kind of society-altering database. Can't we ever catch a break? Also, doesn't it almost seem like we're in the middle of *too* many earthshaking discoveries?"

"Best not to think about it," I replied.

And so we settled in to watch people ten thousand kilometers away have the time of their lives.

"Nice to know that no matter how crazy all these dungeon developments get, some things will never change," I mused. "Like crowds just having a good time at conventions."

Miyoshi was apparently not willing to let me take comfort in small forms of normalcy.

"Oh, you want to go? If we found a way to get teleportation working from Yoyogi to Breezy Point Tip Dungeon, you could be

there in a second."

"Drop it..." We'd already experienced something close to that twice—being once transported to Yoyogi from Yokohama, and once more back up to the surface. Her words had an alarming air of plausibility. "Speaking of..." I responded after a bit, not able to shake her comment from my brain, "we were decompiled and reconstructed, right? Out of D-Factors?"

"The other common teleportation method is wormholes, like space-time warping around the subject. But then you'd expect to see something like a portal open up."

"Sounds a little like dungeon entrances."

"Yeah." She nodded. "Plus, the deconstruction approach is more common. Think *The Fly*. We were most definitely decompiled and reconstructed out of D-Factors, like Dr. Tylor."

The secret garden, given that the Arthurs hadn't followed us, was probably a projected mental space. But the trip from Yokohama to Yoyogi, along with the one back up to the first floor, had definitely been a physical transfer.

"You're oddly calm about that," I said.

"No point in worrying about it now." She shrugged.

"I guess what's done is done. But still... Given we actually did teleport, if we were decompiled... Do you think that means the versions of us here are like, not the originals, but copies made out of D-Factors? I guess it's all philosophical."

"If it works like Dr. Tylor implied, and the original could be rebuilt down to the molecular level out of D-Factors, then as long as there's no element separate from the hardware, like a soul, the rebuilt version would be indistinguishable from the original. Don't get all 'Ship of Theseus' on me."

"If anything, I guess the fact that we're the same as before might be proof that the soul is endemic to the hardware."

"Assuming something we'd call a soul exists." She eyed me. "It might just be that it doesn't."

"I guess so."

The existence of souls... I guessed it wasn't that different from sitting around discussing the existence of ghosts. Although...we'd

seen some of those in the Wandering Manor.

"Say you are a copy made of D-Factors. As long as you're indistinguishable from the original, what's so bad about that?" she asked.

"It's not that it's bad, it's just... Am I going to break into clumps of black light when I die?!"

"Talk about a lasting last impression." She nodded sagely.

That's, um, a rather bold way of looking at it.

"If I'm on my deathbed in a hospital and then I vanish overnight, they'll definitely suspect foul play."

Oh well. There was no way to test any of this now. I was no Nelson Wright—I wasn't going to die just for an experiment.

Annotations

***Dean Koontz's Einstein or Hokazono's 23*:** Surprisingly, Einstein, a dog found in Dean Koontz's *The Watchers*, has a number of fans. The same goes for the doglike entity, 23, found in Hokazono's manga *Inugami.* Both are capable of mentally communicating with humans.

***Nelson Wright*:** The protagonist of 1990's *Flatliners*, played by Kiefer Sutherland. Becomes preoccupied with the afterlife and conducts an experiment involving his own temporary death.

February 24, 2019 (Sunday)

Yoyogi-Hachiman, Office

"Bwaaaah." I stretched my arms over my head.

"Even your yawns sound tired," Miyoshi said from the couch.

"Are there any yawns that don't?"

It was almost morning. Everyone at the event was still enjoying themselves. But it was getting hard to keep feeling the enthusiasm while merely staring at a screen. Apparently Super Recovery didn't offer too much defense against drowsiness if you weren't expending

energy. *Funny. A skill that helps prevent you from getting killed is powerless against time to kill.*

"You still seem wired," I added.

"How could I not be? Just look at all this new data coming in!"

The IBM computer in the back of the room was getting new SMD data by the second—encrypted numerical information plus ancillary information about extenuating factors: party size, presence of child parties, and voluntary information on skills. As far as non-dungeon-based information went, we'd only asked for age and gender. Thanks to all the enthusiastic explorers at the event, we were currently getting research material worth its weight in diamonds.

"Ah, this is heaven!" Miyoshi exclaimed. "Since all the SMDs in the world are gathered in NY right now, with different conditions set to be tested at different times, we can even just look at the data over certain chunks of time to observe the influence of different factors. We'll never have data this pure again!"

She snickered to herself, sounding a bit too much like a mad scientist caught up in some sort of nefarious experiment. If only all the explorers gathered at the venue knew what their revered "Wiseman" was up to now.

"I'll go make some tea." I got up from the sofa, leaving Miyoshi to her work.

"And some snacks too," she called after.

Yes, yes. Your wish is my command.

Javits Center, Manhattan, New York

"*Heeey there, Nakajima!*"

"*H-Hi!*"

The woman who'd waved at him as she passed by hadn't left much to the imagination—at least as far as her exposed thighs were concerned. Nakajima waved back in his best American style.

"Getting cozy with the ladies, are we?"

"M-Midori! It's all a big mistake. See, they think we can get them in with the Wiseman just because we're here running the SMD."

"Using other people's clout for your own gain? You've grown."

"Uh, er..."

Nakajima set about tagging the readings coming in through the SMD, beads of sweat on his brow. The other Tokiwa Lab staffers, hoping to avoid catching stray bullets, scurried off toward the various seminar rooms.

***

"'Skill-Possession-Based Command Testing'?" Yukari read the sign outside the conference room to which she'd run for reprieve before peeking inside.

A number of participants were gathered, each trying various command phrases while holding out their D-Cards. There had been command-phrase-testing sessions organized through online message-boards, but none limited to skill owners. Skill owners still only made up a small percentage of the overall explorer population. However...

"Whoa. There are more than I expected," Yukari mused.

The testers were divided into groups, trying different genres of command. The prior message-board tests had involved running through words A to Z using various dictionaries. Given the limited time, this session had narrowed phrases down to only the most likely candidates.

Yukari was patrolling the room, capturing the scene with her action camera, when—

"*Fuuuuuck! Oh my goooood!*"

Nearly all eyes in the room turned toward the source of the outcry. One man was doubled over in apparent agony.

"*Rick? Rick, you okay?*"

But just when the other members of his group had bent down to check on him, the tearful explorer shouted out for a room manager. Apparently he'd made a discovery.

Interest piqued, Yukari ran over.

"*What was it? What did you find?*" The official room manager, lugging around a larger camera, pointed a microphone toward the

half-sobbing explorer.

"*I found a command...that deletes skills,*" Rick offered between sobs.

The room manager, who had been hamming it up for the camera just a moment prior, froze.

"*Y-You don't mean...*" he began.

"*Yep. My p-pride and joy...*" Rick, red-eyed, held up his D-Card, gesturing toward an empty skill list. "*Gone!*"

Hushed murmurs spread throughout the room. Who could have expected the first person to make a discovery would also become a casualty?

"*I-I'm not really sure what to say...*" The room manager fumbled for a response, scratching the back of his head.

A deletion command had long been held to be among the most likely candidates for undiscovered commands. But actively standing around shouting "erase," "delete," "remove," or "clear" at your own D-Card as a skill owner was a task reserved for only the brave and the foolish. Most had, understandably, balked at the idea of participating in such tests.

"*We, uh, salute your courage*" was all the manager could think to say.

***

We'd fixed our attention on Yukari's feed after hearing some kind of scream.

"Yikes, some kind of accident at the venue?" I asked.

"It didn't quite sound like an injury," Miyoshi commented.

We switched from the main venue feed to the room Yukari was in. Someone was in the middle of interviewing an explorer who, for lack of better phrasing, basically looked ready to die.

"Kei! Did you hear that?! A skill-erasure command!"

"No way! Hold on. That means...!"

"Hello market value for Accelerated Growth!"

"*That's* your first thought?"

Accelerated Growth orbs were a goblin drop, and provided twice

the experience gain at a cost of capping each stat at 60. It was a harsh penalty, but it'd be a much different story if you could just delete the skill after reaching the max. Plus, its cooldown time was only twenty-eight hours and forty-eight minutes. It looked like we'd found a new auction staple.

"I was going to say, that means we can free ourselves from the unexpected shackles of Mining," I continued.

I had a feeling a hundred or so explorers who'd been spending every waking second hunting for the orb on the eighteenth floor just winced without knowing why, but our situation was different. Mining was currently preventing our progress down to lower floors, for fear of setting bad drops. And if we ever *really* needed Mining again, we knew the perfect cavern to visit to grab another copy.

***

"*C-can we have your name for the camera?*" the manager asked.

"*Richard. It's Richard Feindman,*" the explorer replied.

***

"Wait, like the theoretical physicist?!" I shouted.

"That's Richard *Feynman*," Miyoshi said, correcting me. "I think he said *Feindman.*"

"Wait, as in 'person who finds something'?! Come on, that's too rich!"

***

"*Richard. Well, you're as brave as your name implies.*"

The etymology of "Richard" went back to a pair of Germanic words meaning "strong" and "brave."

"*Right now I kind of wish I weren't.*"

"*Uh, ha ha, well...*" The manager paused for a moment. "*So, what was the keyword, if you don't mind?*"

"*Ah, right. Listen. I'm not crazy. I'm here testing, but you'd have to have a couple screws loose to actually try 'erase' or 'remove' or*

'delete' with your own D-Card, right?"

"*I suppose...*" the manager responded. Internally, he couldn't help but think that systematically testing potential command phrases required having a couple screws loose to begin with, but he was tactful enough not to say so out loud.

"*So I tried something more roundabout, hoping it wouldn't work. I tried personifying the D-Card, and...*"

"*Don't tell me,*" the manager interrupted. "*Goodbye? See you? Arrivederci?*"

"*Close.*"

"*Just a simple bye? Without the good?*"

"*Farewell.*"

***

"Is that even a verb?" Miyoshi exclaimed.

"I don't know, but I know '*goodbye*' definitely isn't."

"*Farewell* as skill-deleting command... That sounds like something an edgelord-wannabe middle schooler would come up with."

"You got that right," I agreed.

There was something a little self-consciously melodramatic about choosing "*farewell*" over any other phrase. Then again, it did have an air of being used for final partings. I wasn't sure if the explorer at the venue was still holding out hope that his skills might come back, but I wouldn't have been confident.

Anyway, we could probably chalk up the dungeons' "edgelord-wannabe middle schooler" command phrasing—much like the dungeons' half-Phoenician divine language—to the edgelord-wannabe middle schooler inclinations of Dr. Tylor, their chief psychic architect, and to a lesser extent, I supposed, to the subconsciousness of all the explorers who traversed them.

"I guess we all have a youthful edgelord wannabe inside us," said Miyoshi, evidently thinking the same thing.

I burst out laughing. She'd said it with a completely straight face.

"Well, what would a fantasy setting be without indulging in a little over-the-top theatrics?"

She reached for a tablet and started summarizing the discovery.

Meanwhile, I took out my own D-Card, focused on Mining, and gave the new command a spin.

***

"Hm?"

Yukari reached into her pocket, feeling her phone vibrating. She pulled it out and read the message on the screen.

"*Farewell? Now that was a blind spot. Of course I don't suppose anyone else here will be willing to verif—*"

The manager hadn't even finished his question before all explorers who had gathered near the commotion took several cautious steps back. This might have been a testing session, but that didn't mean scientific progress was worth losing skills.

"*Ha, ha, ha. Well now, I guess that's natural.*"

Even supposing the command only deleted one skill, to most explorers in the venue, that would have been all they had.

"*U-Um, excuse me.*"

"*Hm?*" the manager looked over to the Japanese woman who had approached him. "*And you are?*"

"*Yukari Tsuzuki. I'm part of the Wiseman's visiting tech team.*" She held up her ID.

"*Oooh! You're with the Wiseman? It's a pleasure having you here! We're so thankful for the event!*"

"*N-No problem. I'll pass your thanks along. On that note, regarding follow-up testing for this 'farewell' command...*"

"*Ah, I'm sorry about that.*" He furrowed his brow and shook his head. "*But you can't ask these people to—*"

"*She said you can stop. Just now—I got a message. No need for follow-up tests with this one.*"

"*What? Has the Wiseman already tested it?!*"

"*She did.*"

"*Just now?*"

"*Yep.*"

"*What a madwoman! That's our Wiseman! Whoa!*"

The room was a sea of murmurs once again, this time in awe rather than sympathy.

"*She says the command deletes a skill instantly, without asking for confirmation, so she's warning everyone not to even mess around with it.*"

"*Whew. Talk about bad UI. Okay. Tell her thanks, from all of us.*"

"*Will do.*"

Yukari started to write the manager's thanks on her phone, then remembered Miyoshi was watching the stream anyway. Just as she'd stopped writing, a new message arrived.

"*O-Oooh!*" She ran over to Richard, who was still looking deflated. "*She says she'd like to offer a free orb to Mr. Feindman, for showing such courage today. Interested?*"

"*Huh?*" Richard blinked.

For a moment Yukari was worried his confusion was due to her accent, but given that the manager had frozen up just as suddenly as Richard, she inferred that wasn't the case. After a moment, Richard seemed to come to his senses, his entire demeanor filled with renewed vigor.

"*Thank you! Thank you, thank you!*" he cried, beaming while forcefully shaking Yukari's hand.

"*W-Wow, what a story!*" was all the manager could muster.

"*Come to Yoyogi when you can. She'll pay for the trip to and from Tokyo.*"

"*Incredible! I'm king of the world!*"

And so for a third time, a sea of murmurs rose up from the room, this time in admiration of Richard, who now stood in the center of a crowd, chest puffed out and fists clenched in victory at his hips. Though there was perhaps a tinge of jealousy mixed into the chatter.

"*Hey, does this mean the Wiseman has a way of getting orbs on demand?*"

"*Well, she runs the orb auctions, after all. I'd believe anything.*"

"*Exactly, she does those auctions, so she's probably just hunting orbs all the time.*"

"*An orb hunter...? Wild.*"

"*Unbelievable, yes, but unbelievable is her MO.*"

Meanwhile, Richard's friends were patting him on the back, offering words of congratulations.

"*Hey, while we're at it, why don't we try to see if there's another command to get that skill out of the recycling bin?*"

"*Yeah! If one exists, we'll never have a better chance of finding it than right now!*"

"*Then again, maybe the system never imagined anyone would be dumb enough to get rid of a prized skill.*" Richard's friend looked at him. Richard feigned a kick in his direction. They both smiled.

"*To get a skill out of the recycling bin... Maybe 'restore'?*"

"*No, wait. The deletion command was 'farewell,' so maybe 'welcome'?*"

"*No, no. Keep in mind the fantasy flavor. Try 'revive.'*"

"*You want fantasy? Then 'resurrect.'*"

"*We've wandered way off base from opposites of 'farewell' now. How about 'return'?*"

"*Okay, let's just try 'em all!*"

"*Here we go!*"

And so just as quickly as Richard's skill had disappeared, the bitterness of loss gave way to the thrill of discovery.

Yoyogi-Hachiman, Office

"Whew, that's a relief." I wiped my brow, staring down at my D-Card.

"I'll say," Miyoshi agreed.

We'd just successfully gotten rid of Mining. Our D-Cards practically glistened now that they were free of the pesky resource-dropping skill.

"Although speaking of Mining, we've only got three orbs left in stock."

"And one of them is technically being stored for the JDA."

"Ah, right. We should probably head down to the eighteenth floor again sometime soon so we can stock up."

"I'm not opposed." Miyoshi cracked her knuckles. "We're done

with all the manufacturing for our plastic lunch-pack grif—”

“The verifiers? Don’t call your own product a grift...”

“And Maitreya should be ready to go just about any time we call them up.”

Speaking of Maitreya, now we knew we could delete and restore their Mining skills any time. We didn’t have any reason to remove Komugi’s, but I figured it might be best to temporarily get rid of Mishiro’s if she were aiming to explore the lower floors.

“But as for us,” Miyoshi continued, “what about going deeper than the eighteenth floor and hitting the front lines? We don’t have to worry about setting mineral drops anymore.”

“But tomorrow’s the twenty-fifth.”

“And?”

“Storage’s cooldown timer resets.”

“Oh, right. We used up the Storage we were ‘storing’ for the JDA. I guess we’d better find another one to store until they ask for it.”

“Confusing but true. Anyway, we need another copy on hand.”

We could only get a Storage orb every seventy days. It was best to pick one up as soon as it became available in order to restart the cooldown and maximize our stock.

“Speaking of the front lines, did they ever find the entrance down to the thirty-third floor?”

“Not according to the JDA data. At least, there’s nothing on lower floors yet.”

How was that possible? Were they even really exploring?

“Could just be that development of the safe area is straining JSDF resources,” Miyoshi pointed out.

“Hm. That’s possible. There aren’t many people capable of pushing forward on the front lines, and maybe their hands are full.”

Even Shibu T and Kagero, two other well-known Yoyogi parties, had only made it down to around the mid-twenties. If that was as far as private explorers had managed to get, then it wasn’t surprising that even the JSDF was probably hard up for frontline personnel at this point.

“The only ones in the country who could for sure make a push down to the next floor would be—just Team I?” Miyoshi suggested.

"And most of the world's double-digit rankers are busy on the eighteenth floor..." I added.

"Uh, do you think all the companies who put in development bids for the safe area understand how hard it is to get there?"

"Who knows."

Winners of safe-area lots might start to feel like big losers if they couldn't get materials and personnel down there.

"They're probably just figuring the JDA will do something about it. They...might be in for a rude surprise."

"I mean, the JDA probably *will* move heaven and earth to help out partner organizations. Having Sayama around gives them some leeway to help with development, but at the same time..."

Miyoshi shook her head. Pushing everything onto Sayama would only create a host of new problems.

We'd managed to stay mostly out of the spotlight, at least when it came to our most valuable skills, but Sayama's involvement in the safe area's development would naturally attract outside attention.

For example, he'd probably be escorted down to the thirty-second floor by JSDF teams, which meant at least the JSDF would know about his use of Storage. From there, it wasn't a big leap to imagine them asking him to help move equipment, using the JDA as an intermediary.

But this wasn't a skill purchase, or piece of equipment. Sayama was a person. Push him too far, and—well, he could quit any time. They'd have to play their cards just right if they didn't want to let this massive fish off the line.

"You're a fine one to worry about safe-area development depending too much on Storage users though," I pointed out.

"Huh?"

"Was it just my imagination, or did someone I know agree to lug down equipment for America?"

"Ah, that's right!"

"Right indeed."

And she'd already received the payment.

"Uh, when was I supposed to move that again?"

"Probably can't move anything until they've announced the

winning bids, but...soonish?”

They were already doing equipment assembly over at Yokota Air Base.

“Hm, right.”

“You’ll probably hear from Simon as soon as they’re ready.”

“Ugh, as if we needed any more on our plates.” Her shoulders sagged. “We just started the boot camp too...”

“By the way, what was the response to that like?”

“A pleasant surprise for all involved! Ultimately...” She explained that everyone had been naturally skeptical right up until seeing the results. Not just the numerical ones, of course—those could be faked—but after trying out their own postcamp abilities. Most had left convinced that with a few more trips through the camp, they’d even be ready for the front lines of dungeon exploration.

“The front lines, eh? Well, results do breed motivation. You love to see a good positive feedback loop.”

“We’re running the regular open-enrollment boot camp once per week, but we’ll probably have to run a special edition for the DSF too.”

We *had* eaten up the time of more than a few of its best members, she added with a half grin.

Thanks to their, er, dedication, world peace had been protected—by packing motherboards into plastic containers under Cathy’s supervision.

“Now, on that note, Kei. Once other countries see the DSF’s post-boot-camp performance and understand the camp’s potential, they’ll probably be eager to send in their own elite military personnel.”

“That does seem likely.”

“And that’ll make us targets, right? International liabilities?” She grinned.

“What?!” I raised an eyebrow. “Also, could you look less happy about that?”

“Think about it! One private organization with detailed, confidential info on all the world’s top military teams!”

That...oof. That was indeed the situation we’d be facing. We had direct numerical data on each trainee’s skills, and based on Mason

and Cathy's earlier arm-wrestling performance, we also had a good idea of the kind of practical difference even a few points could make.

"Uh-oh," I mumbled, starting to put the pieces together.

"We'll have a direct look at the global balance of power."

"There are already the public explorer rankings though. I don't think this'll make that much of a difference."

"Maybe, maybe not. What if someone wants to train up some heretofore anonymous secret weapon?"

"We should hope they don't!"

Most of the top-ranking explorers were known, but there were still multiple anonymous entries dotting the double digits—right in the same range as world-famous explorers. Even more anonymous explorers populated the triple digits, all of them in the running for top teams. It was possible Miyoshi's theory was correct—that countries had top contenders they'd been keeping under wraps.

"Oh well." She shrugged. "No point in worrying over hypotheticals."

"*Is* that a hypothetical?" I asked. The more I thought about it, the more it started to seem like a certainty.

Rosary let out a trill, as if amused by our conversation. Meanwhile Glas, having monopolized one of our sofas, just wagged his tail.

Oh well. Maybe fears about becoming international military targets really could wait—for once. We'd decided we were going to the thirty-second floor—and if we could, even beyond. We had plenty to prepare for.

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Message Board [So what do you do...] D-Powers 226
[...in the boot camp?]

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.

118: Anonymous Explorer
Yooo! I took the D-Powers boot camp

119: Anonymous Explorer
You dummy, only like ten people have done that! You’re gonna get doxxed

---

120: It was sick
So? I have nothing to hide

121: Anonymous Explorer
Pour one out for Dr. Doxx over here

122: It was sick
Anyway, AMA! Just nothing about the actual course contents. I signed an NDA.

123: Anonymous Explorer
Rip Dr. Doxx.
Wait, so they do have an NDA?

124: It was sick
They do, but it’s weird

125: Anonymous Explorer
Weird?

126: It was sick
You sign it when your application gets accepted. They won’t leak any private info like statuses, but in return you can’t share any information about the course

---

127: Anonymous Explorer

That’s completely normal lol

128: It was sick
I guess, but what’s weird are the details. You can’t say anything about the contents to a third party, but...

129: Anonymous Explorer
! You can’t *say* anything, but you can write a letter!

130: Anonymous Explorer
Are you stupid? That’s not what they’re getting at

131: Anonymous Explorer
I dunno. I saw a plot point like that in a manga once. Of course it was a hentai, but still...

132: Anonymous Explorer
What’s wild is that you can’t disclose anything to a third party, but apparently there’s nothing stopping you from copying the course and running an imitation yourself. Or at least nothing in the D-Powers NDA to prevent such a thing.

133: It was sick
Bingo. That’s it.

134: Anonymous Explorer
C-Come on, there’s no way.

135: Anonymous Explorer
You’d lose in an instant if they took you to court.

136: It was sick
I’ve got a friend who’s a trainee judicial scrivener, and they said it’s super sketch to leave a loophole like that—almost like they’re deliberately inviting people to steal the course. Though that was just their impression

---

137: Anonymous Explorer
A judicial scrivener friend? Whoa, Anonymous 1%-er over here

138: Anonymous Explorer
For real. Only like two thousand people become scriveners every year. That’s well-connected

---

139: It was sick
Hey, hey! I’m just a broke nobody!

140: Anonymous Explorer
A broke nobody with $30,000 to burn on the boot camp?

141: Anonymous Explorer
That’s just the military and police pricing. Civilian entry only runs 30,000 yen (JPY).

142: Anonymous Explorer
Wait, seriously? The whole reason I didn’t apply is because I thought it cost 30,000 USD. wtf @ the difference

---

143: Anonymous Explorer
I mean, no one said it’s the same program, >142

144: Anonymous Explorer
Is it not?

145: Anonymous Explorer
Idk. Someone’s gonna have to take both and find out

146: Anonymous Explorer
But who? Rich person, plz

147: Anonymous Explorer
It’s not about the money. Civilians *can’t* take the military course, >146

148: Anonymous Explorer
Wait wait wait wait.
Let’s not get off topic.
You think D-Powers is *purposefully* inviting people to steal their course? That’s crazy, right?

149: Anonymous Explorer
We’re getting into tinfoil hat territory here, lol
How would D-Powers profit from that?
Plus, if they really wanted copycats, they’d just make the course content public

---

150: Anonymous Explorer
You’ve seen the auction prices. I doubt they’re thinking in terms of profits and losses at this point.

151: Anonymous Explorer
They rocked the world with their auctions, rocked the world again by getting Otherworldly Language Comprehension...

Heaven’s Leaks? World-rocking
Stat-measuring? Same
Maybe they’re just trying to rock the world yet again with a boot camp revolution

---

152: Anonymous Explorer
why does that middle part read like song lyrics, >151

153: Anonymous Explorer
You know, it’s true. If they were still thinking in terms of profits, they wouldn’t run the open-enrollment course at all; they’d just focus on government contracts. The only thing it seems like they’re for sure making bank on is the auctions. And actually, we don’t know that either.

154: Anonymous Explorer
Uh, yes we do. We have the winning bid amounts

155: Anonymous Explorer
But we don’t know how much they spend getting the orbs

156: Anonymous Explorer
Right, and the government stopped publishing info on the highest bracket of taxpayers...

157: Anonymous Explorer
What about looking at any public CEO salary data?

158: Anonymous Explorer
They’re not a public or OTC company, so they don’t file securities reports, >157

159: It was sick
That was the impression my friend got, >148
Like, “If you want to steal it, go ahead, we dare you”

160: Anonymous Explorer
I still don’t know that anyone would want to do a 1:1 copy, what with the risk of being sued. But maybe after remixing it a little...

161: It was sick
Good luck, because you’ll never know which part of the course actually leads to the stat growth. Pretty hard to remix.
Btw, Takaoka from Shibu T was in the camp with me. Seemed like he was having trouble accepting the methods

---

162: Anonymous Explorer
Shibu T too, huh? Wait, isn’t telling us who else was there violating privacy? See you in court!

163: It was sick
Whoops! Last message will self-destruct in 3, 2, 1

164: Anonymous Explorer
Jeez

165: Anonymous Explorer
So, like, were there any noticeable results? The whole course is just one day

---

166: It was sick
Can you imagine if there weren’t? They measure your stats at the beginning and end of the camp, but $30,000

just to be told your numbers had gone up? Nah, they need some kind of proof

---

167: Anonymous Explorer
Though in your case it was just 30k *yen*, lol
But wait, there's that stat-measuring system that they're going to be running at Yoyogi starting tomorrow. was it the same setup?

168: It was sick
It was and it was super crazy

169: Anonymous Explorer
But D-Powers makes the stat-reader. Couldn't they just be messing with the numbers?

170: It was sick
Don't worry, I'm not that gullible. I thought the same thing.
That's why I tested my results

171: Anonymous Explorer
Tested?

172: It was sick
See, I opted for the STR-boosting course

173: Anonymous Explorer
So, what, did you test your grip strength afterward?

174: It was sick
Actually? Yeah, >173
And it went up from 70 kg to 110

Plus, my back strength went up from 210 to 320

175: Anonymous Explorer
Whoa

176: Anonymous Explorer
Okay, so we know who “It was sick” is now: Hammer thrower Koji Murofushi in his prime

---

177: Anonymous Explorer
Dude could do even more in his heyday. Like 130 grip, 390 kg back

---

178: Anonymous Explorer
Uh, who cares about that? More importantly, your strength went up by that much, all in one day??? Are you sure you just hadn’t checked in a while?

179: It was sick
Nope; I figured I’d want to verify the camp results, so I measured everything that morning to have a baseline

---

180: Anonymous Explorer
That’s a 1.5 times increase
A-Are you some kind of grassroots PR guy?

181: Anonymous Explorer
He’d make up more believable numbers if he were a shill.

182: Anonymous Explorer
50% up in a day...
Also, what would be the point in PR, >180? You can only

get in by lottery selection

183: Anonymous Explorer
I hear the drill sergeant comes from the USDSF. Maybe she has some kind of secret training knowledge.

184: Anonymous Explorer
Team Simon was in the trial camp too

185: Anonymous Explorer
How do you know that?

186: Anonymous Explorer
It’s public knowledge. Was discussed in a previous thread. Plus it’s mentioned in the second article uploaded to the official boot camp site. The first article was Catherine’s introduction

---

187: Anonymous Explorer
A former DSF member selling military training secrets to a Japanese company? I don’t buy it.

188: It was sick
I’ll just say this: I *highly* doubt it was a DSF program
If it was, they’re sick in the head

189: Anonymous Explorer
So it was something really weird.

190: It was sick
I can’t say anything more.
Oh, but fun fact—Sergeant Catherine is huge in real life

191: Anonymous Explorer
Like big melons?

192: It was sick
I’m talking about her height, you nitwit!

193: Anonymous Explorer
Ah, whoops. My bad. I think there’s a picture of her on the site...
Wait, you sure this isn’t doctored???
https://URL/...

194: It was sick
What you see is what you get.

195: Anonymous Explorer
Daaaamn

196: It was sick
She was crazy strict. But, to be honest, also kinda cute. I guess maybe because of her Japanese.

197: Anonymous Explorer
She speaks Japanese?

198: It was sick
Fluently. Sometimes she uses kind of strange phrasing, but it’s a cute kind of strange. And at the end she was like, “You have surmounted this bizarre, harsh training that you might have thought just seemed like playing games.”

199: Anonymous Explorer

Hold on: like playing games?

200: It was sick
You'd definitely think that if you knew what the AGI training was. Though it probably generated the most frustrated screams of the day

---

201: Anonymous Explorer
Argh, I wish you could tell us what it was!

202: Anonymous Explorer
So there was no esoteric exercise or weird drug or anything?

203: It was sick
Uh, well...maybe there was.
But I can't give specifics. I'll just leave a little advice for anyone else who gets in: Hang on for dear life.

204: Anonymous Explorer
Uuuuh. Uh-oh. lol

205: Anonymous Explorer
Catherine-sensei, step on me!

206: Anonymous Explorer
Can we ban this weirdo?

207: Anonymous Explorer
But hey, if everything you're telling us about the results is true, that's an incredible course
Plus, Ryoko Saito took it, right?

208: Anonymous Explorer
Ryoko Saito?

209: Anonymous Explorer
A big actress right now, blowing up.
She also landed a world record in 70 m archery, apparently

210: Anonymous Explorer
An *actress* did???

211: Anonymous Explorer
Wait, I saw that video! So it wasn’t a publicity stunt?

212: Anonymous Explorer
The first YouTube upload was later taken down, but people who were at the event swear it was real. Of course, since she wasn’t in the archery federation—or even a local league—the record didn’t count.

213: Anonymous Explorer
A photographer who was with her uploaded some photos along with some of Saito’s interview responses too. She got asked about the difference between a compound bow and barebow and talked about the different releases. Super technical, but it’s fine since she’s super cute.

214: Anonymous Explorer
Why was she talking about bow types after a 70 m world record? >213

215: Anonymous Explorer
I saw those photos! Looked like she was having a great

time. I’m jealous.

216: Anonymous Explorer
She’d been doing archery for a while, but normally uses a compound bow. The day she set the record was her first time using a barebow, so the interviewer was asking her about it

---

217: Anonymous Explorer
Her first time?!

218: Former Archer
That’s what she said, >217
But doing something like that on her first time with a barebow... Seriously insane.

219: Anonymous Explorer
The video might’ve been deleted, but there are stills: https://URL/...

220: Former Archer
Holy shit, that really is a barebow! This is a 70 m round, right?

221: Anonymous Explorer
Is there something special about doing a 70 m round with a barebow?

222: Former Archer
Nothing other than it being extremely difficult! A barebow is a recurve, but without all the usual extra parts to assist aiming and stability. A barebow... She landed that many shots despite the drop in precision...

Unbelievable...

223: Anonymous Explorer
Former Archer’s losing it

224: Anonymous Explorer
So wait, if a judo martial artist attended the boot camp and got results like “It was sick” did, then they’d be tossing around people 1.5 times bigger than before after just one day? Ordinary strength training is going to look like a joke compared to this.

225: Anonymous Explorer
Gulp

226: Anonymous Explorer
Imagine track runners suddenly getting 1.5 times as fast...

227: Anonymous Explorer
That one’s already a thing. Remember Takada and Fuwa from those recent marathons?

228: Anonymous Explorer
OMG, he made that cryptic shout-out to “Cathy” at Beppu-Oita!

229: Anonymous Explorer
There’s no known D-Powers connection, but there were suspicions about the Hakone Ekiden record breaker doping...

230: Anonymous Explorer

This might go against all known sports science, but...
It wasn’t doping, was it?

231: Anonymous Explorer
I don’t know about the Hakone Ekiden runner, but at least Takada and Fuwa came out clean. Plus, Takada mentioned she was in Tokyo for a training program the day before the race.

232: Anonymous Explorer
Setting aside that mysterious “Hang on for dear life” comment earlier...
As long as the results really aren’t all down to a drug, we’re looking at a camp that gives you lifelong results. And based on the debates surrounding high-altitude training, the case for the camp being a form of doping is going to be almost impossible to make.

233: Anonymous Explorer
Get ready to see every athlete in the world tearing up turf in the dungeons!

Yoyogi Dungeon, Second Floor

That afternoon, we went down to the second floor as part of Sayama’s onboarding.

“This is the ‘field’?” It was apparently smaller than he’d been expecting. We stared down from the top of a hill.

I understood the feeling. We were basically looking at one tree and a small plot of wheat stalks. In fact, if the wheat weren’t already flowering, it would have just looked like a small patch of weeds.

“So, the first and most important thing to get down is the Benzetho-Blast.”

“The what now?”

“Our slime countermeasure technique. Slimes are the natural enemy of wheat, at least in dungeons, and...”

“Is this it?” Sayama was down on his knees, examining one of the stalks. “I’ve read your thesis, but...” He sounded somehow doubtful. “The wheat really respawns?”

“At least this variety.” I cut one of the stalks. After a moment, it reformed from a brilliant ball of light.

“Incredible! This is going to revolutionize the world’s food supply!”

That was the idea. In practice, it would depend on a lot of things going smoothly, and it wouldn’t take care of all of humanity’s food needs. We’d still need traditional forms of agriculture.

“We’re at least going to catch flak from seed patent holders, probably.”

“That’s true. I can’t imagine major bio conglomerates will be happy.” Sayama stood up, brushing off his knees. “But all right, fill me in. What’s my role in taking care of all this?”

“Uh...maybe you could put up a sign?”

“It’d be gone by the very next time I visited.” He smiled.

“I guess you could just serve as guide for anyone who wants to see it. That’d be enough,” Miyoshi interjected. “We’ll get plenty of work out of you once the Ukemochi System takes off,” she added as a threat. “With FAO and DFA eyes on it, you’re going to have your hands full.”

“Isn’t that your job as the owners?” he asked.

“We just invented it. Once we get a basic subscription model up and running, we’ll be handing off day-to-day administration.”

“Wh-What?!”

“The hardware development’s almost done. But there are still hurdles and problems to tackle. For example...”

Miyoshi began rattling off the list of remaining question marks and points requiring further investigation, enumerating them on her fingers.

“...engineering hurdles like a sustainable counter-slime system, biotechnical ones like further optimizing dungeonization...”

On the engineering front, the Ukemochi System setup consisted

of an automated harvester continuously running on rails along an oval-shaped tract of wheat. However, rather than collecting its harvest in an internal grain tank, it would instead deposit the grain into a set of external tanks on a spinning auger. When one tank became full, the auger would rotate to the next tank, arranged in parallel, allowing for the full one to be pulled out and transported for twenty-four seven harvests.

"That's going to be a doozy to set up in an open field, so ultimately we're thinking about enclosed harvesting environments." That would allow easier crop-swapping too, if someone wanted to pivot to a different product. "But as you know, all foreign objects in a dungeon are subject to slime attacks..."

Surveillance measures would greatly reduce the risk, but not eliminate it. We'd need to rely on some number of human staff. Beyond that, there were also construction issues...

"Now, we're at least thinking of constructing the rails and walls out of dungeon materials, but there's still a lot of research to be done regarding how taking them outside the dungeon for construction may affect their eligibility as slime targets. The best bet would be to handle manufacturing in the safe area, but even then..."

We'd need space for factories with rolling mills, servo presses... Would the JDA be able to guarantee us the room? A guaranteed allotment would be a tough ask even for the most high-rolling of corporate bidders. Maybe we could work out a deal through our connections with the JSDF or USDSF, but that also seemed like a long shot.

"So there are those issues on the logistics front, but don't overlook the remaining biotechnical questions either," she concluded.

"Remaining questions?" Sayama echoed dubiously. "But from what I've read, you've already succeeded at dungeonizing."

While that was true, it had only happened by accident—by noticing a bag of seeds that slimes hadn't touched. That still left a mountain of unknowns regarding proper dungeonizing. At present, our only method of knowing if seeds were dungeonized was to try planting them.

Miyoshi explained all this and more to Sayama.

"Plus," she added, "there's a big question of whether crops grown in a container would all respawn in the dungeon if the container were moved to the surface."

The container itself, unless it were a dungeon-based item, probably wouldn't respawn, but there was a chance the soil and crops might, which would make cloning entire fields possible.

"What? But according to the materials I've read, respawn locations are random."

"Right. Which would make it impossible to test in any *average* dungeon."

"Average dungeon?"

"Don't worry. *Our* lab is something else."

"Lab?"

She filled him in on Shinshinan, our research post at Yokohama. The staircase landing "floors" there would be perfect for respawning tests, provided they had enough D-Factors. You'd be able to spot even a single kernel of respawned wheat right away.

"You know, getting to be involved in all these dungeon crop experiments, it almost feels like I'm still at NARO." Sayama grinned.

"Right?! Only this time *way* more people are going to care about your research!" Miyoshi threw her hands up in the air enthusiastically.

Uh, way to diss his former line of work.

"Now, if we can at least clear the engineering hurdles, we can get the system running. But get the biotechnical issues worked out too, and we're off to the races for a world-hunger-solving revolution!"

"Yeah!" Sayama couldn't help but shout.

"Sayama, you're going to help save the world!"

"Yeeeeah!"

She wasn't wrong, but at this rate it was starting to sound like he was going to be spending more time working as a research assistant for D-Powers than as a JDA employee. *Miyoshi, are you sure we're not violating any contract stipulations?*

"Wow! Now this is work I can get into," Sayama concluded.

"Attaboy!" Miyoshi responded.

"Maybe don't get too excited. Helping with the safe-area

construction is definitely going to come first in his priorities," I reminded Miyoshi.

"Uh... Uh?" Sayama looked deflated.

"Kei. Read the damn room a little. Besides, everything I'm saying is true. Nathan and those FAO guys are going to want him to get moving on Ukemochi soon. He won't just be a pack mule forever."

"He won't be a pack mule forever because some of those transport requests are going to come our way too."

"Ah, right... Because my secret deal with the US president got outed to Naruse..."

"Maybe ixnay on the ecretsay oreignfay ontractcay talk in front of outside company... You're making it sound even worse than actually it is."

We took a dungeonized wheat seed, planted it, and grew it with Sayama's powers. If he focused, he could cause a seed to sprout and flower almost instantly. It was like watching time-lapse footage of a plant's growth.

"Jeez. I know you told us about it, but it's something else seeing it in action."

"I get to do experiments involving multiple generations of plants in mere moments."

As a botanical researcher, that would have been living the dream.

"For some reason doing it too much makes me feel super tired though."

That'll be MP drain, Miyoshi signaled via telepathy.

So I guess it does work like an ordinary magic skill.

"Just don't overdo it," I responded.

We set off on the path toward the exit.

"Ah, then there's the matter of soil," Miyoshi added as we walked.

"Soil?"

"There's no soil at Yokohama."

We couldn't do respawning experiments with growing plants if there was no soil for them to grow in.

"I'm guessing ordinary gardening soil won't fly," I commented.

"It'll never evade the attention of the slimes."

"Then let's try planting things in soil taken from Yoyogi first."

I'd be interested just to see if soil from Yoyogi would be recognized as a dungeon item by Yokohama or not. Did the dungeons share a kind of common object database, or were they each locked to their own? Either way, the answer would have profound implications for our dungeonizing process moving forward.

"Ah, by the way." I turned to Sayama. "How was the welcome party?"

"About that..." He grimaced. "It was nice to feel welcome, but I think I might have discovered the difference between wanting to meet the right woman and wanting to be popular with women."

Apparently he'd spent the whole night swarmed by his female coworkers and hardly had a chance to relax. For an introvert like Sayama, it had been a little bit heaven, a little bit hell.

The image of the pained smile he wore as we climbed the stairs up from the first floor would stick with me for some time.

February 25, 2019 (Monday)

Javits Center, Manhattan, New York

"*There. The demons holding their unholy Sabbath!*" A gaunt, sullen man, standing in front of a crowd gathered outside the Javits Center, pointed to the convention hall.

Behind him, several others nodded in agreement.

Across the way, in a car parked on the other side of West 36th Street, Kai and his compatriot watched.

Still a little early for Walpurgis Night, and it's witches, not demons, that hold Sabbaths, Kai thought, but stayed silent.

Wind speeds in New York that day had reached a record high, with gusts of sixty miles per hour. If anyone around looked like demons, it was the protesters; their hair being tossed about in the wind brought to mind snakes or horns.

After having been tasked by his mysterious benefactor with rousing voices of opposition against dungeon-grown food, Kai had

first put in word with some of his previous connections in anti-GMO circles. However, much of the fervor against leading GMO soy-producer Monsanto—though it had been purchased by Bayer the previous year—had shifted into protests against glyphosate herbicides. A lawsuit brought against Monsanto linking a case of malignant lymphoma to glyphosate herbicide exposure had gone to the plaintiff to the tune of 280 million US dollars, with similar lawsuits following.

The shift from attacking GMOs to targeting glyphosate herbicides had happened because evidence presented in the lawsuit had demonstrated that anti-glyphosate GMO soy had no adverse health effects—at least none detectable via lab-mouse testing. That had taken the wind out of the anti-GMO movement's sails, but had also given them a convenient opportunity to change tacks to antiherbicide protests.

The issue was that left Kai without a preexisting cause he could tie to the anti-dungeon-food movement. But a baker must bake—especially when handed three million dollars in dough. Kai had to froth up an anti-dungeon movement even if it killed him. So he considered that if he couldn't foment anti-dungeon sentiment, maybe he could get an anti-*explorer* movement going.

Rumor had it that dungeon-grown food enhanced people's abilities. A movement against explorers, those unnatural freaks running loose in society, would then naturally coincide with a push against the dungeon food that created these superhumans. That had been Kai's thought, but...

The leader of the anti-dungeon group he'd been introduced to was named Ko—East Asian, from appearances, though Kai wasn't sure of his background.

"*Ko, you sure about these guys?*" Kai peered out at the ragtag group assembling outside the convention center.

"*Trust me, bro. Using religious lingo like Sabbath? America loves a good Christian moral panic.*"

"*We need the public on our side on this. You sure we can't go with a more measured approach?*"

"*Hey, we got sponsors of our own, and they're already hopping*

mad. Fuming. Beet red." Though if anything the people on their side looked more demonic than the attendees. Ko laughed.

Kai cocked an eyebrow. He'd figured this would be like anti-fashion-industry protests—a few people by the door shouting about unethical animal treatment, or explorers' danger to society in this case, would do the trick. He wasn't so sure about the religious demagoguery.

"*You know all I want is the anti-*food *movement, in the end.*"

"*Food is everyone. It's too broad. You need* enemies*. And what better enemies than immigrants? Libs lose out on that one all the time.*"

"*I don't see how—*"

"*Just keep the money flowing, my man. I gotta say, three hundred thousand dollars just to shout at an event isn't bad, but...*"

Kai sighed. A man who had been trying to barge into the venue was now proselytizing to the crowd—a mix of men and women—which was listening rapturously.

"*They're already sending over two hundred thousand a month, up from Mexico!*" the man ranted. "*They're taking our jobs! Our livelihoods! Are we going to stand for it?!*"

"*With just a* biiit *more to spend, I could really get this popping,*" Ko remarked as he listened to the speaker.

Kai grinned. It took one to know one—Ko was a swindler with money but no scruples, just like Kai. All he cared about was getting paid. It was too late for regrets. While accepting that he was committed to this course of action, Kai still failed to see how this band of riffraff could ever foment a general anti-explorer or anti-dungeon-food movement, no matter how much money was thrown at them.

"*And now these—these explorers! They think they're better than us?! Most of them don't even live in the States! They aren't from here! They show up with their—their amazing abilities and try to run us off our own soil! These...vermin!*" The man's voice was becoming more and more agitated as the crowd offered up murmurs of agreement. "*We must renounce this great serpent and all his infected followers! Cast them down to the pits of hell where they*

belong! Oh, the Lord will punish the rebellious angels of heaven, and the kings of the earth on the earth. They shall be gathered together, like prisoners in the dungeon! And punished!"

The arrangement was a bit unorthodox, but... Was that a bit of Isaiah...and the Book of Revelation? Suddenly Kai was beginning to worry what would happen if anyone from the crowd made their way into the event...

"*Ko.*" He turned to his partner. "*You got ahold of the media, right?*"

Stick to the mission. A few thousand gathered in protest might make the news on their own, but a small gathering like this one wasn't going to get traction without tipping off a few of the right outlets first.

"*Of course! Not that most of them paid attention.*" Ko went on to complain performatively about the libtard lamestream media. Too many drinking the Kool-Aid on immigration reform. As if breaking the law should give people first dibs for citizenship! Unbelievable that close to eighty percent of Americans supported that bunk. If you'd told him it were all a foreign conspiracy, he'd believe you. No, most media outlets wouldn't pick up the story if it were just one more anti-immigrant protest.

This is why this whole anti-immigrant angle was a stupid idea in the first place! Kai wanted to shout.

"*But don't worry,*" Ko added. "*Some smaller outlets'll be here.*"

"*I'm gonna scope things out.*" Kai unlatched the car door.

"*Suit yourself. Hey, don't forget the back half of the payment.*"

Kai waved half-heartedly behind him, getting out of the car and crossing the street to a hot dog stand. He wasn't hungry—there was just no other place to go. A nice café would have been a balm for the soul in these troubling times.

Annotations

***No other place to go*:** Well, at the time. A little more might have opened up around the convention center since then, but not much.

Yoyogi-Hachiman, Office

At 10 a.m. on the twenty-fourth, New York time, the second day of the event kicked off with expected fanfare. The official livestream depicted merry explorers everywhere, and the command-testing research team members were just as excited in the wake of their newly discovered command.

But despite all the TV crews and hubbub, Midori's stream remained offline.

"Did something happen?"

"The data's coming in, but..."

"Maybe the cameras are interfering?"

A quick glance up at the office clock revealed it was a little past 12:30 a.m. Just after, a video call ringtone played, and Midori appeared on the screen.

"Miyoshi, you there?" Midori's voice came in over the speaker. "Take a look."

"Ah, Midori," Miyoshi said. "What's the matter?"

In the background of Midori's webcam was a gray, modernist room. She'd placed her laptop on the sofa and was sitting right next to it. A large Bill Donovan painting depicting four women hung on the wall behind her. She was in the St. Regis Hotel, on the corner of 5th Avenue and 55th Street. On the first floor of the hotel was Harry Winston, the very jewelry store from which we'd purchased earrings as a gift for Asha.

From there to the Javits Center, it was straight west on 55th until turning left on 11th Avenue. It was a simple three-kilometer trip, no more than ten minutes by taxi, but the fact that she was still at her hotel meant...

"Did you *just* wake up?" Miyoshi said.

"Of *course* not. I sent Nakajima and the others over to the event site, but I don't have time for that right now."

"Huh? Did something happen?"

"'Did something happen?' Wait, do you really not know?"

"Uh?" Totally lost, Miyoshi let out a funny sound.

Midori rubbed her temples.

"Go take a look. Now."

"At what?" Miyoshi asked. "The event hall?"

It was day two of the NY meetup, with streams still running constantly on our living room TV.

"The SMD preorder site."

"Ah!"

Reservations had started at midnight on the twenty-fifth, Japan time. They'd been running for thirty minutes.

"Yeah, how's that looking?" Miyoshi asked, opening the site.

"Looking? Distant, that's how. You're already facing a year's worth of back orders."

"Wh-Whaaa?"

Our manufacturing capacity for the SMD units was limited, but we'd figured there would only be demand among serious explorers and a relatively small contingent of researchers. We'd expected our current stock would sell out fairly quickly, but the long-term demand for the device wouldn't be there. The price put them out of reach for most ordinary people, with the basic version running 350,000 yen and the full-spec version starting at a cool 2.85 million, and potentially going even higher depending on the options. Of course, just our initial SMD-PRO prototype had cost two million to create, so even our current lofty price might have been on the cheap side.

"We— We reached our expected sales number in *eight seconds*. Looks like it was the right call to set up predictive scaling to maintain capacity for the first ten minutes."

Samazon Web Services' auto-scaling worked in one-minute intervals—it couldn't respond to traffic spikes on the level of seconds.

"But if we hit our expected sales number in eight seconds..." I muttered.

"Preorders kept pouring in. Oooof, the fulfillment dates..." Miyoshi moaned.

Thankfully we'd given buyers at least one small kindness. Preorder systems that only slapped you with a "sold out" after data entry were way too cruel. At worst, they even seemed like they were designed just to get your personal data on file, in exchange for

nothing.

That might actually have been the goal of some sites, but we'd designed ours to put in a provisional order as soon as an item was selected. That way, any "sold out" notices would come before the rest of the data was entered. If the other necessary fields went unfilled after a certain amount of time, the provisional entry would be cleared. In our case, we were asking for quite a bit of info, so that kept things fair while people took their time filling in the order form. As soon as any one model in the catalogue was selected, the system marked a provisional +1. All that was supposed to help us avoid any major complaints, but...

"We must have gotten an order from just about every research institution and upper-ranking explorer. Plus most major athletics organizations?" I surmised.

"We really underestimated demand," Miyoshi replied.

"I suspect your friend we met the other day at sushi had something to do with it too," Midori commented through the video feed. She leaned back tiredly against her chair.

She must have been talking about Mitsurugi. Then there was Saito, and Takada, and... We actually had quite a few up-and-coming celebrities putting stat-measurement on the map.

"So preorders are halted?" Miyoshi asked.

"With over a year of back orders, unless there are any cancellations, that's it."

Miyoshi started checking the orders.

"Wow. And at those prices too..."

"Don't act like you didn't set those prices," Midori scoffed. "But never mind that. The SMD is on back order. That's fine. The real issue is the Party Checker."

"Hmm?" Miyoshi lifted her face from the screen, blinking. She cocked her head at Midori.

The D-Card verifiers had evolved into Party Checkers after we'd realized how easy it would be to scan specifically for the presence of parties rather than simply a D-Card. Midori's team was testing prototypes at the event, and they seemed to be working well. All we'd have to do would be to revise our current server setup to

accept different data patterns.

So this issue wasn't likely to be a mechanical glitch with the Party Checkers. But then what problem was Midori talking about?

We'd also made sure we had manufacturing capacity for ten thousand units a month, expecting slightly higher demand than for the SMD, so it wasn't like we'd been inundated by orders, especially with its price.

The answer was both simpler and more embarrassing than we'd expected.

"You didn't update the cost, did you?" Midori asked.

She held up a tablet open to the preorder page, shoving it toward the camera.

"Wah! Oh, shoot! We left the price we estimated for the original Dr. Stats!"

There plain as day was a price of 198,000 yen—our original prediction for the cost of an SMD-EASY unit. She'd copied and pasted the SMD's price onto the Party Checker's dummy entry during site setup, and never swapped it out for the intended price.

"Uh, so that's not good..." I said, eying the price on the screen.

"It's 198,000 yen! We've priced ourselves out of demand!" Miyoshi groaned.

It made the hundred grand we'd charged the JDA for the leased verifiers look like a steal—and that rate had already been us overcharging as a bluff. Now the sale price was practically double that.

"Kei, we have to move these units... We're going to have to revise the price."

Midori shook her head.

"You sold out in two minutes."

"What?"

"Sold. Out. Two. Minutes."

"One hundred twenty seconds?"

"Half of four minutes."

"A year's worth?"

"Yes."

Now, hold on. Ignoring the initial batch Nakajima and company

had prepared, we were looking at a manufacturing capacity of ten thousand units per month. A year's worth of back orders? One hundred twenty thousand units?

"That's not all," Midori continued. "Preorders kept coming in. There are already 6.2 million canceled orders, all with a request for an alert when they're back in stock."

"Wh-What?" Miyoshi blinked, dumbstruck for a long moment. "Wait, we've got more than six *million* back orders on the checkers, and at a stupidly inflated price?!"

"That about sums it up."

"Th-That's...1,227,600,000,000 yen. O-One trillion..." Miyoshi's eyes were spinning.

"Come on," Midori responded coolly. "Toyota took in thirty trillion this year. Don't get a big head just because your company made just one-thirtieth of that."

All joking aside though, just on those orders alone, we were suddenly being discussed alongside Toyota—as a company of two plus a partnership with one lab. A startup with less than a year under our belts was in the same ballpark as one of the world's largest automakers.

"K-Keeeei. What do we dooooo?"

That was a good question. This situation felt entirely different from our business ventures up till now. With the orbs, we'd just sold them, gotten the money, and set it aside in a bank account, not really being able to fathom how much we'd earned. Now we had...an obligation...to make things.

"Uh, nothing to do but get to work on it, I guess. We're going to have to shore up manufacturing, or we'll never get those orders filled. At least not in this half of the century."

We could probably increase production to a million units per month, but handling parts-ordering and setup was going to take someone with a lot more time and a lot more diligence than Nakajima. If we couldn't get these filled, we were going to become the biggest preorder fraud since a certain 2011 incident regarding Japanese New Year's dinners on Groupon...

"We'll have to get in touch with a manufacturing pro, and see

what we can do about parts procurement. Let's check if Nakajima knows anyone too."

"Wait, so we're really going to fill those orders?" Miyoshi still seemed to be struggling with the thought.

Of course, the orders were all canceled for the time being. We wouldn't face legal ramifications for letting them stay unfilled. Still...

"We're a company that sells products. We have a social obligation."

"Since when do *you* think about social obligations?!" she shot back.

That old nugget...?

Strictly speaking, we weren't exactly obligated... But all those purchases were probably for anti-cheating measures. In that sense, the world's education systems really did hang in the balance. Our devices were basically the only way to prevent party-based cheating on exams. If anything, it was our fault for having dug into and publicized info about the party-system in the first place.

"We should probably at least run some kind of campaign, letting people know order fulfillments are coming, or—"

"Saying what? Until we at least have some firm details, we may as well be saying nothing at all."

I shrugged. She was right. If anything, we probably deserved praise for doing as much as we had to solve the problem in as little time as we'd been given. Um, the "we" being mostly limited to Miyoshi and Nakajima.

"Nothing to do about it until we're back in the country, so..." Midori said on the screen.

"So...?"

"Let's all just forget about it until then!" With that, Midori's feed switched off.

"Midori..." Miyoshi grimaced.

"I mean, hey! She's right," I responded. "No point in wasting energy on things you can't fix right now."

"That's assuming we can do anything about it *at all*."

We looked at one another, then both breathed deep sighs.

Javits Center, Manhattan, New York

"*Brrr...*" Nathan shivered in the wintery wind as he stepped out of the taxi. He hugged his coat tight around him.

"*You all right?*" Silkie asked, clutching her hair and pulling her coat's lapel in front of her face as she followed.

"*I'll be fine, Ms. Subway. Just a monstrous wind.*"

The Javits Center was just one trip west down 42nd Street and a left turn on 11th Avenue away from the WDA office in the United Nations Building. Nathan had heard there was a rather unusual event being held there—one involving D-Powers, no less. When he'd heard they were also testing the stat-measuring devices, wild horses couldn't have held him back.

However, his packed work schedule—making up for his impromptu trip to Japan—*could have exercised such restraint*. Today was the first chance he'd had to slip away.

***

There were ten or so people gathered outside the glass entryway to the convention hall. They might have seemed somewhat out of place, but with the number of explorers in unusual outfits heading in and out, and with the bustle around all the front-lounge catering, they didn't draw much attention. At least until they start shouting.

***

"*What's that?*" One of the explorers inside scrunched his face.

On the other side of the glass, the group had unfurled what looked like some sort of banner. So, they were a protest group.

But this was a gathering for explorer research—no, it was even less formal than that, just a large-scale meetup with the Wiseman's name attached. Why would anyone be protesting?

"*Like the animal-rights activists protesting Fashion Week?*"

"*What've they got against explorers?*"

"*Anti-dungeon capturing?*"

"*It does seem like New Yorkers would come down on you if you cleared Breezy Point.*"

Breezy Point Tip Dungeon was a source of considerable revenue for the city, which controlled it.

"*Maybe they're goblin conservationists.*"

"*For wolves or hound monsters, I could see it, but...goblins? I guess they're kind of humanlike... But come on.*"

"*Plus it's not like they're going extinct.*"

Monsters respawned the second they were killed. There was no such thing as overhunting. Or conservation.

"*I'd understand it more if they were lobbing a bomb in here and then demanding potions once we got hit by the blast.*"

"*Yeah...*"

***

"*Friends of Azusa's?*" Nathan asked, spying a team working near a stat-measuring device.

Nakajima looked up, taken aback by his familiar tone.

"*Oh, um, yes. And you are?*" He cocked his head to the side, trying to remember if he'd met this bearded, bespectacled, broadly grinning American before.

"*Ah, sorry! The name's Nathan. Nathan Argyle. I'm a friend of Azusa's. Please, go ahead and call me by my first name.*"

"*Nathan Argyle?*" Midori walked up. She'd heard that name somewhere. "*By any chance,* Dr. *Nathan Argyle? The DFA researcher?*"

"*You hear that, Ms. Subway? I'm famous.*"

"*Of course you're famous! If anything, you could do to comport yourself with more awareness of that fact!*"

Midori made a mental note: This public-organization-leading researcher was the free-spirited type. She could see him and Miyoshi getting along—though she silently sympathized with any subordinates. She winced knowing what Yoshimura would say if he heard that: *You're one to talk*.

"*Is this the status doohickey?*"

"*Uh, y-yes,*" Nakajima responded.

"*Can't help but feel like humanity isn't quiiiite ready for a tool that quantifies all our skills, but can't help but be interested too.*"

The others understood, of course. No matter how high one's mental fortitude, getting stats read would be a trigger for superiority or inferiority complexes. Even if you pretended to not be interested, even if you pretended to ignore the results, that was the reality of living in a competition-based society.

But there was no unringing a bell. Grade point averages only followed you around during school. Stat-point averages would follow you around your whole life.

"Hey Miyoshi, isn't that Nathan on Nakajima's camera?"

"Looks like he's still in New York!"

"Of course he is. He kind of works there."

He might've been the DFA's chief researcher, but it wasn't like he could just snap his fingers and create a Yoyogi field office. Big organizations had to deal with development plans, budgeting, hiring, all that fun stuff.

"You don't think he's expecting *us* to provide the funds, do you?" Miyoshi asked.

"I wouldn't be surprised. I bet he can be a real tightwad when it comes to those things."

"That makes it even more impressive that people still respect him so much."

"Being a likable person is certainly always a plus. But unless someone's got a powerful personality like his, they may have a tough time breaking into something new..."

"Well, he's still got the Sayama barrier to break through!"

"Do you *really* have to call it that?" I rolled my eyes.

***

The man had worked himself into a furor. *Everybody* was out to get him, and *everything* was completely unfair.

When he got out of the car, New York's first windstorm of the

year was sweeping across 11th Ave. like it was portending some kind of great upheaval. It felt like the world was calling him a tiny little man, easily blown away by a measly gust of air. That pissed him off.

The traffic light in front of the entrance turned green, and the luminous red palm on the crosswalk light seemed to be warning him to stop this venture while he still could, which irked him further.

On top of everything else they've pulled, there's no way in hell we're gonna let people devalue us even more using arbitrary measurements like "stats." It's the same thing every single goddamn time. Those bastards looking down on us from their high horses pull some new criteria out of their asses to try and keep us stuck at rock bottom. Well, today is gonna be their dies irae*, so they can all look forward to a one-way trip to hell. "From heaven the Judge descendeth, on whose sentence all dependeth!"*

As per their orders, the men behind him tried to unfurl the fairly hefty banner they were carrying, but it got caught up in the windstorm and went flying into the air. Proudly proclaiming the words "*MARCH AGAINST DUNGEON ORGANISMS!*" as it fluttered wildly in the wind, the banner serendipitously ended up plastered against the convention center entrance.

"*An anti-dungeon-food protest?*"

The explorers who had been observing the entrance tilted their heads at the bizarre concept.

The banner remained stuck there for a while, until it finally got caught by the wind again and fluttered down toward the south concourse.

***

After getting his stats measured, Nathan didn't have much of an idea of how good his numbers were or what they meant, but when he learned that his STR was only 8 while the average adult came in at around 10, he visibly deflated.

"*That just means you need to get more exercise, doctor.*"

"*I had no problem running down to the twenty-first floor of*

Yoyogi, did I? Come on, I jog all the way to the statue of St. George slaying the Nuclear Dragon every day, praying for world peace the whole time!"

"*I wouldn't call a 250-meter jog adequate exercise.*"

"*You wouldn't?*"

Just as Nakajima was thinking that jogging would probably only increase VIT anyway, a loud sound suddenly rang out from the entrance to the south concourse.

Apparently a banner had been blown from the main entrance all the way there. Nathan scowled upon reading the giant slogan written across it, but he couldn't help but burst into laughter at the tiny text scrawled at the bottom: "*say NO to DO*."

The *DO* most likely stood for *dungeon organisms*—referring to dungeon food products. Anti-GMO protests often used the similar slogan "*say NO to GMO*"—meaning genetically modified organisms—but changing the slogan to *DO* made it read to him like a rallying call for people to be lazy and say *no* to doing things in general.

At that moment, a chorus of angry shouts echoed from the direction of the main entrance.

"What on earth?"

Midori turned to look, and Nakajima peered up the stairs at the same time.

"Did a fight break out or something?"

"I'll go take a look."

"Huh? Hey, hold on a sec, boss!"

Waving off Nakajima's protest without so much as turning around, Midori started walking over to the Crystal Palace.

Nathan started making his way over at the exact same time.

"*Mr. Argyle!*"

Silkie pulled on Nathan's arm and called out to him as he started to head in the direction of the voices.

"*You saw that protest banner, Ms. Subway. Whatever's going on out there must have something to do with us.*"

"*You can't say that for certain, and there's no need to put yourself in danger anyway...*"

"*Nonsense. My grandmother always told me that people never die*

while they have unfinished business."

"*That's the most unscientific thing I've ever heard...*"

"*Besides, this is the Javits Center.*"

The Javits Center normally had NYPD vehicles parked out front. At some times of day it might as well have been a traffic cop parking lot. With that much commotion, officers would be on the scene in no time flat—and even if they weren't, somebody would have already called them.

I just need to buy a little time, Nathan thought.

"*Ms. Subway.*"

"*Yes?*"

"*Thank you for being worried about me.*"

Feeling the blood rush to her face, Silkie tilted her gaze downward.

***

The man turned his head this way and that, scanning the area with an odd glint in his eyes. Then, carefully holding a long object wrapped in cloth, his expression tormented, he checked to make sure nobody was around and opened the entrance door.

"*Hey, is that guy all right?*"

"*Huh? Isn't he just cosplaying as something?*"

"*I dunno about that... What's he supposed to be dressed up as?*"

"*A long time ago, I went to Comiket in Japan, and there was this skinny guy with close-cropped hair wearing only pants, naked from the waist up, holding the upper part of his left arm with his right hand.*"

"*What the hell?*"

"*Who knows? He was stumbling around aimlessly saying something about a doctor, if I recall... It went right over my head, but everyone else seemed really into it.*"

"*That's the holy land for you. Totally nonsensical. So what about our guy here?*"

"*I bet it's some character that showed up for all of one panel in an old Marvel comic, wandering around the old Boogie Down.*"

"*Talk about obscure.*"

At that exact moment, the man stumbled as if he had caught his foot on something and dropped to his knees. Worried he might be feeling genuinely unwell, the two watching explorers exchanged glances and ran over to him.

"*Hey, are you all right?*"

"*It's all their fault. I've got to exterminate these insects.*"

"*Excuse me?*"

"*Maybe he's one of the characters from that story where they go to Mars to fight cockroaches*?"

"*You... If only none of* you *were here!*"

The man pulled the cloth off the item he was carrying, revealing a semiautomatic rifle.

"*Whoa! Hey, that isn't even funny, costume prop or not!*"

"*Outta my way! I need to bring judgment to the ringleaders from hell!*"

***

"Did you just hear something?" Nakajima asked as they were about to begin the next measurement session. He was looking over toward the entrance out of concern for Midori, who had gone to check on things.

"It sounded almost like gunfire..."

Right as Yukari finished speaking, screams rang out inside the Crystal Palace. Nakajima sprang out of his chair like a jack-in-the-box and immediately went after Midori.

"Midori!"

"Midori?" Yukari repeated. *Wow, I didn't realize they were on a first-name basis already*, she thought to herself with a chuckle. Realizing there were more important matters, though, she turned to face the camera connected to Miyoshi's feed.

***

"Miyoshi! We're hearing gunshots and people screaming over

here for some reason!”

“Oh, it’s the airplane fanatic!”

“I’m *not* a fanatic! I just like flying... But never mind that!”

“Please, calm down. We’ve got a good idea of what’s going on from watching the official channel feed and Nakajima’s action cam.”

The monitor in the living room that was displaying the official feed showed a man with a semiautomatic weapon on the stairs leading to the venue entrance, and attendees frantically running away from him.

“You’re free to make liberal use of the emergency potions we provided. If anyone is injured, help them out.”

“R-Roger that!”

The airplane fanatic disappeared from the screen, and Miyoshi let out a sigh.

“America’s really gone overboard on the whole gun society thing.”

“Can we please focus here?” I muttered.

“Sure, but it’s not like there’s anything *we* can do. We’re thousands of miles away, and the police will be there any minute. Besides, the place is full of explorers—it’ll take more than a few bullets to take them down. I gave all of our employees multiple potions too, so as long as nobody takes an instantly fatal hit, I’m sure they’ll all be fine...”

The man on the screen appeared to be yelling something.

“Hey, isn’t that Nathan standing in front of the guy?”

“What?! What on earth is a WDA VIP doing trying to talk down a terrorist? He’s insane!” Miyoshi blurted out.

“Tell me something I *didn’t* know...”

It was difficult to make out due to how agitated the man was, but he seemed to think the explorers were invading America or something, and he was shouting at them to get the hell out of his country.

“What’s this guy’s deal? Did he have a bad run-in with an explorer?”

“I dunno, but it sure is odd for someone to focus their aggro on

literally the entire explorer population."

***

"*All right, take it easy.*"

Although he was quivering internally as he faced the gunman after he'd fired those warning shots, Nathan put on his best brave face and kept a calm demeanor, speaking as naturally as possible to make it clear he wasn't a threat.

If I can just buy some time, the police should show up soon.

Some explorers had gathered at a distance and were watching the scene unfold. With the way they were holding their phones out, they seemed less fearful and more as if they were watching some kind of show.

"*Dungeon-grown foods aren't as dangerous as you think they are—they're barely even available for sale either.*" Nathan being Nathan, he came dangerously close to blurting out a follow-up line of *That gun you're carrying is far more dangerous.*

"*Dungeon-grown foods?*"

"*Hmm? You're here to protest about how dangerous they are, aren't you?*"

"*I don't give a shit about that!*"

"*What?!*"

Despite the seriousness of the situation, Nathan nearly fell over at the man's surprising declaration.

A case of "Don't know what I want but I know how to get it," perhaps? he wondered, trying to make sense of the gunman's behavior.

"*My future dream isn't a shopping scheme, you know.*"

"*Shut up! You're not making any sense!*" the gunman roared.

"*Neither are you, though.*"

"*Mr. Argyle!*"

Silkie, on the verge of tears, yanked on Nathan's coat as if to beg him not to agitate the gunman any further. His initial warning shot had only shattered the glass ceiling, but nothing was stopping him from switching targets to them whenever he wanted.

The annoyed man glared at Nathan a moment longer, then noticed an unusual machine further in the distance.

"*Hey. You.*"

"*Yes?*"

"*You some kind of dungeon specialist?*"

"*I am.*"

Silkie let out a tiny *Ugh!* at that response. The gunman had known there was an explorer event going on when he broke in, and Nathan had let it slip that he was a specialist. What was he planning on doing if the man decided to make him a target for purging?

"*Then you know what* that *thing is, right?*" The man pointed his gun at the scientist as incentive to answer.

Seeing that, Silkie adjusted her stance so she could be ready to shove Nathan out of the way at any time.

"*That?*" Following the gunman's gaze, Nathan looked back over his shoulder. "*Yes, that's a stat-measuring device,*" he answered honestly.

***

"*Huh? So...you're* letting me go*?*"

"*Sorry, pal. You're not needed here anymore.*"

"*B-But why? You've even been hiring people who can barely speak the language. I thought you needed the manpower—*"

"*Well, here's the bottom line... Those new explorers? They work better than you.*"

"*Work...better? B-But I've given this job everything I've got, just like the rest—*"

"*Yeah? Well, maybe that is everything you've got. But the fact is, it only takes them one trip inside to pull off what you can barely manage in two. And that's all that matters, isn't it?*"

***

That's all that matters?

If he was going to start losing opportunities based on how many

trips into a dungeon he had to take, and all of his abilities were about to be quantified into numbers... He couldn't let demons like that manifest into the world.

A man or woman who is a medium or spiritist among you must be put to death.

You are to stone them.

Shoot them dead.

Kill them.

Kill them.

Kill them.

"*Aaaaagh!*"

With a sudden scream, the man pointed his gun away from Nathan and began firing wildly at the stat-measuring device.

"*Mr. Argyle!*"

Silkie hurled herself into Nathan from the side, knocking him to the ground.

"Midori!"

As Midori watched, stunned, Nakajima caught up to her and threw himself in front of her.

The explorers, who had been watching from a distance, dove to the ground as well and waited for the storm to pass.

The bullets struck and ricocheted all across the area, and it felt like almost as soon as the gunfire had begun, the last of the ammo had been spent.

Just then, a man wearing a knitted black turtleneck and navy jeans stepped in front of the gunman, like some kind of American superhero.

"*Wh-Who the hell are you?*"

"*Shut uuup!*"

In the blink of an eye, the man delivered a solid right-handed punch. The gunman, who had been basically just standing there, went tumbling to the ground, his gun clattering off to one side.

As a chorus of cheers erupted from the surrounding onlookers, several men dashed over to the gunman, tying him up securely with rope.

The man in the turtleneck, whose face was red with fury as he

breathed heavily, was named Dean McNamara. He had helped organize this very event, and was a respectable explorer himself—possessing over two-and-a-half years of dungeon diving experience.

***

"N-Nakajima? I told you never to call me by my first name in front of other people..."

"You idiot! If you had gone and died on me, I... I just..."

With a bleary-eyed Nakajima standing over her protectively, Midori let slip a murmured "Haruomi..." and closed her eyes.

"Um, excuse me..."

"Bwah! Yukari?!"

Midori's eyes shot open at the sudden voice, and when she saw Yukari peering at them, she instinctively raised her upper body, bumping her head right into Nakajima's.

"Ow!"

"So, uh, I hate to interrupt, but don't forget about that thing you're wearing, Nakajima."

As Nakajima rubbed his nose, grimacing, Yukari pointed to the action cam attached to his head.

"Ah!"

"Waitasec, don't tell me that was—"

"Live? Yup, it was coming through as clear as day!"

"Gaaah!"

Midori crumpled forward, clutching her head in her hands.



***

I couldn't help but look away from Nakajima's feed.

"Man, it's harder than I thought to watch a love scene with people you actually know."

"Jeez, it's so embarrassing, I can't look up!"

It was such an impactful moment that we couldn't have made fun of it if we wanted to—so we decided to just let sleeping dogs lie and pretend it never happened.

***

"So we've got these."

Yukari pulled out a decent assortment of potions from the pouch Miyoshi had provided. They were all tagged with numbers like 1, 3, and so on.

"I was told we're free to use them if anyone is injured."

"Oh, fine, I guess we can use the nightingales," Midori replied, using a nickname for healing potions hearkening back to a famous historical nurse.

The Tokiwa staff members split up and started tending to the wounded.

***

Nathan had been thrown to the floor by Silkie's diving tackle, and with all the bumps and bruises from that, he wasn't entirely sure whether he had been hit by any bullets.

There were a number of explorers lying on the ground as well, potentially injured. A Diana Prince who had been near the front of the pack had apparently taken some heavy damage; a pool of blood was starting to form on the floor around her.

A man with glasses—Nathan was pretty sure his name was Nakajima—ran over to check on Diana. After a brief flinch, he pulled something out of his pocket and poured it over her—a potion, apparently. *Leave it to the Wiseman's staff to be ready for absolutely*

anything.

After that, Nathan finally looked down and gave his own body a glance.

"*What a mess...*"

He had slid through some blood spatters as he bounced along the ground, making him concerned that he might've been bleeding himself; however, a cursory check confirmed that his injuries didn't feel that major. It had to have been someone else's blood. *You're a lifesaver, Ms. Subway.*

"*Mr. Argyle!*"

"*Ah, Ms. Subway. Are you hurt?*"

"*Forget me, I'm more worried about you!*"

"*Well, I'm sorry to be the bearer of bad news...*" Nathan said, closing his eyes.

"*Mr. Argyle...?*" Silkie noticed his breathing pause and went into a panic. "*Oh no... Doctor, hang in there!*"

Opening one eye playfully, Nathan shot her a grin.

"*It appears our trip to Yoyogi will be a bit delayed.*"

"*Ah! You jerk!*"

Her subsequent punch dealt more damage to him than anything else had that day—but he remained nothing but smiles.

***

"*What the hell's going on, Ko?!*"

"*Ha ha ha! This shit's gonna be all over the news!*"

"*Who cares? It's gonna make us look like—*"

"*Like what?*" Ko scoffed.

"*Like terrorists!*"

"*Hah! Didn't you used to be a terrorist yourself, though?*"

The group Kai had been a part of was still registered as an environmental terrorist organization by the FBI.

"*And how exactly do you plan on dealing with this...?*" Kai muttered. Apart from a few who had run away, everyone who had participated in the protest had been arrested. *What are we supposed to do if the trail ends up leading from them to us?!*

"*Dealing with it? The police are doing a great job of handling that.*"

"*What?!*"

"*Now they can all blab about their cause on national TV, which works toward your objective,* and *it means I get my money. What's the big deal?*"

Damn it! This guy's out of his mind!

***

On the official live feed, a man who looked a lot like Nakajima was getting a thank-you kiss from a buxom brunette dressed up as Wonder Woman, who had apparently been injured. His personal feed had a massive close-up of her face, so it definitely had to be him. She seemed to be telling him, "Come see me at the Smithsonian sometime!"

Last year, the sequel to *Wonder Woman* had been announced, and apparently the heroine worked at the Smithsonian in the film, so she was probably keeping in character. Though for all I knew, she could've actually worked there.

"Oh, Nakajima. He's headed right to the doghouse, isn't he?"

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"I figure Midori's probably gonna bite his head off after that."

"I still can't believe the two of them were a *thing*..." *Though I guess they* were *close enough to start up a new business together, huh?*

When the police arrived soon after, they were greeted by event attendees yelling at them for responding so slowly. Everyone who was injured had already made a full recovery, and while some people did get pulled away for questioning, the measurement device didn't seem to be too badly damaged, so the event was able to proceed.

Some guy barges in with a semiautomatic rifle, and the show just goes on... What a world we live in.

American TV was abuzz with the story about the terrorist who attacked the explorer event and the sponsor who took him down with a single punch.

"I'm pretty sure this event is the only place that could ever happen."

The chief researcher for the WDA had been on-site, and the protesters had left a banner on the ground, which had apparently thrust dungeon-grown foods into the public eye. But what shocked people around the world the most was the use of expensive, rare potions to heal the wounded.

One big highlight of the story was an interview with someone dressed as Wonder Woman, who was cheerily pointing out the holes in her costume where she had been shot. One amazed TV commentator pointed out that considering how much damage a gun must have done to her, the fact that she was still alive was a "wonder" in itself.

Annotations

***Dies irae*:** Translates to "the Day of Wrath." The title of a medieval Latin chant, it refers to the day when Christ will return to the world, resurrect all of humanity, and sort out whether each person will go to heaven or hell.

***"The statue of St. George slaying the Nuclear Dragon"*:** A statue located in the Gift Garden at the headquarters of the United Nations. The statue depicts St. George slaying a dragon, but the dragon's body is a nuclear missile; it thus symbolizes humanity eradicating nuclear war. Supposedly it actually contains pieces of Soviet and American missiles. Incidentally, the path from the statue to the headquarters itself is about 250 meters in length.

***"My future dream isn't a shopping scheme"*:** Refers to the lyrics of "Anarchy in the U.K.," a song by the Sex Pistols. Nathan thought that the man he was talking to might've been a fledgling anarchist who just wanted to kill people.

***Diana Prince*:** Also known as the heroine Wonder Woman. Here, it refers to a woman who was cosplaying as the superhero. Apparently the cosplayer worked at the Smithsonian, and it's believed that she chose the costume after learning about a scene in the then-upcoming movie *Wonder Woman 1984* (which released in 2020). In the movie, the character also worked at the Smithsonian.

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Message Board [What the hell's going on...] D-Powers 228 [...with SMDs?]

1: Anonymous Explorer ID: P12xx-xxxx-xxxx-1623
From out of nowhere, the ridiculously named D-Powers appeared and began auctioning orbs. Now they've started selling stat-measuring devices, called the SMD-EASY and the SMD-PRO.
Are they the ultimate swindlers? Or saviors of the world? Where will D-Powers land after all this?
Next thread at 930.

263: Anonymous Explorer
Anyone manage to pick up an SMD?

264: Anonymous Explorer
they don't exist

265: Anonymous Explorer
They're machines that live on only in your memories... They're...nothing more than illusions in your young boy's heart, a dream of your youth...

266: Anonymous Explorer
This stinks. I wasn't fast enough

267: Anonymous Explorer
dat quadruple dot ellipsis tho lol

268: Anonymous Explorer
Ridiculous, I tried one minute after midnight and they

were already sold out. How many did they even have prepped?

269: Anonymous Explorer
They didn’t produce enough units, we know that for sure.

270: Anonymous Explorer
obviously trying to work up the public’s appetite by engineering a chronic supply shortage

---

271: Anonymous Explorer
Never heard of Tokiwa Medical Equipment Laboratory. Do they have assembly lines running in the lab or something?

272: Anonymous Explorer
p sure they outsource the manufacturing

273: Anonymous Explorer
Unclear whether they’re outsourcing.
None of the factories around Taiwan have publicly announced they’re manufacturing the things. But you don’t just snap a huge factory into existence either.

274: Anonymous Explorer
If it’s not outsourced, would that mean they’re building them in-house in small batches, cottage-industry style?

275: Anonymous Explorer
They might be starting out that way.
Considering its functionality, it makes sense for there

to be massive demand, but if you think about actual use case scenarios, demand should be super low. I don’t get it.

276: Anonymous Explorer
They’re selling to niche demographics. Hardcore explorers, researchers, maybe curiosity seekers. It’d be one thing if it was cheaper, but right now I bet they’re pricing themselves out of wider demand.

277: Anonymous Explorer
yeah, it’s pretty expensive

278: Anonymous Explorer
Is it really, though? For a machine nobody else can make?
For cars there’s Porsche and Ferrari, for watches you’ve got things like Patek Philippe. It’s that kind of high-end item.

279: Anonymous Explorer
Think in terms of electronics. Even VCRs used to cost 50k yen starting out. That’s how it is when you’re first to market. Also, it’ll be a pay service in the second year.

280: Anonymous Explorer
Pay service? Paying for what?

281: Anonymous Explorer
A server connection fee, >280

282: Anonymous Explorer

Server?

283: Anonymous Explorer
maybe you should read the info page another hundred times or so

---

284: Anonymous Explorer
No need to be mean, now.
This thing’s just a measuring device. Apparently it sends its info to a server where the actual stat calculations take place.
Even Siri connects to guzzoni.napple.com, right? Same idea.

285: Anonymous Explorer
guess that means there’s some decent complexity involved

286: Anonymous Explorer
so they’ll be charging for access to their server...

287: Anonymous Explorer
That’s why you can’t resell it. Only the person it’s registered to can use it.

288: Anonymous Explorer
WUT?!?!?!

289: Anonymous Explorer
Shouldn’t be a big deal for the PRO, I’d think, since it can have multiple registered users.

290: Anonymous Explorer

you’re looking at a minimum 2.8 million yen, tho...totally out of reach for individuals

---

291: Anonymous Explorer
Cheaper than high-end cars or watches, and individuals buy those. All depends on what people value

---

292: Anonymous Explorer
But you actually end up *owning* the cars and watches. So how much will the subscription be?

293: Anonymous Explorer
Starts at 500 yen, apparently. It’s tiered depending on how many measurements you take, but as long as you’re not using it on every rando you run into, sounds like most people will come in under 1,000/month, no problem.

294: Anonymous Explorer
Wow!

295: Anonymous Explorer
Not that it really matters if you can’t even buy one

296: Anonymous Explorer
^^^ this x1,000%

297: Anonymous Explorer
Not surprised the first batch sold out so quick. Corporations, top-ranked explorers, and militaries all over the world were probably frothing at the mouth to get one of the damn things.

298: Anonymous Explorer

Wouldn’t those types of buyers just reach out directly?

299: Anonymous Explorer
D-Powers doesn’t do business like that...
Not that anyone can reach them by phone anyhow

300: Anonymous Explorer
How would you even know?

301: Anonymous Explorer
Eh, it was work-related. Never did manage to get through.

302: Anonymous Explorer
Couldn’t leave a voicemail?

303: Anonymous Explorer
No, nothing ever happens. It just keeps on playing their ring back tone and nobody picks up.

304: Anonymous Explorer
What’s a ring back tone?

305: Anonymous Explorer
It’s a special ringing sound people can set up to play when others call them. It just takes the place of the regular ringing sound you hear on the line. Though the name kind of makes it sound like it’s making the caller’s phone ring instead.

306: Anonymous Explorer
That would just be a normal ringtone.
They call this a ring BACK tone to differentiate the

two.

307: Anonymous Explorer
holy shit that’s confusing

308: Anonymous Explorer
If nobody’s picking up, maybe they unplugged their phone? >303

309: Anonymous Explorer
Almost seems that way.
No matter how much influence someone might have, they can’t make use of it because they can’t get in touch w/ D-Powers

---

310: Anonymous Explorer
They have a mailing address, right?

311: Anonymous Explorer
never heard of anyone getting a response, lol >310

312: Anonymous Explorer
What kind of business are they running??

313: Anonymous Explorer
Well, when you’ve got a grand total of one employee...

314: Anonymous Explorer
srsly?!

315: Anonymous Explorer
That’s what it says on their Company Overview page

316: Anonymous Explorer

So it’s basically just Wiseman Inc!

317: Anonymous Explorer
Nope, the CEO isn’t included in the employee count.

318: Anonymous Explorer
After all this, she’s still considered a small business owner under the Small and Medium-sized Enterprise Basic Act??

319: Proud SMD Buyer
Heh heh heh. I managed to get a preorder in.

320: Anonymous Explorer
Waaaaaaat?! So they DO exist!

321: Anonymous Explorer
Chill.
He might just be talking about some upcoming video game

322: Anonymous Explorer
Which one did you get? E? P?

323: Proud SMD Buyer
EP? It’s not a vinyl, lol
It’s an EASY. Wife said no to me buying the PRO

324: Anonymous Explorer
GG, imaginary wife

325: Proud SMD Buyer
You need an explorer card to use it, but apparently it doesn’t matter whether you have a D-Card. Seems like

you just have to link it to your WDA license, put in a SIM card or connect it to Wi-Fi, then it’ll go right into account verification & be ready to use.

326: Anonymous Explorer
Can you switch it to another WDA license?

327: Proud SMD Buyer
Nope. You’ll need to go through a special process for that.

328: Anonymous Explorer
WHAT

329: Anonymous Explorer
You didn’t know? It’s right there in the description.

330: Anonymous Explorer
If you bothered reading all that, you probably didn’t have time to score a unit

---

331: Anonymous Explorer
Fair point. Be smart, get punished, I guess

332: Proud SMD Buyer
From what I could tell, my preorder was temporarily reserved once I made my model selection. I just clicked first and had no problem taking my time entering my info after. And boy are there a ton of fields to fill in

---

333: Anonymous Explorer
They need more than just your name/address/age/explorer

ID?

334: Proud SMD Buyer
They’ve got some fields related to ordering your SIM card. Those are optional, though. You’ve got to register your account, put in your payment method, *etc*. Businesses have even more to fill in, supposedly. I didn’t have to deal with any of that since I’m considered an individual.

335: Anonymous Explorer
So when does it show up?

336: Proud SMD Buyer
No firm date.
I’ll get a notification when it’s on its way.

337: Anonymous Explorer
Awesome, IRL party at Proud SMD Buyer’s place once the SMD shows up! We can all get measured

---

338: Proud SMD Buyer
If you’re near Yoyogi, be my guest. 500 yen per measurement, yo!

339: Anonymous Explorer
You’re gonna charge us?! Ah, who am I kidding, for that price I’m tempted. I have a feeling providing stat readings is gonna turn into a legitimate business pretty soon.
At 350,000 yen, you’d break even after 700 measurements!

340: Anonymous Explorer
You’re outta luck. I read that the JDA is gonna start up a stat-measuring service. There was an article on the Yoyo-D Information Bureau site

---

341: Anonymous Explorer
Seriously?! There go my big plans...

342: Anonymous Explorer
shoulda planned a little bigger lol

343: Anonymous Explorer
When does the JDA service start?

344: Anonymous Explorer
It’s set to open this Tuesday. The JDA’s probably keeping all the PRO models for themselves through their back channels

---

345: Anonymous Explorer
back channels lol
like they’re some kind of smugglers

346: Anonymous Explorer
Hey, that’s literally tomorrow!
I saw something being constructed in the first-floor rental space behind the gates at Yoyogi. Maybe it’ll be there?

347: Anonymous Explorer
Yeah, that’s it. They said it’ll be next door to what used to be the big meeting room.

348: Anonymous Explorer
Sweet, let’s go get measured!

349: Anonymous Explorer
I can hear the voices already: “Your STR is only 5? Pfft, weaksauce...” Anyway, I bet it’s gonna be super crowded at first.

350: Anonymous Explorer
I don’t wanna be shamed in public. I’d rather some pretty lady whisper the info directly into my ear

---

351: Anonymous Explorer
It’s not a hostess club!
...you should totally drop a comment suggesting it on the Yoyo-D site tho

---

352: Anonymous Explorer
Aw yeah, this is starting to get exciting!

Yoyogi-Hachiman

“*Our main problem is* Mining*, then,*” Facile said, opening the thick curtains in the smoky living room just wide enough to peek outside.

Unless an orb dropped right in front of their eyes, there was no way to steal it from someone else; once it had been used, the orb was unobtainable.

“*Shall we proceed with operations on the eighteenth floor until it drops?*”

“*Not a fan of that plan,*” Ratel responded with closed eyes as he plopped himself down onto the sofa chair, a thick cigar between his lips.

Genomos were apparently fairly ubiquitous. If they brought in a Browning M2 or something and started mowing the things down,

they had a somewhat decent chance of picking up a Mining orb. Then again, others out there had been doing exactly that for over a month, yet precious few had seen any orbs actually drop—and considering Ratel and his men wanted to stay as inconspicuous as possible, the eighteenth floor being busy and crowded was an unwelcome development.

"*Can we just kidnap someone with Mining and put them to work for us?*"

"*What do you propose we use for that? Itorphin, perhaps?*"

Upon hearing Facile's exasperated response, Ratel plucked the cigar from his mouth and put it in the ashtray.

"*Would be nice if we could. I heard there was an executive order back in 2003 that brought things like that back into play, but once Obama started up his Open Government Initiative they were pretty much dead in the water again.*"

In 2003, George W. Bush had taken an executive order issued by Bill Clinton that allowed for the release of information under the basic principle of "err on the side of less classification," and amended it to effectively give the director of the CIA authority to overturn any decisions to declassify info. That had been done amid the context of the 9/11 attacks, and in 2009, Barack Obama updated the rules further to prevent records from remaining classified indefinitely.

"*In that case, shall we go the auction route?*"

Two more copies of Mining had been put up for sale in an auction that had started two days prior.

"*We tried having a proxy put some bids in, but at that price it's out of our league.*"

The winning bid last time had been roughly thirty billion yen. No matter how generous they might've been, no client would've allowed that kind of expense. Even a hundred million would raise serious eyebrows.

There was always the option of taking an orb by force at the time of transaction, but that would likely mean killing some JDA staff along the way and wouldn't leave any opportunity to dive into Yoyogi.

"*Quite frankly, the most realistic solution would be to kidnap*

someone with the Mining skill, force them to procure the drops we need, then either keep them in our back pocket or eliminate them." Facile crossed his arms, emphasizing how limited their options were. "*Though not only will we need to locate a Mining user first, you can bet they will be heavily guarded.*"

They probably wouldn't have much trouble finding someone with Mining by canvassing the twenty-second floor. That was where most Mining users would go in Yoyogi when they wanted to test the effects of their skill. "Noble metals" dropped there, so a lot of people would naturally seek to recoup some of what they had spent on obtaining the orb.

However, most of those individuals were backed by various nations or large organizations. Killing off an entire group of such dungeon divers was technically doable, but the fallout would no doubt be a huge pain to deal with. Still...

"*We could just clear out everyone who gets in our way, then leave the country before anyone's the wiser.*"

Facile suppressed a half smile. *That's certainly an option.*

Ratel wasn't the type to vacillate over whether something could or couldn't be done. If his careful calculations determined there was a chance, he simply took action.

"*Worst-case scenario, we may have to resort to that.*" As Ratel's second-in-command, it was Facile's job to follow through and sort out the details of any plans his boss might have. "*However, I've taken the liberty of calling Burst in. Let's lie low for a while until he arrives.*"

Burst was their team's best authority in chemistry and physics—and an expert in explosives. He'd had no role to play in their most recent operation, but Facile figured he was the ideal person to have as their Mining user.

"*I'm all for lying low. Feels good to have my feet firmly on the ground.*"

Better than being excess baggage on a cargo plane again, Ratel thought to himself, letting out a bellow of laughter.

"*I wonder if David will just let us out of our contract,*" Facile thought out loud.

"*Nothing to worry about there. He already broke the contract himself.*"

Though that was just Ratel's point of view as a hired hand. Under normal circumstances they probably could have forced him to annul the contract, but not only was David a particularly slippery guy, he wasn't intimidated by the threat of violence either.

Ever so slightly concerned, Facile eyed Ratel. The second-in-command knew full well that no matter how great any plan or tactics might have been, they wouldn't work without the strength to back it up—and utilizing that strength was precisely what Ratel specialized in.

As he was musing to himself, Facile heard the soft rumble of the estate's front gate opening. When he glanced out the window, a car was pulling into the driveway.

"*Well, now. It appears the man of the hour has arrived.*"

***

The huge house David had rented out was owned by an executive of a certain company. The executive had dealings with French institutions, and David had been introduced to him as someone who could heal the severe burns his daughter had suffered. He'd ended up being a recipient of one of David's group's miracles. Of course, the real secret behind Marianne's miracle was a third-ranked healing potion. Fortunately the daughter hadn't fallen into Nightmare's clutches yet.

"*So tell me, what exactly is so important that you decided to call me over?*"

David sat down in the sofa chair in the living room and crossed his legs, facing away from the wide window and its thick curtains.

"*Well, I figured our relationship was just about coming to a close,*" Ratel said.

David showed no hint of surprise.

"*I believe our contract period still has a fair amount of time left, doesn't it?*"

"*I'm sure you'd rather be done with it than pay us to sit here and*

do nothing, right?"

"*Hmm.*"

"*I always used to like the fact that you thought religion was a crock, despite the fact that you were a frontman for a religious organization.*"

"*I haven't exactly changed, have I*?"

"*So you're not working for God after all?*"

Hearing that, David slowly adjusted his legs to cross them in the other direction.

"*It seems the two of you are misunderstanding something.*"

"*Misunderstanding?*"

"*That's right. You believe religion and faith are the same thing.*"

"*What's the difference, then*?"

"*It's quite simple: Religion uses the idea of God to collect funds. It's just a means of raising money.*" David's face seemed to say he thought everyone already knew that. "*In the end, it's nothing more than a clever way for weaklings to get by in life. It's a method for people without any power or money to gather allies using little more than flattery and fake smiles, so they can strike back at those who do hold power. All without realizing the powerful will still take advantage of them. It's so foolish, it's almost endearing, honestly.*"

"*Okay, what about faith, then?*"

David didn't answer Ratel's question directly.

"*Every philosopher in history has attempted to answer the question of whether God exists. Kant, after much thought, proved that it was impossible to confirm or deny God's existence. Pascal's wager was based on profit versus loss, though he admitted that reason would dictate not to make the wager at all. However, I think that if the two of them had been born into the present world, they both would've come to very different conclusions.*" David leaned forward slightly. "*You have to understand, I am convinced beyond a doubt that God exists.*"

"*That's ridiculous.*"

"*Take the dungeons, for example. Who else would be able to create such things? They're definitive proof that there is a God*."

"*I kinda prefer the idea that they're miracles born from a mass*

delusion of humanity."

"*And who, pray tell, could orchestrate such miracles, apart from God?*"

"*Can't the devil do that kind of stuff too?*"

"*They're two sides of the same coin, really,*" David replied, sinking back down into his chair. "*My father was a religious man—he was a Reverend Father.*"

"*I wasn't aware of that,*" Facile blurted out. He had investigated David thoroughly around the time they had signed the contract, but that particular bit of information hadn't been in his profile.

"*Men who have a bit of mystery to them make better religious figures,*" David replied.

"*It is a rather attractive quality for con artists.*"

Facile's comment had been nothing more than banter, but he sensed David's mood take a sudden turn.

"*My father preached the word of God every day, but seeing his parishioners suffer such sorrows and bemoan God's absence caused him deep anguish.*"

As David lowered his head, his intonation gradually deepening in pitch, Facile shot a disturbed glance at Ratel, trying to verify whether he should take action. In response, Ratel raised his left hand, a signal to hold off for the time being.

"*As real as he knew God to be, my father thought that if those who suffered could physically feel his presence, their faith would no longer waver.*" The atmosphere gradually grew heavier and heavier, similar to the sense of foreboding that sometimes fell over battlefields. "*But how, then, can one experience God's touch?*" David asked rhetorically.

"*Offer him your ass, maybe*?"

Despite Ratel's sardonic comment, David merely rested his elbows on his knees and pressed his fingers together into a triangle shape, his face twisting into a grin.

"*That's one way of doing it. Preaching the word of God, guiding the people, doing good deeds.*"

"*Spoken like a true con artist. Sounds like a perfect scam.*"

David's body began to quiver rhythmically, as if he were trying to

quell his amusement. He almost looked like he was nodding to himself repeatedly.

"*No matter how faithfully my father served, though, the Lord never showed himself.*"

"*Of course he didn't.*" Ratel let out a snort. *Because God doesn't exist*, he thought.

Ignoring this, David went on.

"*Eventually, though, he finally arrived at a certain truth.*"

"*Truth?*"

David curled his lips and spread his arms out as if the answer were obvious.

"*God was too busy. Indeed, though all of existence is under God's purview, there are over seven billion living human beings on Earth. Even if he were to spend just one second of his time per person, it would take him over two hundred years to interact with everyone—and if beings on other planets or other living creatures on Earth are also under his grace, it would take even longer. Mankind simply doesn't live long enough for everyone to receive equal shares of God's grace.*"

"*Sounds like a convenient excuse to me,*" Ratel said with a throaty laugh. "*So our good fake priest took that as inspiration and is trying to pile up good deeds by walking around healing bigwigs, in hopes of getting a better spot in line for a one-on-one with God?*"

"*Bigwigs?*" David looked up in amusement, his wry smile unmistakably confessing that he only used people like that for their money and connections. "*No, God has not turned his interest to us in any special way, unfortunately. When someone is taking care of a beautiful garden or courtyard, they may admire the birds and insects that visit it as another part of the full experience, but they wouldn't be particularly aware of the lives and deaths of each visiting creature. They're only one component of the garden, and it wouldn't really matter to the human if the visitors weren't always the exact same ones. However, the Lord does not suffer people to trample his courts. He is, after all, said to deliver divine punishment to all who oppose him, and said punishment would no doubt be quite severe.*"

"*So you're saying if there were insects eating up his roses, he'd*

need to exterminate them."

David nodded in agreement.

"*What's your point with all this, anyway?*"

"*You haven't figured it out?*"

There was a strange twinkle in David's gaze, burning with the heat of a carefully tended fire.

"*Again, the Lord does not suffer people to trample his courts.*" He glared wildly upward as if he saw something through the roof. "*And that is the very reason he shall grace us with his presence—to deliver his divine punishment!*"

With that declaration, David rose suddenly to his feet, speaking with fervor.

"*The only path to approach God—is through sin!*" He spread his arms out dramatically. "*Pure sin of the highest order!*"

"*Whoa, there...*" Even Ratel was put off by the level of fanaticism David was exuding. The mercenary had seen people get swept up by wartime fervor out on the battlefield, but there was something different about this. It was like smoldering dark red embers hidden among ashes under gloomy gray skies, flaring up in scattered bursts of flame that threatened to spread across the entire world.

"*By disgracing and defiling God's kingdom with reckless abandon, we will* force *him to come down from on high!*"

"*You're out of your fucking mind.*"

Hearing that, David responded by casting a disinterested icy stare back at Ratel.

"*That's the very definition of faith, isn't it?*"

"*Hah. That explains a lot about French clergymen, then.*"

Starting in 2015, victims had made numerous accusations of sexual abuse by members of the Roman Catholic clergy in France. Due to that, the country's Bishops' Conference commissioned an investigation into the matter in 2018.

"*That's a rather upsetting comparison, you know. No matter how many sins one might tally up against other individuals, it won't be enough to make any difference.*"

"*You're nothing but a two-bit con artist yourself.*"

"*Which is why I wanted to hire people like you, who make a living*

off of war. But you're just so well-behaved! If you're *what evil is supposed to be, I'm rather disappointed, to tell the truth.*"

"*You don't get it. All us mercenaries care about are contracts and payments. There's no room in the equation for good or evil.*"

"*Oh, I like that. I like it a lot!*" David reached into his pocket, pulling out a folded piece of paper. "*And I must say,* this *is pretty incredible as well.*" He placed the paper on the table between them and opened it. It was a copy of an email that Ratel had received.

The moment Facile saw it, he swiftly drew his gun, pointed it at David, and came a hair's breadth from pulling the trigger before Ratel's arm shot up to stop him.

"*Where did you get that?*" Ratel asked in a deep, booming voice that sounded like it was emanating from the depths of hell itself.

David's only response was to smile in silence. *Such things are trivial for God*, he almost seemed to be saying.

It would've been difficult to intercept his email mid-transmission via botnet. Ratel could only think of one method to easily pull off something like that...

Whipping his phone out of his pocket in a flash, Ratel pinched the sides of it between his fingers and held it up in front of him. Instantly, the muffled sound of two silenced gunshots rang out, and both projectiles blasted holes in the phone, whizzing past David's cheek and embedding themselves in the wall right next to him.

"*I'll ask one more time... Where'd you get it?*" Ratel pointed to the paper, then held up the damaged phone for David to see before tossing it onto the table where the document was. He then took the gun from Facile and aimed it at the head of the man seated across from him.

Suddenly, David's cell phone let out a tiny beep.



Paying little heed to the gun pointed at him, David pulled out his phone and glanced at the screen.

"*Well, now. It seems the Broker has put in a winning bid for Mining.*"

The muscles in Ratel's face twitched involuntarily.

"*How about it? That would be worth our continued collaboration, don't you think?*"

"*Collaboration? You want us to help with your crazy 'sin' plan, then?*"

"*Oh, I won't ask for* that *much.*"

Seeing how unconcerned David was, Ratel clicked his tongue in annoyance and lowered his weapon.

***

As David walked out the entryway door, the smile on his face was one of pity.

When there are two sides that will not compromise pitted against each other, the only recourse is for one side to wipe the other out. Any fools who reach out to negotiate once the damage starts to get worse are simply liars—they never should have said they refused to compromise in the first place. How do people swimming in lies and excrement expect to convince anyone of anything?

He got into his car, started the engine, and cast a fleeting glance back at the mansion.

"*If you aren't able to compromise, then you're doomed to be wiped out. You have been from the very start,*" he murmured, then quietly stepped on the gas pedal.

Annotations

***Itorphin*:** Ratel and Facile were talking about a (fictional) rumor that this mind control drug actually existed. No, they hadn't actually read the manga it came from, *Rusalka Will Not Return*. Rest in peace, Satomi Mikuriya (author of said manga—he passed away at the end of 2022).

***Reverend Father*:** An honorific title for a Catholic priest. As a

general rule, priests aren't allowed to marry, but that doesn't preclude the possibility of them having children. For example, if a priest chose a life of priesthood after his wife passed away, he might have already had children. Many priests also choose to adopt.

Yoyogi-Hachiman, Office

The overcast sky had cleared up beautifully after lunch, and I headed downstairs into the office, stifling a yawn.

Miyoshi was already awake. She was sitting at the dining table staring at her laptop, a cup of coffee in one hand.

"Oh, good morning!"

"Wow, you're up early." We had ended up staying awake for the entire New York event, and hadn't crawled into bed until early this morning.

"Come on, Kei, how can I sleep when *this* is going on? It's been on my mind all morning!" She turned her laptop screen in my direction.

"Coffee for me too, please."

"Sure thing."

The screen had a stock chart up on it—for Goten Industrial, apparently. Morning trading was already over, and the stock price was—

"Huh. It's not all that different from last weekend."

"Crazy, isn't it? Every last share I put up for sale on Saturday was successfully traded during the morning session!"

"What?! At that price?" It had been a roughly twentyfold return on the purchase price.

"So, you remember when Midori contacted us last night, right?"

"About the preorders, you mean?"

That whole thing made my stomach hurt. *Can we really handle that many back orders? The lower middle class should only have enough money to eat comfortably and have a tiny bit left over to splurge on a few small luxuries. Seriously.*

"The preorder situation is public information, you realize."

"So you're telling me people propped up the shares after they saw our preorder numbers?"

"You'll freak out when you see the actuals!"

"I'm not sure I want to..."

We hadn't been planning to use any Goten parts in our final products to begin with. It looked like things for them had gone straight past "awful" and into "pitiful" territory.

"There's no way this would've happened if the blueprints had been leaked on the EMS side, though. Turns out EMSs are more secure than I thought!"

"That's because Napple has been shoring things up."

"Yeah, thanks to all those data leaks about their new mobile devices."

Napple, which had been suffering frequent leaks from manufacturers about yet-to-be-released products, had tried to resolve the issue by imposing downright draconian rules and penalties on them.

At any rate, there were also signs that the shareholders who had been waiting patiently for Goten's stock price to explode would end up rushing to sell their shares to lock in profits after seeing Miyoshi's massive sell-off.

"Nearly sixty percent of Goten Industrial shares are owned by nonindividual foreign entities—specifically, lots of outfits with 'Management' or 'Investment' in their names. When you add in shares that count as personal income, that number jumps to seventy-five percent. Shareholders that are considered corporations or financial institutions, which traditionally show up in a lot of cross-holding situations, hold less than twentyfive percent of the company's stock."

"So what does that mean?"

"It means when the time comes to start selling, they're gonna sell like crazy!"

But with the stock price continuing to rise, it was probably already considered highly likely that someone out there had hit on some unknown market factor. Everyone seemed to be throwing each other off by collectively fumbling around for the right moment to

sell. After all, the initial investment had been too large to have been a fraudulent transaction.

"Next, how about we try selling off a ton of shares on margin?"

"Let's not and say we did."

"Aw, spoilsport."

"Like they always say, it's possible to have too much of a good thing. The cowards already paid nine hundred billion yen. Now's the time for us to pull out and pretend we don't know a thing about it."

"Boo. Sure, fine, so be it."

"Do we want to use our profits to ramp up production on the Party Checkers?"

"We've already got enough in our pooled funds to cover that."

Not only that, but thanks to our little pricing snafu, we had a profit margin of ninety percent. It was one thing to worry about being in the red, but I could picture the bloody tears pouring out of the eyes of business managers all over the world if they ever ended up hearing we were concerned about making *too much* profit over a pricing error.

"Why not just invest it into whatever fund looks decent and let it accumulate naturally?" she suggested.

"What are we supposed to do with even *more* money? Do you even have any ideas for new projects?"

Miyoshi thought about this for a while, then shook her head.

"That's the thing about money, I guess—once the pile reaches a certain size, it just sort of starts growing on its own."

"Well, there's a limit to everything. That reminds me, though, how are our taxes coming?" I asked.

"With our income tax and residential taxes together, you'll be shocked to hear our tax rate comes to a whopping twenty percent!"

Actually, we also needed to add in the special income tax for reconstruction from the 2011 Tohoku earthquake, so the final number was slightly higher.

"About the same as the dungeon tax, then."

"*This* is the tax rate for people who make easy money off capital gains, and *this* is the tax rate for people who earn an honest living wage by working at normal jobs," Miyoshi said, gesturing to two

numbers. “At this rate it won’t be long before the nation runs out of workers.”

Supporters of stronger income tax regulation held that the wealthy used the tax rate on capital gains to avoid paying the income tax rate intended to apply to them. Opponents argued that the majority of investors had gross incomes of less than eight million yen, and with the tax rate being just twenty percent, increasing regulation would run the risk of dampening their desire to invest.

Then again, if stock prices fell due to that dampening, one could argue that the people most likely to be negatively affected were the big volume traders—the wealthy. *It sure would be nice if the whole “nonspenders are nothing but fodder for the big spenders” dynamic could stay in the world of free-to-play mobile games.*

“You know, hearing you of all people say that just doesn’t have a whole lot of impact,” I said.

“I guess it wouldn’t, would it?”

Hotel Grand Hill Ichigaya, Ichigaya

The man had barely passed through the doors to Cattleya, the café on the first floor of the Hotel Grand Hill Ichigaya, when he found a familiar face seated in a back corner and walked over to him.

“Hey, Tera. Been a bit.”

The person seated in his chair drinking a cup of coffee was Lt. Col. Takekatsu Terasawa, supervisor of the Japanese Dungeon Attack Group.

The other man removed his coat before taking a seat at the opposite side of the table.

“You’re earlier than I thought you’d be,” Terasawa said.

“You gave me *one iron ball* to work with. But I’m a pro, so I managed what I could in the time I was given.”

“Oh? Does that mean you figured it out?”

“Don’t be so impatient,” the man said, turning to the waitress to place his drink order. “One scotch, on the rocks.”

"Oh, *come on*, Shinozaki."

Shinozaki grinned.

"Don't worry, I've already closed up shop for the day." He reached into his bag, pulled out a plain document envelope, and handed it to Terasawa. "But are you really sure we should be doing this here? Right under the JSDF's noses?"

Hotel Grand Hill Ichigaya was sometimes called the JSDF's Imperial Hotel, among other things, and no small number of JSDF officials had their weddings there. In short, they utilized the place remarkably often.

"I'd say it's the perfect place to meet with a JSDF official. If anyone happens to question me, I'm just meeting up with a friend. Meeting up in the back corner of some little hole-in-the-wall would be far more suspicious, if you ask me." Despite him saying that, though, the two of them were in fact nestled into a rather inconspicuous part of the café.

As they waited for their orders to arrive, Terasawa pulled out the report, and Shinozaki, after moistening his lips, began to explain.

"I traced the iron balls way more easily than I expected. All it took was an internet search. Just had to scroll down to the first link after all the big e-commerce sites—maybe the tenth link from the top—and *bam*, there was our maker."

"Forget about how you found them—how'd you get the actual info out of them?"

"I'd *like* to say it was pure skill, but actually all I had to do was call their order hotline and say 'Excuse me, I placed an order for a large quantity of iron balls not too long ago,' and they responded with 'Ah, yes. Miyoshi, right?'" Shinozaki grinned, pushing up his glasses. "The average person is completely clueless, huh?"

The investigator raised his glass and took a glug of his drink, but Terasawa was focused on something else.

"Miyoshi?"

"Yup. I don't know the actual characters for the name, of course... Have you heard it before, then?"

If anyone who hung around the dungeons heard the name "Miyoshi," there was only one person who would immediately come

to mind: a petite woman resembling a Japanese doll, who was nicknamed Wiseman. According to a report from Team I, she was also the person who appraised the item that ended up being the key to locating the stairs leading down to the thirty-second floor.

So Miyoshi *is the one who ordered the iron balls that the Phantom used... No, wait...*

"Are you *sure* they're identical to the iron ball I gave you?"

"No way to know for certain without a rigorous compositional comparison." Shinozaki emptied the last of his scotch and signaled the waitress over with his hand to bring another. "Still, placing an order for ten thousand of those things is downright bizarre, to put it lightly."

"Ten thousand?!"

"Yup, apparently our Miyoshi character ordered them by the truckload. What else could they possibly be used for besides that weapon you mentioned?"

Ten thousand eight-centimeter-diameter iron balls? Together they'd weigh tons*. And that's not even considering the volume... Where on earth is she putting all these things?!* Terasawa was befuddled by this revelation. *At any rate, it feels like a bit of a stretch to assume that Azusa Miyoshi and the Phantom are the same person. If I remember correctly, in First Lieutenant Kimitsu's report, Miyoshi showed up right after the Phantom disappeared—but according to Hagane their heights were drastically different, not to mention Kimitsu said the Phantom was a man. Speaking of men in Miyoshi's circle, she has a male party member—is there a chance* he *could be the Phantom? From what I recall, according to our records, he's barely even gotten his feet wet as a novice explorer, but...*

"Oh, one more thing—apparently there were a whole bunch of iron balls 2.5 centimeters in diameter included in the order as well."

"What? She ordered smaller ones too?"

"That's right. Too small and awkward to throw, but too big to use as slingshot ammo. Wonder what the hell those are for."

"Hmm." Terasawa began digesting this information. *Setting aside the issue of how to use the smaller iron balls, if this particular Miyoshi is indeed the Wiseman—and I'd be crazy to think otherwise*

at this point—then there's a high probability she knows the Phantom's true identity. Of course, there's always the chance he's keeping that info secret and is just using her to get what he needs via her commercial license... "Hold on."

"What's up?"

Terasawa fell silent again. *If all of them were connected, it might actually be the Phantom who's procuring the orbs for the auctions. That would at least make more sense than the theory that there's a "Making" skill out there that lets people conjure up whatever orbs they want. Although there's also the fact that the timing of the Otherworldly Language Comprehension orb's sale was a little too convenient—and there's no way to explain why the auction was set for three days either.*

Seeing Terasawa lost in silent thought, Shinozaki took a sip of his second scotch, a bitter smile playing on his lips as he remembered the old days. *I almost forgot—once he starts thinking, sometimes he goes off into his own little world.* After waiting a short while, Shinozaki checked to make sure Terasawa had joined him again, then lowered his voice and started discussing the other request he had been given.

"The second report in there is about the Director of the Bureau of Personnel and Education," he said, referring to the department under the Ministry of Defense that had seemingly tried to get at the Phantom via Iori.

Hearing that, Terasawa pulled out a rather thick stack of papers held together by binder clips. The documents contained a long list of names and photos of individuals who had come into contact with the director, sorted in chronological order.

"That's the list of people who've met up with him since you hired me."

"Thorough job."

"Like I said, we're pros."

"No kidding. So what did you learn?"

"Well, you wanted details, so we did a pretty deep dive. A lot of the time they met up at fancy Japanese places or other restaurants and went in separately, so it was hard to pin down the specifics

about their encounters, but we followed up on anyone who entered and left within thirty minutes of him. I marked those people with 'UC.'"

"UC?"

"Stands for 'uncertain.'"

"Why not just write 'uncertain,' then?"

"Too many letters," Shinozaki grunted. He might as well have just admitted writing it out would've taken too much effort. "Anyone whose backgrounds seemed to align with what you're looking for, I marked with an exclamation point and included a summary with their info. Anyone we couldn't identify has a question mark instead."

"That helps out a lot."

Shinozaki leaned forward, pulling a smaller envelope out of his pocket.

"That one took some serious money—we needed substantial manpower to pull it off. Sure hope you've got plenty of cash piled up in those discretionary fund coffers."

Unsurprisingly, there was an invoice inside the envelope Terasawa had been handed.

Chapter 12: Tokyo Blackout?

February 26, 2019 (Tuesday)

Yoyogi Dungeon, YD Café

"*Here it is, just as you desired: one Mining orb.*"

Seated at a table that was conveniently in the shadows of some decorative greenery in the far back of the YD Café, the thin-faced man known only as the Broker pulled out a titanium case in front of Ratel and Facile.

"*Burst.*"

There were five men sitting at the tables in the back—a group of two and a group of three. When Facile called Burst's name, he hastily stifled the huge yawn he had been in the middle of, went over to the other table, and grabbed the case.

"*So this is it, huh...*" When he opened the lid, the Mining orb was there, shining brilliantly in rainbow colors.

As soon as the thin-faced man saw that the recipient had confirmed the contents, he immediately stood up.

"*I will be on my way, then,*" he said, and left the café. There was no such thing as receipts in their line of work. The fact that the Broker didn't leave any evidence of their transaction was proof that he was a pro.

Facile placed a WDA license in front of Burst, who had been rather ambivalent about receiving his new skill, and the latter quickly slipped it inside his pocket.

"*Do you have all the data memorized?*"

"*You bet I do. I've got this covered.*"

"*Perfect. We're heading in now, then.*"

"*Wait, what?! I just came in on Air France this morning!*" Burst

had arrived in Japan on a red-eye flight early in the morning, and his internal clock was still running at about 1 a.m.

"*That's your own fault for not sleeping on the flight.*"

"*No fair! Hound came out of nowhere and put me on a flight just after nine in the morning! How was I supposed to sleep?*"

"*No need to worry. I hear the Arche isn't a particularly fast machine, so you should be able to sleep like a baby tonight.*"

"*If I don't get woken up by the sentries,*" Burst grumbled. They had planned for him to head into the dungeon with a French-made porter called the Arche, which David had arranged for them to use. In a practical survey conducted by the French Special Operations Command's Dungeon Tactical Unit, the machine could traverse roughly nine floors per day on average at a constant walking speed.

"*So I'm supposed to meet up with you and the rest of the team near the ninth floor exit, right?*"

"*Correct. Shoot, Scout, and Eics—split up and make your way down to the ninth floor separately. We'll regroup there. Chauffeur, make sure you're waiting outside for us at the scheduled date and time.*"

The man called Chauffeur gave a small nod in confirmation. He was a specialist in operating vehicles, and his job was to gather details on escape routes and camera placements in the city while he waited.

"*So we'll check our equipment once we get there, then?*" Scout piped up, concerned that he hadn't been able to verify the state of their equipment prior to starting the mission.

"*If things go like they did the other day, none of us should have any equipment problems before we get to the ninth floor.*"

"*What happens if we do end up with a deficiency in our equipment, then?*"

"*That's simple,*" Ratel said, a cocky smile surfacing on his face. "*David dies.*"

Dungeon Management Section, JDA

Headquarters, Ichigaya

"Hey chief, we just got a strange phone call."

"Oh really?" Giving the seemingly never-ending pile of confirmation papers related to the safe-area bidding one last resentful glance, Saiga leaned back in his chair and looked over.

"They're saying there's been a violation of an official notice inside the dungeon, and they'd like to speak to the person in charge..."

"Excuse me?"

Tip-offs like these tended to occur a few times a year, but most of the time they ended up just being pranks—false reports, in other words. Still, the JDA had no choice but to check them out anyway, on the off chance there was actually something to them. Normally that would be the police's job, but they weren't equipped to handle things inside dungeons, so they ended up being routed to the Dungeon Management Section, which took care of everything.

"Not only that, they're speaking in English."

"In English? Really?"

They didn't usually get tip-offs in English. Someone who was actually proficient in the language had just so happened to have picked up the phone this time, so it had gotten passed along without a problem, but if it had happened at another time, there would've been just a bit of confusion over handling such a call.

"All right. I'll take it."

Letting out a small sigh, Saiga picked up the receiver and pressed the hold button for the line.

"*Hello, this is Saiga speaking.*"

"*Are you the person in charge?*" The voice on the line sounded a bit muffled, like it was going through one of those old voice changers.

"*I am. May I ask who's calling?*"

The caller ignored Saiga's question.

"*From my understanding, the JDA does not permit Mining users to collect ore outside of designated floors, correct?*"

"*That's correct.*"

"*It has come to my attention that not long ago, someone hired by*

a certain organization started making their way down to mine on one of those unauthorized floors."

"*Oh?*" Saiga detected a hint of awkwardness in the person's speech, more than he'd expect from a native English speaker.

"*Strange. You don't sound all that surprised*."

"*Oh, believe me, I'm plenty surprised. How did you find this out, by the way?*"

The voice chuckled.

"*That's a trade secret, I'm afraid. More importantly, aren't you curious about what exactly they're going in there to mine?*"

The WDA had filed reports that discussed the possibility of forcing random ore to drop, so whoever was on the phone must have already looked at those reports.

"*I'm surprised you even know that detail.*"

"*The ore they're after...*"

They? Saiga thought. *I guess that means the caller is reporting a group, not an individual.*

"*...is plutonium.*"

"*Uh...*"

This is the exact problem D-Powers was worried about when they proposed the mass and atomic number system, Saiga reflected. *I can't believe it's actually becoming a reality already—this feels too real to be a prank.*

"*The JDA has authority over everything that goes on inside dungeons,*" the caller asserted.

If I report this call to the police on suspicion of forcible obstruction of a business, Saiga wondered, *would they be able to trace its source?*

"*However, some doubts remain as to how effective they are,*" the caller remarked.

"*Thanks for letting me know,*" Saiga replied. "*That's unfortunate to hear.*"

"*Still, I don't imagine you would simply believe a story like this out of the blue.*"

"*Well, we wouldn't normally, at least.*"

"*My friendly recommendation to you would be to go and*

investigate as soon as you can."

"*Thank you for your kind counsel.*"

"*Hah, nonsense, it's what any good person who loves to see justice served would do. Now, I bid you farewell.*"

After hanging up the phone, Saiga immediately called Miharu over. There were very few explorers who had managed to reach the twenty-fourth floor, possessed the Mining skill, and had no affiliation with any particular larger institution. In fact, there was only one party that met all those criteria.

Yoyogi Park

Seated at the edge of the fountain pond in Yoyogi Park, the man hung up his burner phone and tossed it into the water, watching the ripples it created as he stood up.

"*Nothing personal, Ratel. I paid you a healthy sum, so you should have no problem doing the work for me, right? Besides*"—David's lips curled upward into a smile—"*you and your men aren't quite ready for sin yet.*"

Yotsuya, Sotobori Park

Upon exiting the Ministry of Defense, if one headed straight down the road in front of it, they'd come to the Sotobori Park baseball field. In the area behind the backstop, there's a short stairway leading down. These stairs stood right on the boundary between Yotsuya at the top and Ichigaya at the bottom.

A burly man with his hands inside his coat pockets stood at the bottom of those stairs. As another man with sharp features started coming down the steps with a practiced gait, the man in the coat raised his hand.

"Hi there, Terasawa. Thanks for taking the time to come out and see me."

"I'm a very busy man, Saiga."

"I'm sure you are. I just figured you might be interested in a few

details about the Storage orb we discussed last month."

"Did you use it?!"

Saiga didn't answer him directly. Strictly speaking, his team hadn't used it, but *someone* had. If Terasawa made unwarranted assumptions, it would be his own fault.

"There don't seem to be any limits on size, but the total capacity is determined by mass, apparently."

"Mass? How much mass are we talking?"

"The current user's limit seems to be just over forty-four tonnes."

Forty-four tonnes was the same weight as a fully loaded Type 10 tank. That meant if someone really wanted to, they could carry an entire tank around with them.

Terasawa's imagination immediately started to run away with him. *JSDF vehicles are all under twenty-five tonnes, since they were made to be able to use existing roads—and helicopters are even lighter. We'd need to store them to travel between floors, and of course we'd need to be careful of slimes showing up, but—*

"Oh, by the way, from what we understand, creatures like slimes can't get into the storage space either."

"What?!" *Does that mean we can negate the slime problem by storing the objects every so often?* Terasawa cleared his throat. "I'd like to talk about the possibility of getting some assistance with progressing further through the dungeon—"

"Oh, that reminds me," Saiga interrupted. "You did say we could get your cooperation if anything happened, didn't you?"

Hearing that, Terasawa's face scrunched up and he let out a loud sigh.

"So *that's* what this was all about."

Saiga then went on to explain the current sticky situation that had come to light after the anonymous phone call.

"We're not an intelligence agency, Saiga."

"The police would never even give us the time of day if we went to them about it. Besides, *your* people have contacts in higher places than my team does, don't you agree?"

"If we can't be sure of the authenticity of the info, it may as well just be a rumor. There's nothing anyone can do about that. If we

reached out to our contacts, they'd never give *us* the time of day."

The bar was just set too high for some random explorer to try and force plutonium drops in Yoyogi Dungeon—not only would they need the Mining skill, but they'd also need to be able to reach the twenty-fourth floor.

"Anyway, it's quite an elaborate story. I take it you have some kind of lead?" Terasawa asked.

"There aren't many explorers who can make it down to the twenty-fourth floor. Maybe only a few individuals at the very top of Yoyogi's leaderboards, the military—er, I mean the JSDF, and some of the other top-ranked explorers in other dungeons."

"For starters, you should check on anyone who entered the dungeon within two days of the call and still hasn't come out. Once you follow up on that lead, get back to me and we can—"

Saiga's face went sour.

"There wasn't anybody who met those criteria."

"That makes the hoax theory a lot more likely, then." Terasawa smiled as he spoke, but he knew Saiga had chosen this specific meeting spot for some reason or another. There was no way the conversation was over yet.

"There was, however, a lone explorer on the list that stood out: one 'Mitsuo Maruyama,'" Saiga said, pulling out a piece of paper.

Terasawa tilted his head slightly. He had never heard the name before in his life.

"Am I supposed to know who that is?"

"I'd be surprised if you did."

"Then why'd he stand out?"

"He apparently brought a French-made porter in with him."

"Some no-name explorer went in with an Arche?"

"Exactly."

There were currently very few explorers who owned porters, because there wasn't really any way to get one without being seriously well-connected.

"We didn't have any record of it being kept in the JDA storage area, so it was most likely the first time it had been brought in."

"But he still could just be some random rich guy, right?"

"Maybe. The thing is, the dungeon employees remembered seeing the man with the Arche."

"Well, it's not something you run into every day, that's for sure."

"Fair enough, but what stood out most according to them was that the individual in question was a rather handsome Caucasian."

Terasawa raised an eyebrow. "A Caucasian? Named Mitsuo Maruyama?"

"There's always the possibility he's from a family that became naturalized citizens." Nobody had been able to get into contact with Mitsuo Maruyama, which wasn't particularly surprising considering he was supposedly inside the dungeon. "Unfortunately, we're short on evidence," Saiga continued. "Nothing has happened yet—and without anything concrete to bring to the authorities, our only option would be to check up on the guy on our own and risk harassment charges."

"You have security cameras at the dungeon gate, don't you?"

"What am I supposed to do, print a shot of this guy who technically isn't even accused of anything yet, then stand out on the street waving it around and yelling, 'Hey, anyone know whether this is Mitsuo Maruyama?'"

Obviously, common sense stated that wasn't an option.

"Fine, fine, I'll try to dig up some info on this Maruyama guy."

"Using the JSDF?"

"Not exactly... I guess you could say I've got a friend."

A very expensive friend, Terasawa added in his thoughts as he pulled out his cell phone.

***

"Mitsuo Maruyama? Who the hell's that?"

Shinozaki had lazily taken the phone call from Terasawa and was sitting disheveled in his chair. He had stayed up all night and into the afternoon, and the call had woken him up from a power nap.

"He's just your bog-standard explorer."

"What, you see this guy going on a walk with your daughter or something?"

"I don't have a daughter."

"Cripes. Hadn't seen you in five years and you're already working me like an ox. I won't pry about it—you just want me to find the guy, right?"

"Not exactly. Officially he's supposed to be inside the dungeon right now."

"Huh? Well what am I investigating, then?"

"Talk to a friend of his, a coworker—anybody he knows—and find out what he looks like."

"What he...*looks like*?"

It was a bizarre request. Apparently the man wasn't on the run, and he wasn't exactly in hiding either. If they wanted to know what he looked like, they could've just sneaked a peek at him while he was walking around.

"To be more specific, I want to find out if he looks like he might be of foreign or mixed-race descent."

Shinozaki let out a silent curse. Nowadays, if one wanted to find something out about a target, a lot of the time it could be taken care of with a quick phone call or internet search. But when it came to finding people who know the target and asking them things, that would require some actual legwork. Back in the day one could check out a nearby video store, and if the person had a membership, things would come together from there, but nowadays there weren't many of those stores left, and nobody tended to use them anyway.

"Do you know what high school he graduated from?" If so, they might be able to get the info they need from the school yearbook or some of his classmates.

"The only info the JDA has on record is his name, age, address, and phone number." Nowadays, registering a gender was optional, but sometimes it was possible to determine that info by looking at their locker reservation history.

"What kind of ID did they have when they registered with you?"

"A driver's license, apparently."

"There should be a photo on the ID, then."

"The JDA doesn't collect personal information without permission, and if we asked the police for a photo without any evidence of a

crime yet, they'd slam the door in our faces."

Shinozaki had no idea why Terasawa was so insistent on investigating this person despite the fact that there was no evidence of a crime, but an assignment was an assignment.

"All right. I'll head over to the place and ask the people around there for more info."

"Get on it ASAP if you can. I'll text you the details."

"You've gotta be kidding me..."

Ending the call, Shinozaki let out a huge yawn and headed over to the office shower.

***

"I'm sure this will be more than enough to confirm whether your man is the real Mitsuo Maruyama. Now, as for payment"—Terasawa suddenly fell silent, prompting a confused look from Saiga, before continuing—"how about instead of money, you provide me with some info on Azusa Miyoshi?"

"If you were hoping to use the JSDF to try and keep a leash on the Wiseman," Saiga replied, "let me warn you, you're wasting your time and effort."

"As much as I'd love to do that, right now I just want to know more about her. All these crazy things keep happening, and they all seem to be centered around her."

With that, Terasawa reached into his bag and pulled out a heavy-looking iron ball.

Saiga raised an eyebrow.

"What's that?"

"A man in a strange outfit with a cape gave this to our Lt. Kimitsu on the thirty-first floor. We did some research on it, but it's just your regular iron ball."

"I see. So what about it?"

"I can't be sure it's the exact same item, but *someone* placed an order for ten thousand iron balls with the same specs."

"I thought you weren't an intelligence agency?"

Terasawa sighed.

"What can I say? The little things like that always bother me."

"That's why you were the perfect man to help us out. Go ahead and send us a bill—but please, go easy on us if you can."

"You don't seem particularly surprised by this."

"Oh, believe me, I'm plenty surprised," Saiga said, giving a playful shrug. "I'm just more used to surprises now, considering the people I've been having to deal with."

"Well, I guess that's that, then. All that's left for you to do is confirm this info in person—but there's no way in hell we can send out a team based on such vague intel. Even if I framed it as a training exercise, it'd be way too sudden." If it had been a week out, Terasawa might've been able to do something, but this situation called for immediate action.

"We'll just have to figure something out. However, I'd like to have the JSDF on call if any plutonium does actually end up dropping."

"The moment it's taken outside the dungeon, it'll be a job for Public Safety. If dungeons aren't considered to be inside the country, then that'd be what, the Fourth Foreign Affairs Division?"

The question of who in Japan was responsible for dealing with nuclear terrorism was an extremely difficult one to answer. Naturally the National Police Agency and the Fire and Disaster Management Agency were big parts of it, but numerous other agencies had some semblance of countermeasures in place: the Ministry of Foreign Affairs; the Ministry of Health, Labor, and Welfare; the Ministry of Economy, Trade, and Industry; and the Ministry of Justice. Still, the bulk of the work would likely fall to the National Public Safety Commission.

"The JDA doesn't have the right to use physical force," Saiga pointed out. "It may be our jurisdiction to make the rules, but we have no means of enforcing them."

"Whoa there. Don't go stirring up controversy by suggesting we should start arming dungeon associations."

"If the JDA has to start dealing with things like plutonium, even if we prohibit taking things like that out of the dungeon, it's highly likely there will be a constant stream of people trying to smuggle them out anyway."

"And if that happens, it could be seen as the dungeon associations abdicating their duties."

"Well, do you think that countries around the world would be willing to allow their dungeon associations to take up arms to enforce regulations?"

Terasawa rubbed his head in annoyance.

"Look, on the off chance some plutonium actually drops, you'll probably just have to let someone like Tanaka handle the next steps. We're all just cogs in the mechanism of society, and cogs shouldn't start spinning on their own."

"Well, if anything happens, we'll reach out to you."

"Got it."

The two of them then exchanged private numbers, in case anything happened to occur during off-hours.

"Not the greatest feeling in the world to sit here exchanging phone numbers with a guy your age in a place like this."

"I'm not any happier about it than you are."

With a bitter half smile, Terasawa started heading back up the stairs toward Yotsuya.

"An iron ball from the Phantom, huh..." Saiga straightened his collar as a cold wind blew across the moat. "Well, for now, the plutonium issue takes precedence."

He sincerely hoped it was all some kind of prank, but if it wasn't, he wondered if the JDA would be able to keep the info from spreading.

"It's nice to be able to serve humanity, but I really could do without having to deal with crazy stuff like this..."

Shoulders slumped somewhat, he started on his way back to his office, figuring he might as well get a dosimeter ready just in case.

Annotations

***Saiga getting Terasawa's cooperation*:** A reference to volume 5, specifically something that occurred on January 8, 2019.

Yoyogi-Hachiman, Office

Though it had been relatively warm, there was a sudden drop in temperature, and a cold, humid wind was threatening to bring in snow. There was no reason to expect anybody to come into the office on a night like this, but the bell at the entrance rang all the same.

"Hm? Naruse?"

Right on the heels of the safe-area bidding, yesterday had also been the early date for the second stage of the national university exam. The Dungeon Management Section's workload wasn't getting any lighter, and Naruse was no doubt as busy as her coworkers. I tilted my head, wondering if something urgent had come up.

She took off her coat, wearing an uncharacteristically intense expression.

"Sorry to bother you so late."

Oh, that's right—today was the day they were starting up the stat-measuring service at Yoyogi.

"Not a problem at all. So...did something go wrong with the SMDs?"

"No, that part actually went swimmingly—no major issues. There's just, ah, something else going on."

Miyoshi blinked.

"I think we might need something to cut the tension here, Kei."

"I dunno; it doesn't really feel like the right time to be cracking wise."

Hearing that, Naruse smiled weakly and started to explain.

"Well, here's what happened—" It had all started with an anonymous phone call earlier that afternoon. "The caller told us that a certain explorer was headed to the twenty-fourth floor to try and force a plutonium drop."

When we heard this, our reaction was one of dull surprise. It had only been a matter of time.

"None of the isotopes of plutonium are stable, and its atomic mass number has a huge range from 228 to 247. If they force a drop without taking any of that into account, whatever they get should follow the natural abundance ratios, but what would happen if they end up with an isotope that doesn't show up in nature very

often?” Miyoshi mused.

“If that’s even possible, it’d probably be mixed with various other isotopes, sort of like spent uranium fuel, right?” I pointed out.

“Well, that would at least make it difficult to use in nuclear weapons, which would be a bit of a relief...” Miyoshi murmured.

“If they’re going down there to force a drop, they probably plan on making it plutonium-239.”

“So they’d use the mass and atomic number system?”

I nodded.

“Most likely.”

The fact that it was possible to force certain minerals to drop had already been reported to the JDA and made public. In the wake of that, the JDA had forbidden Mining users from going into floors that didn’t yet have an ore drop determined. We’d managed to convince them to keep the mass and atomic number system from being publicized, but it wasn’t as if people couldn’t come to the same conclusions we had—with the exception of anything that required special skills.

“But Kei, plutonium or not, if someone wants to get a specific ore to drop, not only do they have to be strong enough to make it down to the twenty-fourth floor, they’d need the Mining skill too.”

“There’s the rub,” I echoed.

The chances of it being a prank were pretty high, but on the off chance it wasn’t, Saiga had apparently already looked into everyone who had gone into the dungeon over the past two days and hadn’t come out yet.

The twenty-fourth floor, huh? If we’re talking private citizens, only the top Yoyogi teams stand much of a chance of making it that far.

“So what did Saiga find out?” I asked.

Naruse frowned.

“In the end, nobody met those criteria.”

“That means it was just a prank, right? You could just sue the caller for fraudulent obstruction of business.”

“Well...” She explained how earlier that morning, they had verified that a man named Mitsuo Maruyama had gone into the dungeon with a French porter called an Arche.

"Mitsuo Maruyama?" Wondering who that was, I exchanged glances with Miyoshi, but she just shook her head. Apparently she had never heard of him either.

"We can't exactly assume someone is a criminal just because they brought a porter with them, can we?" Miyoshi pointed out.

"The JDA staff said they remembered him being a handsome Caucasian man—but our investigation revealed that he was just a plain old Japanese person, without any Caucasian features whatsoever."

"Now *that's* suspicious," I admitted.

"Where is the real Mitsuo Maruyama?" Miyoshi inquired.

"If he's not inside the dungeon, then he's a missing person," Naruse responded.

"Have you reached out to the police?"

She shook her head. The person seen by the staff might not have been Mitsuo Maruyama after all—and if he was officially registered as being inside the dungeon, he wasn't necessarily a missing person either. And even if they decided to report him, there was nothing anybody could do besides wait for him to come out of the dungeon.

"I think I've got the gist of the situation," I said. "I take it you want us to go down to the twenty-fourth floor and confirm whether plutonium is dropping?"

"That's right. Since we haven't proven the call to be a hoax yet, we have a duty to follow up on it, and we don't know any other explorers with Mining who can make it down to the twenty-fourth floor besides you."

Miharu knows who I really am, so I'm sure she has faith in my ability to dive that far down. Still, there are other explorers who can do the same thing. Some of the teams from various nations on the eighteenth floor could probably handle it—though if they're working for national governments, it wouldn't be worth their time to help us out. For nations that are already nuclear-capable, there'd be no point farming plutonium like this. Meanwhile, any states that do have nuclear aspirations would know that obtaining a single nuke won't get them anywhere. If they wanted to stockpile them in significant numbers, they'd need so much ore that they'd have trouble getting

it all out of Yoyogi. Plus, if they wanted to get plutonium through Mining, they might as well focus their efforts on exploiting their own dungeons, not coming all the way to Yoyogi.

That only left one possibility.

Miyoshi looked at me.

"If this whole thing is actually happening, I'd assume terrorists are behind it, right?"

"There's a high chance of that, yeah." Unlike for a nation, for nuclear terrorists, a single bomb would be plenty. "If terrorists start bringing nukes into capitals, countries would have no choice but to listen to pretty much whatever demands they make. Think how easy it would be to smuggle a bomb from international waters into a major port city using some insignificant fishing boat."

"If they wanted to do it by air, they say luggage inspection can be pretty lax for private jets. I heard that Tamayura, the dedicated facility for private jets that opened up at Kansai International last year, isn't equipped with any large X-ray machines, so oversized luggage just skips right past those checks."

Security checks were more strict on aircraft where there was a greater likelihood of incidents such as hijackings instigated by passengers. However, since there was virtually zero chance the passengers on a private jet would try to pull something like that, security check implementation was left to the discretion of the company operating the flight, apparently.

So we potentially have a terrorist who's able to make it all the way down to the twenty-fourth floor, huh. What a horrifying thought...

"Doesn't sound like we've got much choice. All right, Naruse, we'll head down there and check it out," I declared.

"Oooh, look at you, Kei, being a big brave man for no good reason!"

"Are you daft? If some lunatic uses a dirty bomb in Tokyo, my plan to enjoy a slow life will go up in literal flames!"

"Don't worry, I'll accept that as your cover story."

"Ugh! Look, let's just get this over with ASAP—"

"Just a sec, Kei. Suppose this Mitsuo Maruyama guy *is* up to no

good. If he took an Arche with him and dove into the dungeon early in the morning, if we went after him right now, we might end up passing right by him."

"That's a fair point." Even if this model happened to be relatively fast by porter standards, porters in general were pretty lacking in the speed department.

"We'd be fine if it took the fastest route down, but if it didn't, we'd zip right by it. And if that happened..."

"We might end up accidentally setting the ore drop for the twenty-fourth floor ourselves, instead of just checking on it," I said, finishing her thought.

"Considering the circumstances, what would we even do if we accidentally forced a plutonium drop?"

I put on an expression of mock horror.

"Uh-oh, what if the anonymous tip was all some elaborate trap to make us do exactly that?!"

"Um, I think that may be reading into things a little too much."

"Oh, so *now* you act like a normal person..."

"Let's start by setting a few guidelines for our course of action," Miyoshi suggested, holding up a forefinger up emphatically.

She's right—it's not time to start freaking out quite yet.

"First, what do we do if we run into a Caucasian male with an Arche en route?" she asked.

"Well, we're not public prosecutors or their assistant officers, nor are we judicial police officials...so we have no power of arrest." If we restricted our suspect's freedom in any way, *we* would be the ones engaging in criminal activity. "The best we could do is to keep trailing them from a distance, I suppose."

"So we conduct surveillance, then? Wait for them to force an ore drop on the twenty-fourth floor and catch them red-handed?"

"Actually, we can't do that either." It was the JDA that had banned setting drops on new floors. However, they didn't have their own dedicated police force. Japanese law applied for most things, but there was no Japanese law that stated people weren't allowed to set ore drops on dungeon floors that had yet to be set.

"When the JDA was founded, there was talk about applying

article 14, paragraph 3 of the Local Autonomy Act to us, but, well...” Naruse chimed in regretfully.

Article 14, paragraph 3 of the Local Autonomy Act was more or less a clause that allowed local governments to make their own ordinances—including, of course, penalties for violating them.

However, the Local Autonomy Act really only applied to entities that were considered local governments. According to Naruse, there had been various objections raised stating that applying the act to the JDA would have been tantamount to recognizing dungeons as their own municipalities, putting them under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications.

At any rate, for an ordinary citizen to arrest someone, the suspect had to be in the act of committing a crime. Unfortunately, disregarding notices posted by the JDA was not considered a crime under Japanese law.

Miyoshi frowned.

“So that means we can’t rush down to the twenty-fourth floor and wait to ambush them there either, huh?”

“Sounds like we can’t do much of *anything*, at this rate.”

Currently there was no way for us to legally prevent drops, because nobody had anticipated this becoming a problem in the first place. No matter how suspicious this Mitsuo Maruyama might have been, it wasn’t a sure thing that he was up to no good. In the end, we wouldn’t know whether anyone was violating JDA rules until somebody actually forced a drop.

The allies of justice are in a bit of a bind, here.

“If only there were some way for us to prevent him from leaving the dungeon with whatever drop he ends up forcing...” I murmured.

“Hmm...” Miyoshi hummed, her arms crossed, until she suddenly looked up. “The culprit’s gotta have Mining, right?”

“You’d think. If he didn’t, he wouldn’t be able to force a drop.” Even if the number of people with Mining was over forty-nine, it would be impossible for someone without Mining to force an ore drop on a floor that didn’t have its drops set yet.

“In that case, if we had a way to identify people who have Mining, couldn’t we just question them as they’re leaving the

dungeon?”

“Huh?”

“Can you actually do that?!” Naruse couldn’t help but shout, jumping up from her seat. I was just as surprised as she was.

“Sure! We just have them show us their D-Cards—simple as that!”

Upon hearing that, Naruse hung her head dejectedly, her raised hopes having been summarily dashed.

“The JDA isn’t entitled to inspect people’s D-Cards. Besides, most ordinary explorers don’t carry their D-Cards around with them all the time.”

The sole item used to control entry into dungeons was the explorer card. The D-Card was only used to confirm Skills, so there probably weren’t too many people in the habit of carrying theirs around. Since people were starting to form parties now, carrying one’s D-Card might have been a bit more common now than it used to be, but without any investigative authority, the JDA had no means of forcing people to even show their explorer cards, much less their D-Cards.

Outside the dungeon, it might have been legal for police to check someone’s card as an extension of a personal belongings search via voluntary deposition, but it would take considerable manpower to follow the person back to their house if they didn’t have it with them, so considering it was still uncertain whether there was even a real threat in this case, that wasn’t a particularly realistic option.

“I was joking, jeez. Don’t you remember the protrusion in those stat-based 3D models we made a while back, Kei?”

She was talking about a discrepancy between the models we’d created based on stat measurements from people like Mitsurugi and Saito, and the models we’d created based on me and Miyoshi. Our hypothesis at the time was that the difference had something to do with spatial storage skills like Vault.

“Protrusion?”

As Naruse cocked her head in confusion, I explained to her the model we had discovered while working on the SMD that might allow for the identification of skills.

“Would it be possible to use that, then?” she asked.

"We won't know unless we try, but we've got a ton of data in our back pocket, so I feel like we've got a decent shot. Right, Kei?"

"And if it works, we should be able to have the suspect questioned and searched based solely on the fact that he has the Mining skill, even if the dosimeter doesn't go off." If the phone tip-off was real, obviously the police would be sent out—and having Mining would be more than enough to warrant a search of the person. "If the police search turns up any plutonium, they could be arrested under the Radiation Emission Punishment Act. They can still be charged even for a failed attempt." Not to mention, if they were caught in possession of the substance, even nonpolice individuals were allowed to apprehend them.

"We'd love it if you would, then!"

"For starters, then, can you procure some kind of container for us?"

"A container?"

If any plutonium did end up dropping, we would need a container to carry it out as evidence. Normally there were various regulations that governed transport of substances like that, but plutonium-239 posed virtually no danger as an alpha emitter. On the other hand, dust particles from it could be extremely dangerous—but as long as we had some kind of airtight container, we should be fine. Once we got out of the dungeon, we could let the experts handle the rest.

"But Kei, if we can determine who the Mining users are, can't we just force anybody who has it to turn around once they reach the twenty-fourth floor?"

"We can't exactly connect directly to the server, can we?"

"I guess that's what you would call a developer privilege?" Miyoshi responded with a smirk, pulling out her laptop.

Oh, come on*. If you could make those kinds of calculations on your own, what was even the point of buying that ridiculous supercomputer...?*

"Fine, then. I guess that means you'll be waiting on the twenty-fourth floor the *entire time* until we find something?"

Miyoshi responded with a loud snoring sound.

Not to mention, we don't know whether we'll have enough time

for that in this case.

"All we can really do is try our best to handle things on the fly, at this rate."

"It feels like everything we've been doing has been last-minute, lately..." Miyoshi shot me a disgusted look, as if it had somehow all been my fault.

"Well, when the problems themselves keep getting thrown at us at the last minute, what choice do we have?"

We had the Yokohama incident, then the Forest King incident, and now there's this plutonium drop thing. Nobody could've predicted any of them, and they all came with brutal time limits. Maybe we're actually badasses for coming in clutch on so many last-minute dangers? There's no way that kind of luck can last forever, though.

"Maybe we should just cut off the 'last' part of the adjective 'last-minute.' Then all our problems will be *minute*!"

"Tell me you didn't just say that..." I turned toward Naruse. "Anyway, we'll let you know as soon as we're ready."

"Understood. We'll work on prepping the container for you and whatnot."

"We'll let you know via Arthur mail when we know what the situation on the twenty-fourth floor looks like."

"I'll be waiting for you in as inconspicuous a location as possible."

With that, Naruse went home—or, more likely, back to Ichigaya.

"Full-time supervisors sure do have it rough, huh?" Miyoshi remarked.

"As one of her *supervisees*, you should probably keep your mouth shut," I said with a sigh. "Anyway, what's the plan?"

"It would probably take a porter three days or so to reach the twenty-fourth floor. If we want to be sure to catch up, I'd say we need to move out sometime tomorrow at the latest."

"If we run at full speed like we did during the King of the Forest incident, we'll stick out like sore thumbs." Back then, most people had been focused on the two people who were clinging to the Arthurs for dear life, so it wasn't technically *us* who had caused most of the fuss, but still...

"I did say 'at the latest,'" Miyoshi pointed out. "The sooner we can get moving, the better."

"Yeah. If we're lucky, we might actually get there in time to turn them away at the twenty-fourth floor."

Then an idea struck me.

"Do you think that protrusion we saw in the data also applies to the Mining skill?"

"It's definitely worth checking out. After all, now we can take measurements using your model with and without Mining—and we can even use my model too!"

Thanks to someone finding the command to delete skills, the two of us no longer had Mining. If we compared models based on our current measurement data to the ones we'd taken while we had Mining, then—

"Hey, unlike last time, we actually have a high-speed computer right here at our fingertips!" Miyoshi pointed a finger at the nearby hardware she had sniped from the Vietnamese.

"I honestly thought that thing was just a huge waste of space—but I guess it ended up being a happy little accident."

"I don't think you're using that phrase quite right, Kei," Miyoshi said, shooting me an annoyed glare as she sat down.

"Ah well. Guess I'll make a midnight snack or something."

"Hold it, before that—those measurements, if you please!"

"Fine, fine."

And, for the first time in a long time—actually, in not very long at all—we dove right back into the exploitative workplace grind.

Yoyogi Dungeon, Ninth Floor

Normally there were no explorers hanging out by the ninth floor exit late at night. The reason for that was that anyone who stayed up all night tended to avoid the ninth floor, which was chock-full of things like ogres and colonial worms during those hours. Instead people stationed themselves at the eighth floor exit. It went without saying that nobody dared to come up from the tenth floor entrance

at night either.

In the rare cases people got trapped there, they would sit there on the staircase that connected the ninth and tenth floors and stay wide awake the entire night. Supposedly it was the safest thing to do in that situation.

At their designated meeting point near the ninth floor exit, Ratel and his men were gathered around the Arche, setting up camp and inspecting their equipment.

"*For support weapons, we've got a 7.62-mm Minimi, a 12.7-mm Hécate II, and an HK417 assault rifle. Black market French military stuff, I'm guessing.*"

"*I'm shocked he managed to procure an Arche, though—it only just got released. His plans for 'sin' must be costing him a pretty penny,*" Facile remarked with a scoff.

The Arche, French for "Ark," was a porter developed by France. Its distinguishing characteristics were its strong, pillbox-like defenses and its rather large carrying capacity.

"*It sure is slow as hell, though.*"

"*Apparently it prioritizes load capacity and base functionality,*" Eics said, summarizing the manual he was reading.

Eics was an expert in information warfare, and his name was a contracted version of the word "electronics." He had no problem handling rough jobs as well, but they weren't exactly his specialty, so the main reason he had been brought on board this time was to operate the porter.

"*No big deal. If worse comes to worst, we'll just scrap the damn thing.*"

"*Roger that.*"

As he was talking with Facile, Ratel had been rapidly checking his equipment. He came to a sudden stop, furrowed his eyebrows, and picked up one of the guns that had been loaded on the porter.

"*What the hell is this?*"

"*It's a Weatherby Mark V, right?*"

"*I know* what *the gun is—my question is, why do we have an antique like this on board? Are we going elephant hunting or something?*"

The Weatherby Mark V was a high performance rifle introduced in 1957 and generally intended for hunting. Even though Ratel was sometimes called the Basilisk of Cyrenaica, he had no interest whatsoever in trophy hunting—most African elephants, hippos, and rhinos were considered protected species nowadays anyway—so he had never used the weapon before. Ratel typically only hunted humans, and the Weatherby was overpowered for taking down people, underpowered against armored opponents, and lacking in ammo capacity.

"*If you consider where we're headed, Captain, a weapon like that might actually be more useful than military rifles, which are optimized for killing people.*"

In terms of muzzle energy, a .460 Weatherby Magnum cartridge had over half the power of a 12.7-mm cartridge, and nearly three times that of a 7.62-mm cartridge. Considering the .460 cartridges were used for whaling, they would most likely be effective, at least to some degree, even against monsters that could easily tank 7.62-mm rounds.

"*Hmm.*"

Many of the bigger beasts on the twenty-fourth through twenty-ninth floors, such as the trolls, weren't particularly agile, but once the HK417 stopped being effective, that would leave only the Hécate, which was severely lacking in maneuverability.

"*May as well use the thing for its intended purpose.*"

Burst pulled back the bolt and started loading ammo in.

"*If we're gonna be hunting big game, there's nothing wrong with channeling our inner Hemingway. Though we can't exactly have something stuffed if we blow it to smithereens.*"

Despite cracking that joke, Burst grimaced when he realized he could only fit two bullets into the internal magazine. "*So only three rounds total, even with one in the chamber? Are we supposed to walk around carrying like ten of these at a time, Captain?*"

"*Just take things down with the three shots you have.*"

"*Whaaat?!*"

"*I finished checking our consumables. We've got supplies coming out of our ears.*"

"*All right, mealtime, then.*"

"*Roger that.*"

Ratel mulled over his plan as he ate from the can of basque chicken he'd found among the French army combat rations they had been given. The porter was loaded up with more than enough supplies like bullets, so once the team's objective was complete, they could give it to Burst and have him make his way slowly out of the dungeon. If they packed the Arche full of the drop items they collected along the way, they could conceal the bomb core among all that other stuff.

February 27, 2019 (Wednesday)

Yoyogi-Hachiman, Office

We had been running the mainframe at full capacity since last night, and the air conditioner was roaring loudly from the other side of the soundproof room.

Before I knew it, it was already past noon, and just as it seemed like time was about to run out, Miyoshi, who had been revising the model the entire time and glaring at the data that had been collected from me, had a sudden sparkle appear in her sunken eyes and began pointing at the screen.

"Check it out, Kei! Isn't this amazing...?" Miyoshi murmured in excitement as she spun the diagram displayed on the computer monitor around. The model displayed there had changed from the previous figure reminiscent of a solid Klein bottle into something even more complex.

"It reminds me of the Morin surface that shows up when you evert a sphere using differential topology, but section three of the Morin surface has that distortion or protrusion that keeps showing up."

"Does that mean we could possibly identify a skill based on the location of the protrusion?"

"It looks like Mining was in the same spot for both of *us*, at least—and Water Magic, Physical Resistance, and Super Recovery all seem to show up in the same place when we have them too. Not to mention"—she overlaid a shape she had created using a different data set with my original shape, and the protrusions showed up in different locations—"these are pretty close matches, don't you agree?"

I raised an eyebrow as Miyoshi compared the newly displayed protrusion with mine.

"What's the other model, anyway?"

"It's Natalie's data."

"Whoa, hold on..."

The SMD we had used at the pre-boot camp was a standard model, but from before the first full production run. The raw data sets available from it were identical to the measurements we'd been taking right here using our own preretail model. Incidentally, they were using the same units at the con in New York as well. The SMD delivered to Yoyogi a couple of days ago was from the first official production batch, so was highly likely it wouldn't be able to produce quite the same results.

"Weren't we, you know, supposed to *destroy* that data?"

"The contract specifically states, 'We will not retain any personally identifiable data.'"

"You *literally* just identified her!"

"Tsk, tsk, Kei. There's a difference between data being 'personally identifiable' and it being 'personally recognizable.'"

"Is there *really*, though?"

According to Miyoshi's sophistry, "personally identifiable data" was data that anyone could link to a person just by looking at it, while "personally recognizable data" could only be linked to a person if you happened to already know their abilities. In other words, if the data you saw while witnessing a specific person was rather unique, or if perhaps the numbers were particularly low, if you ended up seeing that data again, you couldn't help but know who it belonged to.

"Sounds like a major gray area to me."

"As long as a third party wouldn't know whose data it was if they

saw it, we're perfectly fine!"

"Okay, okay," I said with a defeated shrug. "So what's up with the data?"

"See, the protrusion she has *here* is really close to where yours is right *here*!"

"Hmm."

"I think her protrusion is Fire Magic."

"So then mine would be Ultimate Flame Magic?"

"Probably!"

I see—so that means similar families of magic end up creating protrusions in relatively nearby locations on the model, huh.

"Even so, there are still plenty of details to work out."

"Looks like it was worth 'wasting' the Water Magic, Physical Resistance, and even the Super Recovery orb." For ordinary research institutes, that would've ended up burning through nearly twenty billion yen of research funds in a single evening—but *our* main expense was basically just the electricity bill for that big ol' computer we had whirring in the background.

"How are we going to make use of this info, though?"

Unlike the SMD-EASY, the SMD-PRO was a big deal. It would definitely raise some eyebrows if we forced everybody who was leaving the dungeon to pass through a PRO gate.

"The standard model of the EASY can take the measurements we need. Let's just have Miharu use that."

We made sure to limit this little bonus function strictly to the device the JDA would be using; if someone went through that measuring device, and they happened to have the Mining skill, the device would append an asterisk in the area where their stats were displayed.

"I know this is an emergency and we don't have much choice, but I have a concern..."

"What's wrong?"

"If people find out that it's possible to check for skills using SMDs, wouldn't that turn into a huge scandal?" After all, that info still hadn't been made public. From the world at large's point of view, it would look like D-Powers, LLC, had been collecting that info

surreptitiously.

"I think we covered all of the usual bases in the user agreement," Miyoshi assured me, "so we should be fine from a legal perspective at least..."

We were only collecting the raw data picked up by the sensors, in a format that couldn't be tied to any particular individual, and it was ostensibly only being used to improve the device itself. Still, no user agreement in the world could control how people felt about your company...

"Also, no one can reproduce the full information you get from the units that are out on the market."

"Though that does seem like a feature some device administrators would really want to make use of..."

"Hey, let's just make it available for Mining only!" she suggested.

"Why exactly would we make it available for Mining, but not for any other skills?" I wondered.

"That's the thing!"

"*What's* the thing?"

"In the end, all we're doing is measuring a skill owner, then extracting characteristics based on that info, right?"

"I guess?" I conceded. She wasn't exactly wrong.

"So, we can just say we don't recognize any skills we don't actually have!"

"Then what are you gonna do when someone points out you should be able to recognize Storage?"

"Ohhh..." Miyoshi groaned.

That would be *bad* bad. I sighed.

"Let's strike that one off the list."

"Do *you* have any good ideas?"

"Let's just push the narrative that we've only figured out how to identify Mining so far."

"Ew. Sloppy."

"Oh, then I take it that means you've got something better to offer, Press Secretary Miyoshi?"

"Consider the narrative pushed!"

With how loopy we were after staying up all night, neither of us

could come up with anything else.

"All right, let's get a quick nap in, then leave this stuff with Naruse and head down to the twenty-fourth floor."

"Since we've probably got a bit of time left, let's spend a night on the twenty-first floor and pick up any extra supplies Maitreya doesn't have the means to get."

"Sounds good to me."

With that, the two of us went upstairs and collapsed into our beds.

February 28, 2019 (Thursday)

Yoyogi Dungeon, Twenty-Fourth Floor

"*Finally made it to the damn twenty-fourth floor...*"

Ratel blew out a puff of smoke from his Cohiba Esplendidos, a weary look on his face. People said Che Guevara had started smoking cigars as a way to keep insects away, but there were no insects in this particular jungle—Ratel just really liked his cigars. The smell might've put him at a disadvantage against other people, but that didn't matter one bit against monsters. He could smoke like a chimney if he wanted to.

Burst, on the other hand, had been completely enthralled by the dungeon as they had worked their way down.

"*Man, these dungeons really* are *like some kind of fantasy world, huh!*"

It was like being right in the middle of one of those realms he'd adored so much as a child, like Narnia or Middle-earth. He had the D-Card that had dropped from the first monster they defeated on the second floor tucked away safely in his pocket. He might have been a skilled explosives expert, but he was still a young man as well.

At that point, Scout, who had been patrolling just ahead of the others, contacted the team via headset.

"*There's something nasty-looking up ahead, Captain.*"

A bit further ahead stood some kind of giant humanoids with huge, ugly hooked noses, swollen eyelids, and eyes that were unnaturally far apart. Thick fangs protruded from their spittle-spewing mouths, and their thick limbs were protected by a tough hide that would've looked right at home on an African elephant.

"*Trolls?!*" Burst sputtered upon seeing the beasts.

Right as the word escaped his lips, the other squad members immediately dispersed and readied their assault rifles, awaiting Ratel's orders.

When the trolls noticed Ratel and the others, they shot furious glares toward the men, then raised their clubs and let out massive roars as if to goad them into attacking.

"*These things sure don't look like the type that turn to stone in the sunlight,*" Burst gushed.

Ratel raised an eyebrow.

"*The hell are you talking about?*"

"*Never mind. All right, let's take these Uruk-hai bastards down! You guys take left!*"

Burst dashed out, carrying both the HK417 and the Weatherby. They didn't have any info on what would happen to the drops if multiple people defeated a monster, so he was aiming to take it down all by himself.

Seeing the fired-up explosives expert make his move, Facile took the Hécate off his shoulder, pulled out the stock, and placed it on the ground. "Someone *seems a bit overexcited. I hope he remembers what we came here to do.*"

"*Don't worry, we've still got some more chances if he flubs it here. Though if he dies on us, the whole operation goes right down the shitter. For now, keep the monster on the right in your sights, and if things start to go south, let 'er rip.*"

"*Roger that. What about the one on the left?*"

"*That one's about to be the perfect target for testing how effective this 7.62-mm is.*"

There had been similar monsters on the twenty-third floor with skin that hadn't looked quite as sturdy as these, and sure enough,

the 7.62-mm rounds had been enough to penetrate those.

"*How does the rest of the vicinity look, Eics?*"

"*No signs of movement. It's just these things.*"

The Arche included mobile base functionality and was equipped with all sorts of additional features like cutting-edge antipersonnel radar capabilities; it really did take a bit of a specialist to make full use of the machine.

"*Let me know if any other signals show up. Testing's over; now we concentrate on finishing things off.*"

"*Got it.*"

Eics strapped a shotgun loaded with ten-gauge buckshot over his shoulder and went back to checking the monitor. The tiny, fairly swift dinosaur-like creatures on the floor above had been a pain to deal with since they always attacked nearly as soon as he picked them up on the radar, but ten-gauge buckshot had been more than enough to deal with them.

"*Scout, you run interference—Shoot, I want you to try some things out for future knowledge.*"

"*Yes, sir.*"

As the various squad members began their activities, Ratel scowled at the two trolls in front of them. "*I'd probably break a few bones if I tried to wrestle one of those things.*"

"*Please don't make jokes like that, Captain. There's no 'probably' about it.*"

"*Aren't there some explorers that actually do that, though?*"

"*Who knows? I haven't seen it myself, so I couldn't tell you.*"

The trolls didn't seem to be particularly light on their feet, and the one facing Scout was pretty much completely at the merc's mercy. That said, if even one of the beast's attacks managed to hit someone, that unlucky fellow would be crushed into meat paste.

To be fair, bullets could kill people in one hit just as easily. It didn't matter what you were up against—a battlefield was a battlefield. Things weren't all that different from normal.

Taking advantage of the open line of sight that Scout created, Shoot started showering the troll with 7.62-mm bullets. However, they didn't seem to be able to pierce the troll's skin when they hit it

at an angle—that thick hide deflected them just like sloped armor on a tank. Surprisingly, they weren't all that effective when they hit straight on either. The bullets all got pushed out of the wounds with the passage of time.

"*Gotta hand it to these monsters, they're kind of a handful compared to humans. They're still human*oid—*same general body structure. It's just a matter of how tough their skin is.*"

Burst circled quickly behind the troll to get out of its reach, then fired one shot from the Weatherby Magnum into its left Achilles tendon. When he saw the monster let out a roar and lose its balance, he pumped out another shot into the back of its knee.

As soon as the troll crumpled to the ground, propped itself up with its arms, and started to turn toward its rear left, the merc brought up his HK417 and let out a burst of gunfire aimed at its eyes. A few bullets found their marks, but were obstructed by the troll's thick eyelids and failed to reach its brain. Finally, Burst fired another Weatherby round at the monster's head, but the troll brought up its left arm to try and ward off the pesky bullet, and all the weapon ended up doing was blowing a nasty hole in the arm.

The troll then started wildly flailing its other arm to keep Burst from following up with another attack.

"*Holy* shit*, these things are built tough!*"

Taking advantage of the opportunity, Burst loaded three more rounds into the Weatherby Magnum, then dashed over toward the blind spot on the troll's left side to fire off the finishing blow—but even though his right arm shouldn't have been able to reach, for some reason the monster twisted its left foot and swung its massive club at the man.

"*The hell?!*" He had obliterated its left Achilles tendon and knee, but they were somehow both already partially regenerated.

Burst just barely managed to duck out of the way of the club and, using his free arm, slammed the heavy Weatherby down on the troll's head. Having taken the blow hard, the monster lurched backward, swayed, and fell to its left knee once again. *One more hit to the same spot should finish it off.* The merc leaped up onto the troll's right knee and dashed up its body. *I feel like Aragorn wielding*

Andúril.

"*Take this!*"

With that, Burst fired the Weatherby into the troll's head wound and, as he sprang backward using the intense recoil, he pulled the bolt back again and sent the next bullet in the chamber flying.

As soon as he landed, he brought his scope up to eye level and saw the troll in the distance falling backward to the ground. However —*it hadn't disappeared yet*.





Burst sprinted over to the downed troll and stood on top of its chest.

"*A day may come when I perish, but it is not this day!*"

Then, putting his gun right up against the monster's head, he pulled the trigger once more.

Hécate at the ready, Facile groaned in exasperation as he watched the young merc thrust his rifle high into the air.

"*What the hell does he think he's doing?*"

"*Who knows? Can't believe it took six shots from a Weatherby to take that thing down, though. The first three shots went into its legs and left arm. We still don't know what would've happened if he had started by aiming at its head or its heart.*"

"*Welp, looks like we finally found something the 7.62-mm doesn't work on!*" Shoot had shot the troll his group was up against in multiple locations, but it still hadn't shown any signs of slowing down.

"*Facile,*" Ratel said.

"*Yes, sir.*" Adjusting the Hécate, Facile lined up the remaining troll in its sight, waited for Scout to get far enough away, then pulled the trigger. Instantly, an explosive sound rang out, and the troll's head burst like a watermelon.

"*Nothing like a 12.7-mm.*"

"*I'm glad at least one of our weapons is still effective.*"

Just then, Burst came back over to them, looking absolutely miserable.

"*Captain...*"

He was holding a silvery-white ingot in his hand. Perhaps he had successfully managed to find some pluto—

"*I'm so sorry!*"

Apologizing, he held out a piece of metal that was like nothing they had expected.

Yoyogi Dungeon, Twenty-Fifth Floor

Having failed to force the intended ore to drop on the twenty-

fourth floor, a dejected Burst began heading down to the twenty-fifth floor, shoulders sagging.

Secretly amused at how young the merc was acting, Ratel struck up a conversation with him.

"*Hey, Burst.*"

"*Yeah?*"

"*You have the structure of the pit from the bomb schematics memorized, right?*"

"*Of course, sir.*"

"*Then forget about everything else, and just focus on forcing the entire core to drop—rather than plutonium that needs to be processed, try to get us something ready-made to insert into the pit.*"

"*Huh?*"

"*The twenty-first floor has raw gemstones, the twenty-second floor has noble metals, and the twenty-fourth floor has that thing we just got, right?*" Ratel cracked a grin from behind his cigar as he walked with a long stride. "*If we can get the complete core to drop, we won't have to carry around an unstable element like plutonium. It'd be more logical to force it to drop in a usable form right off the bat.*"

"*Um, but sir... Only* ore *drops from Mining, doesn't it?*"

"*Don't get hung up on your common sense,*" Ratel declared in a powerful manner of speaking that belied his age. "*Dungeons themselves exist outside of all those pesky rules of common sense we used to know.*"

"*So screw all the conventional rules, then?*"

"*Exactly. That phrase fits us to a T, doesn't it?*"

Thinking about it, the plutonium-gallium alloy at the core of a nuclear weapon was technically a mineral. Even though the designated delivery location was already in Tokyo, the schematics for the bomb had been included as well, under the pretext that the amount of ore would need to be verified.

"*Do you think our client actually plans to make this thing in Tokyo?*"

"*That's none of our business. If they do, though, there's no way*

in hell I'm gonna get caught up in the fallout. The sooner we skedaddle, the better."

Ratel pondered their current situation. *I already confirmed that the advance payment was transferred over. Since the client never met us in person or even spoke over the phone, I knew he was a really cautious customer—but at least he's good about payment. Considering what he's doing, though, he'd have to be a complete idiot not to be cautious. If info on this ever got out, countries all over the world would come rushing over to stop it.*

In an effort to block out his feelings of anxiety, Burst had started studying the schematics again.

"*I probably should've noticed before, but this thing's pretty small, huh?*"

"*When it comes to terrorism, smaller is better.*"

Nuclear terrorism didn't require the massive power packed into an ICBM. When nuclear *anything* was involved, even a minimal amount of power would be enough to make one's enemies tremble in fear and acquiesce to all demands. That was the very essence of terrorism. And to make that happen, obviously terrorists would want to make their device as easy to transport as possible.

As Burst stared at the blueprints with an intense expression, Ratel gave the youngster a solid pat on the shoulder.

"*Relax. You've still got five more chances.*"

March 1, 2019 (Friday)

Yoyogi Dungeon, Twenty-Fourth Floor

After replenishing our consumables and spending the night on the twenty-first floor, we hurried on our way further down.

On the twenty-second floor where noble metals dropped, there was a group from some random country apparently having a grand old time tearing through monsters. We took a number of detours to avoid running into them, and eventually descended to the twenty-

third floor.

Though we had tested the mass and atomic number system on that floor, we hadn't explored the place particularly thoroughly at the time—we'd just sort of hung out by the entrance. This time we followed the map and headed along the shortest possible route to the twenty-fourth floor. Even though we followed the path, because of how early in the morning it was, we didn't run into a single person. A full week had passed since the safe zone bidding had ended, and clear boundaries had been established between the zones, yet none of the escorts the JSDF was supposed to hire had been stationed there yet, nor had any signal corps troops.

Finally, we descended to the twenty-fourth floor—another jungle area, not unlike the previous floor.

"This thought came to me earlier, too, but it sure is creepy being in a jungle with no birds chirping or insects buzzing, isn't it?" I observed.

It felt as if everything else besides plants had gone extinct. Giant leaves rustled loudly against each other in the wind, adding to our sense of unease.

"Kind of. Though if other things *were* making noises, hearing those would be just as creepy, I'd think."

Standing there in a jungle, surrounded by a sea of green, with chirps and cries from unseen animals echoing all around me—yeah, I wouldn't go out of my way for *that* experience.

"Now that I think about it, this is actually our first time coming here, isn't it?"

"We've been down to the thirty-first floor, yet we managed to skip this one entirely, both on the way in and on the way out. Those are some mad skills, huh?" Miyoshi quipped.

We had been transported there straight from Yokohama, and we had left by being transported directly back to the first floor. Thinking about it from a rational perspective, it was downright ludicrous.

"At this rate, I wouldn't be surprised if we saw some kind of gate appear that lets you move between floors."

"Yeah. Honestly, I can even picture teleportation magic being a thing."

We found no sign of people in the area.

"Considering how long it's been, our guy should've made it this far by now, no matter how slow he may be..." If he had been traversing the quickest route like we were, we would've known if we had passed him, considering he had a porter.

"I wonder if we missed him when we stopped by Iggy on the twenty-first floor," Miyoshi speculated, "or when we took that detour to avoid the group of explorers on the twenty-second floor?"

"It's certainly possible..."

We didn't know what his exact start time was, though. All we knew was that our suspect was a man with an Arche, and he was supposedly traveling alone. At any rate, if he had already made it down here and accomplished his objective, we were about to get a plutonium-239 drop—and no matter how unpopular this floor might've been, we couldn't exactly do that right next to the entrance.

We diverted from the main path and proceeded a ways in, avoiding monsters along the way. When we got a sufficient distance from the entrance, we began our investigation.

***

"Wow, you can get pretty much *anything* online nowadays, huh?"

Miyoshi had brought out a pair of Tyvek hazmat suits. These particular suits were quite flexible, but they didn't provide any protection against radiation.

The half-life of plutonium-239 was over twenty-four thousand years, so it didn't emit very strong alpha radiation. Furthermore, alpha particles could only travel a few centimeters through air, so they could sometimes even be stopped by a sheet of paper. And even if such particles did hit the skin, they typically didn't cause any ill effects, as they weren't able to penetrate the outermost layer of the epidermis.

However, if any material entered the respiratory system and got stuck in the lungs, it could cause *major* problems. In other words, we'd be fine as long as we had some kind of equipment to protect

us from inhaling dust particles.

"I mean, these things seem like they'd be pretty useful for universities and businesses too."

"Reminds me of our anti-slime suits in Yokohama," I said, putting on my bulky NIOSH-certified N100 particulate respirator mask. "Wow, it's pretty hard to breathe in these things."

"Better breathless than lifeless!"

"Can't argue with that. All right, here goes—"

"Wait just a second."

"What's wrong?"

"Remember what you said might happen if the culprit hadn't made it to the twenty-fourth floor yet? *We* might end up being the ones who accidentally force the plutonium drop!"

"Ugh, yeah..." *Now that she mentions it, I haven't been able to get plutonium out of my head this whole time. If I'm not careful, it'll be the whole Yokohama diamond fiasco all over again.* "So what should we go for, then? Standard disclaimer: I *refuse* to do iron."

"Hmm... If we want to aim for a rare metal that people stockpile, you can't go wrong with something harmless like nickel, can you?"

"Nickel, huh... Doesn't sound particularly enticing for explorers."

"It's going for just over fifteen hundred yen per kilogram, currently. Being lower on the price charts doesn't diminish its value as a natural resource, though."

You can always count on the Queen of the Merchants for things like this. So I just have to use the lanthanide method like I did before, and focus on thinking about nickel.

"Let's see... Nickel is atomic number 28, if I recall."

"Its most abundant form in nature is nickel-58, but judging from the lanthanide method we used previously, I imagine it'll appear in the natural abundance ratio without needing to pay attention to isotopic probability."

"Should I focus solely on the number of protons, then? That'd be nice and simple."

"If it helps, the ground state electron configuration is an argon nucleus plus eight electrons in the 3d orbital and two in the 4s orbital."

"Got it. Here goes!"

The grassy area just beyond us suddenly began to rustle, and a pack of small dinosaurs came sprinting out of it.

"Raptors!"

Raptors had started showing up on the twenty-third floor, but when we encountered them there, Miyoshi had made short work of them with a shotgun-like spray of 2.5-centimeter iron balls.

That attack isn't in my repertoire, so Water Magic it is—

"Agh! Why can't I hit these things?"

The raptors dodged nimbly from side to side as they ran toward us, and despite firing off shot after shot, I kept missing them by a mile for some reason I couldn't fathom.

"What is going *on*? I can see where they are just fine..."

"You're probably just out of practice."

Not having much other choice, I pulled out my Sword of Deserts and dashed into the pack of monsters. *My N100 mask needs to stay on due to the risk of plutonium dropping. I was really hoping to avoid physical activity since it's so hard to breathe in this thing, but them's the breaks, I guess...*

"Oooh, there you go, Kei! Considering your stats, nothing in this area can touch you if you go physical!"

Holding my sword out, I dashed swiftly past each of the raptors, then struck a dramatic pose as all four of their heads plopped to the ground.

Miyoshi, for her part, had been watching excitedly and recording the entire brief battle. *Crap, that was a force of habit from back when we were doing our intensive training.*

"What are you doing? I'm not even in my Phantom outfit, so what's the point of taking footage?"

"This video's gonna be a present for Miharu."

"I swear, do you even have a single ounce of concern about the situation we're—"

Before I could finish my question, a silvery-white ingot materialized before us.

"Ah! That's right, in metallic form, plutonium and nickel look extremely similar!"

"Oh, great..."

I knew I had to pick it up, but I still found myself reluctant to come into direct contact with the potential plutonium, despite being fully aware that doing so would be perfectly safe. Heck, Richard Feynman had said he had picked it up with his bare hands—

The stupefied look on Miyoshi's face halted my train of thought.

"Uh, Miyoshi?"

She didn't respond.

"Earth to Miyoshi! Are you okay? Is something wrong?"

"K-K-Kei..."

"What?"

"Th-The ore..." She was visibly shaken as she pointed at the metal chunk that had dropped.

"Is it plutonium?!" It had totally slipped my mind that she had Appraisal—she didn't even have to touch the ore to know what it was.

Then, she ran over to the drop, picked it up just like that, and started giving it a thorough, intent examination. *Wait, is it nickel after all, then?*

"A-Apparently this ore is called...*mithril*."

"Whaaaaat...?" I hesitantly placed a hand on the ore, and when I did so, the following description popped up: *A fantasy metal*. "What the hell's going on?!"

I'd had a feeling mithril was going to show up someday, but just because I'd expected it didn't mean I had the faintest clue what the metal was even supposed to be composed of. *And now it's actually a real-life drop? Does that mean if we analyze this ore, we could figure out the chemical composition of a metal that was only supposed to exist in a fantasy world? If we weren't in the middle of something so important, I'd rush home and start poking around at it right away—*

"About this metal, Kei..."

"Does it have some kind of special property?"

"It showed remainders in the Appraisal results, just like when I use the skill on monsters."

"It did?!"

When used on monsters, the Appraisal results screen divided the

target's stats by the skill user's stats and displayed the remainders.

"Does that mean that mithril ore...has actual *stats*?!" *A metal with stats? Though I suppose that might actually track for a fantasy metal.* "What could that even mean?"

"Maybe wielding a weapon made out of that metal would add the metal's stats to the user's existing stats or something?"

I could envision that.

"That would make sense with melee weapons like swords, but what would happen if someone made projectiles out of it, like bullets or arrows?"

The overall destructive power of a bullet was ultimately determined by its weight and firing velocity. Even if the material of the bullet changed, there would be no difference in how the calculations were performed—but if having better stats actually made it more powerful, what would the logic be behind that change?

"There's no way to tell without trying it out," Miyoshi said with a shrug. "Another idea would be to test what would happen if we tried to make an alloy by combining it with existing metals..."

I put a hand to my chin.

"If something has stats, it's considered a part of the dungeon. Do you realize what that would mean if an alloy made from mithril inherited its stats?"

"Then we could make some kind of substance outside the dungeon that wouldn't be on the slimes' radar...potentially, at least?"

"That would be *huge*...in all kinds of ways." One thing was for sure, the problems we were having with the engineering portion of our Ukemochi System would be all but solved.

"Oh, here's another thought: What if this stuff can actually get experience points and level up? Curiouser and curiouser!" Miyoshi exclaimed.

We didn't know whether we could actually measure it with a stat-measuring device, but we could definitely find out if there were any changes in stats by using Appraisal. *Hot damn, the possibilities are just endless!*

"If it can be used to make slime-proof material, it might end up being the savior of dungeon development."

Plus, the current understanding of why guns eventually started to lose their effectiveness in dungeons was that they don't keep up with the user's stat growth. If the gun itself were able to experience growth, though, it would be a different story altogether. Having an assault rifle that leveled up alongside you would certainly appeal to one's inner delusions of grandeur.

"But who made this stuff drop, I wonder?" Miyoshi pondered.

"I'd imagine it was whoever came here intending to make plutonium drop—but how on earth did they accidentally end up with mithril instead?"

There are *trolls on this floor, which could certainly conjure up images of famous fantasy works for first-time visitors. But didn't this guy plan on using the mass and atomic number system to get the drop he wanted? Maybe mithril's some kind of closely related element?*

"What if it's actually one of the transuranium elements that hasn't been created yet?"

"I highly doubt any of those elements would actually be stable—"

Upon hearing that, Miyoshi hurriedly pulled out her dosimeter from Storage. If it *was* a transuranium element, it would be letting out a healthy dose of radiation.

"Whew! According to this, it looks like we're in the clear."

"All things considered, this really was just a random unknown substance..."

"I just came close to becoming another Marie Curie, didn't I?"

Marie Curie had never publicly acknowledged any health problems related to radiation exposure, but the dangerous effects of radiation weren't known at the time, and it was commonly believed she suffered from acute radiation sickness due to them. In fact, people were still required to put on a radiation suit to read her handwritten papers.

"Well, now that we know what this stuff is—" I turned and fired off a blast of Water Magic at the wolflike creature that had been sneaking up on us. Letting out a yowl, it collapsed to the ground and dissipated into a glimmer of black, leaving behind a yellowish-gold ingot.

"A dire wolf, huh..." Miyoshi murmured. She picked up the new object, then let out a sigh. "Looks like this one's orichalcum."

That was the mystery metal attributed to Atlantis that Plato had written about in his *Critias*. Ever since the age of the Roman Empire, it had been more or less clearly identified as a form of brass—but now that we were in the Dungeon Age, all bets were off.

"No idea why, but I think we can safely say that the twenty-fourth floor has been set to drop fantasy metals," I surmised. *I'm sure it's only a matter of time before we start seeing things like adamantite or scarletite.* I breathed in deeply. "As genuinely interested as I am in this stuff, we've got a job to do. Let's head down to the twenty-fifth floor."

"I definitely want to come back here when we're done, though!" Miyoshi replied.

"Once things have calmed down, yeah."

Traveling to the twenty-fourth floor and beyond was already prohibited for all Mining users, meaning it would probably still be a little while before the new drops became public knowledge. Provided, of course, that the person who set the drops decided *not* to announce them to the world at large.

Annotations

***Just over fifteen hundred yen per kilogram*:** The yen had experienced a sudden weakening in February around that time, and by early March the exchange rate was around 111 yen to the dollar. After that, the price of nickel surged, and in 2020 it surpassed 25,800 dollars per tonne. Even then, though, it still came in at less than 3,000 yen per kilogram—not impressive enough for explorers to have any interest in farming it.

Yoyogi Dungeon, Twenty-Fifth Floor

Like the two floors above it, the twenty-fifth floor was a jungle-themed area, but a short distance from the entrance the trees thinned out, revealing a bowl-shaped basin that was relatively dry at

the bottom. Scattered around the area, some kind of beasts resembling a fusion of a saber-toothed cat and a lizard were strutting about.

"What on earth are those?" I asked.

"The data lists them as gorgonops," Miyoshi replied.

"I guess when it comes to dungeons, there's no real difference between 250 million years ago and the present day."

Gorgonops was a predator that used to be around in the Paleozoic Era. It was close to the top of the food chain during its time, with reasonably good speed and powerful jaws. Also, unlike an actual lizard, it wasn't affected much by low temperatures.

What did it mean, though, that the lesser salamandora were on the eleventh floor, while these things were on the twenty-fifth floor? Obviously there was no way to know whether their abilities matched what they'd had when they'd actually roamed the planet.

"Well, this place *is* just a massive jumble of fiction and nonfiction," Miyoshi pointed out.

"True enough."

Not wanting to get too close to the wandering predators, I pulled out an eight-centimeter-diameter iron ball.

"What's wrong with using Water Magic?"

"I have concerns about its power and accuracy if I'm too far away from the targets." It felt a bit to me like how a faulty laser beam starts to scatter at long distances. "That reminds me, you said these balls cost us twelve thousand yen each to make, right? Pretty sure the 8.4-centimeter, two-kilogram practice shot put balls would've only been about three thousand."

"I was a little worried about the tensile strength of those."

"Really? They weren't made completely out of iron, then?"

Considering their specific gravity, they'd have to be a lot lighter than iron. I guess their composition must be regulated in some way.

I pulled my arm back a bit and hurled my projectile at the head of the nearest gorgonops. The iron ball flew through the air in a perfectly straight line, finding its mark and blasting open the monster's head.

"I'm amazed that throwing around 2.1-kilogram iron balls like that

doesn’t throw out your shoulder!”

“I feel like it would be a snap for me to score a new shot put world record.”

“I’m pretty sure you’re not allowed to throw them like baseballs.”

As Miyoshi finished firing off her quip, a golden ball appeared in front of us.

“Huh? What’s that?”

For a split second, I thought we had another orichalcum drop, but it looked too far too smooth and spherical to be an ingot.

“Kei! That’s a plutonium-gallium alloy!”

“Wh-What?! Why is it gold, then?”

“Someone went out of their way to give it gold plating, apparently.”

“Wait... You’re saying it’s a complete core for a plutonium bomb?!”

With that, I swiftly stored it with Vault, removed it from Vault directly into our airtight container, then stored the container right back into the Vault. Since time didn’t pass inside the Vault, we wouldn’t be in any danger.

I hadn’t touched the object, but to be on the safe side, I took off my radiation suit, stored it as well, and washed my hands.

“I guess that means the tip-off was accurate all along.” As I thought about how we needed to record a message to send to Naruse, I noticed Miyoshi seemed to be deep in thought, a big frown on her face.

“What’s wrong?”

“I don’t know who’s behind this, Kei, but they forced a literal complete core to drop.”

“And?”

“If they just needed a plutonium-gallium alloy, it would’ve been way easier to get it out of the dungeon if they’d made it drop as an ingot.”

All of the metals I had made drop had been in ingot form. That was because I had it in my mind that this was their normal form and that they would be easiest to deal with in this form. No doubt Rokujo had made her gems drop in raw form because she preferred them in

their natural state. So if I had to think of some specific reason that a sphere would be the most logical form for this latest drop—

I swallowed.

"No way... Do you think the exterior portion of the bomb has already been made?"

"I can't think of any other reason they would've had the exact dimensions of the sphere in mind."

There was no way anyone could bring large quantities of these out of Yoyogi at once. I mean, one or two would've been plenty, anyway. But if one or two was all they were going for—

"Doesn't that mean...there's a high likelihood they can actually make the bomb right here in Tokyo?" If their plan had been to take the plutonium outside the country, it would've been more convenient to have it in ingot form. There would've been no reason to make it spherical, which was a much more difficult shape to deal with. They could've just taken the ingot to the destination country and cast it or shaped it somehow into the proper size for their bomb.

They want to use it right away. There's no way they would've made it drop in spherical form otherwise.

"The critical mass of a plutonium sphere is about sixteen kilograms, so judging by the size, their bomb is the type that uses a tamper." With a tamper, a bomb could be made extremely small, but it was more difficult to manufacture than a larger bomb.

"What would they do about the depleted uranium needed for the tamper, then?" I asked.

"Nowadays, over eighteen hundred companies, universities, and individuals own uranium in some form. It's shockingly easy for people to get a hold of some if they really want to, in either natural or depleted forms," Miyoshi replied with a shrug, adding that they had even showed up on Yahoo Auctions.

Possession or transfer of uranium required authorization under the Nuclear Reactor Regulation Act. However, when dealing with natural and depleted uranium in quantities under three hundred grams, apparently the only requirement was to submit a semiannual report to the Nuclear Regulation Authority.

"In other words, if they wanted to make the bomb casing badly

enough, they could do it," I muttered. *Where would they do it, though?*

"Either way, if they make it out of the dungeon with the core, we're gonna have a major crisis on our hands!"

"We need to get in touch with Naruse right away."

We started the footage rolling, talked about the item that dropped on the twenty-fifth floor, gave a quick summation of our theory about what was going on, then slapped the memory card on Cavall and swapped him out with Aethlem.

"Well, that takes care of notifying Naruse. I guess that's mission accomplished for us... Now I'm worrying about how things are going at the surface. Let's head home ASAP."

"Hey Kei..."

"What?"

"It's only just after 10 a.m. Do you want to try heading over to see Dr. Tylor?"

"Whoa, really?"

"We can't exactly do anything about the plutonium that's probably on its way out right now, but don't you agree we might need some kind of advance prep in case others try to do the same thing in the future?"

"I mean, I get what you're saying, but..."

"If we could get in touch with Ms. Maker, it's possible she could zap any ore that dropped entirely!"

"That would be *awfully* convenient, wouldn't it?"

"When there's no way to predict something one way or the other, the only thing left to do is to try it out, right?"

And just what the hell are we supposed to do if something irreversible happens?!

"This is an insanely childish idea," I grumbled.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"It sounds like something an elementary schooler would come up with."

Still, it's true that Tylor may as well be considered a terminal for the dungeon—and not only that, he still possesses human consciousness and thoughts. Taking our chances on him might not

be all that bad of a bet after all.

"You know what sounds like something an elementary schooler would do? Sit here and collect fantasy metal because they've got nothing better to do!"

"Oh, fine. As one who has been granted the cornucopia, I guess I should put in a little work." *Not entirely sure it'll be worth the effort, though.*

"The mobs that will make the Manor show up the fastest would probably be the skeletons on the tenth floor. Miyoshi, you should use your iron balls—"

"Don't be silly, Kei. It'd be way faster for you to just spam Sirius Nova!"

"No way. Do you realize what would happen if there were any other explorers around?"

If any explorers were in the area of effect of that particular spell, they'd probably end up crispy critters.

"I'm telling you, no explorers in their right mind would stray from the path on the tenth floor!"

There is a wide gulf of difference between "no explorers in their right mind" and "no explorers whatsoever."

"Has anyone ever told you that risk management isn't exactly your forte?" I quipped, shooting Miyoshi a grin as we started running back up toward the tenth floor.

Annotations

***Uranium being sold on Yahoo Auctions*:** An incident that occurred in November of 2017.

Dungeon Management Section, JDA Headquarters, Ichigaya

"Chief!"

"What's got you so freaked out, Naruse? Are you okay?"

"Forget about me, it's that prank call we got!"

"Oh no, don't tell me..."

"They were telling the truth all along!" Miharu explained, handing the video data over to Saiga. "According to a communication we just got from the twenty-fifth floor, the drop there was a piece of plutonium-gallium alloy just smaller than a softball..."

"A softball? Is it spherical?"

"Apparently so. We should be able to see it for ourselves once Miyoshi's team gets out of the dungeon. It was also shown in their video."

"So it *is* spherical... This is gonna be a way bigger deal than I thought..." Saiga caught sight of one of his busy subordinates focusing intently on their task. "We have the dosimeter ready, but there's not much we can do at these staffing levels."

"Miyoshi left us a Mining Checker to use."

"What's a Mining Checker?"

Miharu told Saiga about the machine they had been given to use the morning prior.

"So you're telling me the SMDs can actually check whether a person has a skill?"

"I was told it only works for Mining."

"Huh. Is there some reason it can only detect that one specific skill, I wonder?"

Ah well, even if it can only detect Mining right now*, it could* eventually *be able to detect other skills.* Saiga shrugged and moved on.

"Anyway, we'll set up the dosimeter and the Mining Checker just inside the dungeon gate. We need to figure out the police situation, though."

The JDA had no power of arrest or investigation. If the dosimeter showed any high readings, it was possible to put someone under citizen's arrest for violating the Radiation Emission Punishment Act, but at the same time, there was no way they could start questioning Mining users without any police officers present.

However, if they were to just casually call up the precinct about this, there would be such an uproar that there was no telling whether they'd be able to send out a proper response.

Would regular police officers even know how to handle someone

trying to smuggle a nuclear bomb core out of a dungeon? Highly unlikely. But you know what? The Public Safety Bureau would probably mobilize for a situation like this.

Pulling out the business card he had gotten the other day, which was blank apart from a phone number and an email address, Saiga started dialing up that very number.

Yoyogi Dungeon, Tenth Floor

"Sirius Nova!"

"Woo-hoo!"

From her vantage point lying on the ground, Miyoshi let out a cry of wonder as she watched the ring of light spread outward.

Sirius Nova was a spell that attacked using an expanding ring of light, and based on that aspect, it was possible to set the ring to go off at a certain height. If I set it to go off at about a meter above the ground, anyone lying down would be perfectly safe.

There ended up being no other explorers on the tenth floor, so I was able to set the range of my ring to fifty meters or so, causing the defeated monster count to skyrocket with each cast. Considering I had taken down hundreds of monsters, though, the experience points were leaving a lot to be desired.

"This isn't a particularly efficient strat, is it?" Miyoshi opined.

There had been plenty of enemies at the start, which was nice enough, but it took a decent while for all the monsters within a fifty meter radius to respawn after I had fired off an attack. It was nighttime, so things did tend to swarm in from the surrounding area, but wow, were these things *slow*. If I took my time clearing them out, they would respawn at a fairly steady pace, but when I wiped them all out at once, waiting for new monsters to slowly replenish the ranks was like watching paint dry.

In terms of experience point efficiency in a given amount of time, it would've probably been a lot faster to stay inside Dolly and take down one monster at a time using the Arthur method. Not that our current method would have been too terrible if I just traveled a

hundred meters away between each of my blasts—but between the crawling zombies and anything that happened to be mid-spawn when I fired, a surprising number of monsters managed to avoid getting hit by the rings, keeping me on constant lookout. There were a lot fewer skeletons overall than there were zombies too.

"If the Manor doesn't show up until right before the date rolls over, we're in big trouble." After all, once a given monster had spawned the Manor, the same monster could never spawn it again. If we were unlucky enough to have it instantly despawn, no other monsters that spawned in mass quantities came to mind—meaning the next Manor run could end up being a daylong affair.

"I'm pretty sure we'll have about an hour of leeway at our current pace," Miyoshi countered.

"I sure hope we don't end up triggering some kind of overhunting flag that makes the skeletons stop spawning," I muttered. Taking down 373 of the things was a lot tougher than I'd expected. Even if I killed a hundred per hour, it'd take nearly four hours to hit the Manor's trigger.

"Well, the zombies and slimes we used previously spawned in massive numbers compared to these guys."

Miyoshi was running around picking up various drops like first-ranked potions and skeleton bones, as well as magic crystals, which she tossed into the waiting mouths of the Arthurs, who were popping onto the scene now and then. *I guess that must be their overtime pay.*

The skill orb acquisition screen popped up for me a number of times, but considering I was only fighting zombies and skeletons, it didn't really matter. I had no use for Rot or Undeath orbs, which left Life Detection and Magic Resistance I as the only options—but the former had a four hour and forty-eight minute cooldown on dropping, and the latter was even longer, at seven days. Long story short, the orb situation was a crying shame.

In the end, we only managed to pick up two Life Detection orbs, one each from a zombie and a skeleton, and a lone Magic Resistance I orb.

"You know, earlier on I had two zombie orb selection windows

open at the same time, and I'm pretty sure both of them listed Life Detection..."

"Does that mean the drop cooldown isn't actually triggered until a selection is made in the window?!"

"Sure seems that way."

"I wonder if we could just load up on Storage orbs by leaving the selection window open without making any selections?" Miyoshi pondered.

"Doubtful—that would be one hell of a bug."

"Bugs are meant to be exploited until they get hotfixed!"

A page right out of the munchkin school of thought.

"Couldn't you get banned for something like that?" Miyoshi getting her account permabanned from entering the dungeon would be absolutely catastrophic.

"But if we do it once, and they don't patch it, we don't get banned, and we don't get warnings, wouldn't that mean it's just working as intended?"

"You think so?"

"Well, this would be our chance to test it out!"

I gave in, and when the next selection window popped up, I left it open. It wasn't like this was something we could do every day, after all. And then—

I let out a gasp of surprise.

"Huh? What? What happened, Kei?"

"Miyoshi, I have some unfortunate news for you."

"What is it?"

"If you leave the selection window open for too long without making a choice, it closes automatically."

"Awww!"

The longest time I had left the window open previously was probably when we fought the eyeballs back when the Wandering Manor first appeared. We had more important things to worry about than selecting orbs—such as running like hell. However, the bell at the top of the spire had already started ringing, so it only took a minute, maybe two minutes tops, before I'd finally made a selection.

The other time I had two selection windows open, the people we

were rescuing had a massive horde of monsters around them. It was also the first time I had used Sirius Nova, so I had let out what was probably a maximum range blast. Provided the kill count had been close to ninety-nine, the chances of getting two windows at once had been pretty reasonable.

In short, even if the potential bug was really just working as intended, there was no point in bothering trying to exploit it unless you could kill a hundred monsters in less than a couple minutes. Meaning—

"I guess it'd be pretty much impossible to exploit anyway."

"Bummer!"

Just as Miyoshi said that, all of the monsters in the vicinity vanished.

Yoyogi Dungeon, Surface, Inside Gate

"*Captain!*"

Scout had just gotten back from scoping out the top of the ramp that led from the first floor to the surface as his squad ascended.

"*What's the situation?*"

"*Something at the gate seems off.*"

"*What do you mean, off?*"

Ratel raised his left eyebrow upon hearing the vague report, but just then, Eics, who had also gone to check on the situation, came back and provided him with additional details.

"*Pretty sure that thing's a dosimeter.*"

"*What?!*" Ratel exclaimed. *A dosimeter at the dungeon exit? They're too well prepared. And they know exactly what they're looking for. And it's the middle of the night!*

There weren't many explorers around at that hour, but for some reason the JDA had multiple men stationed at the exit in front of a measuring device.

"*It's only been somewhere in the range of thirty-three to thirty-four hours since Burst got the core to drop. In typical circumstances, I'd say it's impossible that anybody could've beaten us to the surface*

and reported us."

Nobody with the Mining skill is allowed to travel down to the twenty-fourth floor or beyond without permission from the JDA to begin with. If everyone was being good little boys and girls and playing by JDA rules, there's no way they could've found out about the core dropping on the twenty-fifth floor. And even if someone did *manage to glean that info somehow, they'd have no way to contact anyone outside the dungeon while they were still on the inside. I didn't see anyone who looked like part of a military signal corps, and considering the conditions in there, it would've been next to impossible to beat my team back up to the top. That only leaves one possibility:* someone *leaked our plan of action beforehand.*

"*Who all knows the details of this mission?*"

Facile responded to Ratel immediately.

"*Excluding the members present here, we have Chauffeur on the surface, Burst who's on his way, and of course—*"

"*The client, and David, huh,*" Ratel interrupted, finishing his adjutant's sentence.

If I trust my own squad, that means the leak came from either the client or David. The client already deposited half of our payment in advance, though. It wouldn't make any sense to throw away that much money on a contract with us just to sell us out—normally someone would set it up as full payment upon completion if they wanted to pull something like that. David put a pretty healthy chunk of money into this too, from arranging the Mining orb for us, to supplying our weaponry. That, and he has his batshit plan to commit "sin," if we're to believe all his smooth talk. I don't think selling us out is gonna help him "trample God's courts" or whatever garbage he was going on about. No matter which one of them did it—neither has a motive that makes any sense.

"*Have you done anything that would cause anyone to have a grudge against you, Captain?*"

"*Too many to count. I wouldn't know where to start. But who says* I'm *the target, anyway?*" Ratel shot a look at Facile that all but said, *Maybe they're after you?*

Facile grinned.

"*I suppose I wouldn't know where to start either.*"

Scout had been listening in silence to the banter between the captain and adjutant for a while, but he really needed to get some guidance.

"*We could always dump the goods somewhere on the first floor,*" he suggested.

Ratel crossed his arms for a moment as he considered the idea, but quickly uncrossed them soon after.

"*No matter who double-crossed us, they're gonna regret making me look like a horse's ass.*"

"*What about the goods?*"

Ratel narrowed his eyes for a split second, but a grin quickly resurfaced on his face.

"*We're taking 'em to their final destination.*"

"*You're certain you want to go through with this?*" Facile asked, pointing to the guards at the exit.

"*Yup. Do something about it.*"

"*You certainly aren't making this easy... This isn't the Middle East, you know.*"

A chaotic plan, as usual, Facile mused, *but very much Ratel's style. Besides, I know that, in hindsight, his chaotic plans somehow always seem to end up leading to the correct solution. He just has an innate sense for these things. Besides, if we throw away the goods and make it through the checkpoint, they'll definitely apprehend Burst. Not only was his visit to Japan sudden, he has possession of someone else's explorer card—someone who is very much dead. By the time they found the body, we were supposed to have been long since overseas—yet somehow, the authorities are already on our trail.*

Forced into dealing with the captain's unreasonable task, Facile quickly put together a plan.

"*Works for me,*" Ratel replied. "*We're already in hot water—turning up the temp a bit isn't gonna make a big difference.*"

As soon as Ratel gave Facile's plan the go-ahead, Scout's face went pale.

"*Captain, I really don't wanna die out here on some lonely island*

in the Far East!" he moaned pitifully.

"*I hear ya. This place is so peaceful, sometimes I feel like I'm gonna just rot away into nothing.*" Shoot, who was part Japanese, scrunched up his face as he let his own feelings loose.

Eics, not sure whether Shoot had been serious or joking, fired out a response as well.

"*Don't worry, if we die, we're all gonna rot away whether we like it or not.*"

Ratel listened to his team's typical banter with a satisfied smirk, then turned to Facile.

"*How's the seal on the core?*"

"*No issues at all.*"

"*Then let's move out. Stand tall, men.*"

"*Yes, sir!*"

Handing over their weapons per protocol, the mercenaries began walking toward the gate.

***

That day, CIRO had contacted the Fourth Foreign Affairs Division of the Tokyo Public Safety Bureau, and two junior officers had been dispatched in response. Working with a JDA employee who was sitting there poring over data on a laptop located next to a dosimeter and an item that resembled a speed gun, the officers were in front of the dungeon, keeping watch over the explorers who were coming out.

"Hm, a party of foreign nationals. Any radiation?" one of the officers, a man named Kabashima, asked the JDA employee.

"Radiation levels are normal. No sign of Mining either."

Kabashima grunted in thought. He had heard the suspect was Caucasian, but that word covered a wide range of people. There were a lot of people out there who complained that police questioning people based on their nationality was discrimination—but considering the specifics of this particular case, that kind of uproar was the least of his concerns.

The Fourth Foreign Affairs Division was the division of the Public

Safety Bureau that specialized in international terrorism, focusing mainly on investigations and intelligence gathering related to Iranian spy activity. Unfortunately for them, the two junior officers had no reason to recognize Ratel and his group, since they had never been active as international terrorists.

As Facile began to walk by, Kabashima interrupted him.

"*Excuse me.*"

"*May I help you?*"

"*I'd just like to check your belongings,*" Kabashima said, showing Facile his badge.

"*Oh, you're a police officer? May I ask what's going on?*" Facile shot a quick glance at Ratel, who was quietly allowing the other officer to search him.

"*There's been a small incident. If you could cooperate by letting me inspect you, that'd be very helpful.*"

Hearing that, Facile leaned in closer to Kabashima's ear and spoke in a whisper.

"*I'd be happy to cooperate, but I'd like to request a private room.*"

"*Why is that?*"

"*I can't say this too loudly, but I found a skill orb.*"

"*What?*"

"*Please, don't tell anyone.*"

Needless to say, by now, people far and wide knew how ridiculously valuable skill orbs were. It was also widely known that anyone with a D-Card could use an orb by simply touching it. Everyone leaving the dungeon almost definitely had D-Cards, and despite how few people were there at that late hour, revealing in public that someone had an orb posed a number of potential risks, such as the orb being used by a third party or stolen from the owner later.

"*I see... Understood. Shoda, keep an eye on things here.*"

"*Roger that.*"

The man named Shoda shot only a fleeting glance at Kabashima

as he continued to rummage through Ratel and his men's things.

***

"*This place should work, right?*"

It had only been five days since the stat-measuring service had begun, and despite how late it was, a number of explorers were gathered around the small building inside the gate. To avoid their prying eyes, the two men relocated to a small, empty waiting room on the second floor, turning on the lights as they entered.

"*Absolutely,*" Facile responded, and began setting out his belongings on the table.

As Kabashima went quickly through the items to check them, he came to two boxes that looked roughly large enough to hold softballs.

"*So these are orb containers?*"

"*Correct.*"

"*You have two orbs, then?*"

"*One of the containers is empty,*" Facile explained with a smile.

"*May I check inside them?*"

"*Must you?*"

"*Unfortunately, I must.*"

"*I understand. Just please, promise you won't touch them.*"

"*I wouldn't think of it.*"

Having secured Kabashima's promise, Facile picked up one of the boxes, stood next to the officer, and placed it in front of him.

As Kabashima pulled the box closer to him and opened it, his eyes widened, and—

In that instant, there was a loud cracking sound as if something had been broken, and the officer's vision went black.

"*You could've lived longer if you hadn't been so persistent.*"

Having grabbed Kabashima's head and jaw from behind and twisted them with a jerk, breaking his neck, Facile quickly gathered his belongings and shoved the officer's body into a nearby locker. Then, once he had used the mirror that was set into the locker door to tidy himself up a bit, he quietly shut the door and turned out the

lights in the room.

***

Noticing that Facile had returned alone, Shoda raised an eyebrow slightly.

"*Where's the guy who was with you?*"

"*Oh, he said he had to use the restroom, I believe. I'm sure he'll be back shortly.*"

"*Ugh, unbelievable.*"

"*May I go on through?*" Facile asked, pointing a finger ahead.

The men who were accompanying him were perfectly cooperative and had nothing questionable with them, so the officer gave a quick nod.

"*Ah, yes, of course. Thank you for your cooperation.*"

"*No problem at all. Thank* you *for your hard work.*"

***

After walking briskly out of the Yoyogi Dungeon entrance and off the premises, Facile came to a large minivan parked by the curb; Ratel and the others were already inside.

"*Hey. How'd it go?*"

The adjutant slid in next to Ratel, then let out a sinister chuckle.

"*Japan sure is peaceful, isn't it?*" Bringing his hands up to his throat, he gave them a quick twist and pantomimed breaking his own neck.

"*No kidding. Guess we don't have much time left here, though.*"

With that, the minivan carrying the mercenaries rolled smoothly out into the street.

Yoyogi Dungeon, Tenth Floor, The Wandering Manor

"Man, you actually start to get used to this place when you've

been here three times, huh?"

The Manor had appeared out of nowhere in the same way it always did, and we headed over to it, pushed open the same iron gates, and were greeted with the same creaking sound.

"Maybe I'll oil the hinges on this thing next time."

"Well look at you, Mr. Cool-as-a-Cucumber."

"With this much responsibility on our shoulders, I feel about as green as one too."

From the outside, the building looked like your standard manor house. Historically, the higher up a room was in a manor house, the lower the status of the workers who lived in the rooms, so typically the study would not be located any higher than the second floor.

It looked like the building only had two floors, meaning one would think it might be on the first floor, but we'd given the first floor a pretty decent once-over last time we were here, and we hadn't seen any rooms that were likely candidates.

"What if the entrance hall doubles as the study?" Miyoshi theorized. "You know, the one with the bookshelves all over the place."

"In what world would *that* be considered a study? That's jumping straight from manor house to *maniac mansion*."

I suddenly had a ridiculous mental image where, instead of any inscriptions, a bunch of whirring, robotic Dr. Tylors appeared and started spouting random monotone messages. *Ummm... Maybe it's not all that far-fetched? Maybe. Glad it didn't happen that way though.*

The first time we were here, we were greeted by muninn, gargoyles, and monoeyes. The second time, we had to face servants who were staggering around all over the place, and who also ended up having monoeyes inside their bodies.

What about this time?

"A combo of A and B, is it?"

Freshly repaired gargoyles were staring at us from their perches on top of the roof, and the monoeyes were alive and kicking beneath the eaves. I wasn't sure whether they were muninns, but there was a flock of raven-like birds perched atop a dead tree some distance

away, with some occasionally taking flight or landing. Finally, there were ghosts that looked like servants scattered here and there, staggering awkwardly as they walked.

"What's the term for this? Birds of a feather flocking together? Or all the eggs being in one basket?"

"Two swings and two misses." *I might have accepted "Variety is the spice of life."*

"So are we going in the front entrance?"

"Nope, let's take the back door, like we did on our second trip. And now—we leave ourselves in your capable hands, Rosary."

When I said that, a little trilly chirp sounded from my backpack.

***

We made our way inside through the back door of the mansion, following Rosary, who was acting as our guide.

The hallway was a perfectly straight path, so theoretically all we needed to do was head up to the second floor and go straight, but the bizarre path Rosary led us on involved going up and down various sets of stairs across the manor.

And then there was another familiar issue.

"So Kei, we went up a set of stairs, then down one, then back up. Didn't we just go up another time after that, though?"

"Don't think about it too hard. That's how they get you." Though in this case, it wasn't actual monsters that would get us, but our own mental gremlins. We needed to keep level heads. "It's pretty common in places like this for the correct path to be set up in some kind of magical pattern."

"So the other paths wouldn't get us to where we need to go?"

"Probably not. Even if they lead to the second floor, it might not be the *same* second floor we're on. Just like qubits in superposition state, multiple versions of the second floor might exist on top of each other simultaneously, and the route someone takes determines which version is active." *If something like this happened in the macro world, societal order would probably collapse...but this is another world entirely. Yup, pretty much anything goes here.*

"That's a great theory and all, but we just went upstairs *four times* in a row..."

"Don't think about it too hard. That's how they get you," I repeated.

We continued following briskly behind Rosary, an uncomfortable sweat beading on our brows. Finally, she landed in front of a door and tapped lightly on the floor twice with her beak.

"Is that some kind of ritual, maybe?"

"I really doubt that..."

Though in Europe, they do *have a superstition that involves a ritual of knocking on wood. I guess we can't exactly rule it out. At any rate, we seem to have reached our final destination.*

"How are we on time?" I asked.

"We're doing fine so far," Miyoshi confirmed.

As we stood there in front of the door trying to decide whether we should knock, it swung inward on its own, as if to invite us in.

"First the front entrance, now this door. The Manor sure has a great sense of hospitality," I joked, though I was quivering in fear on the inside.

There was a bookshelf up against the left wall, and a large painting hanging on the right wall. The upper left corner of the painting also had some words written on it in French.

D'où Venons Nous
Que Sommes Nous
Où Allons Nous

"Hmm, it says, 'Where do we come from,' 'What are we,' and 'Where are we going.'" The painting was a masterpiece by renowned artist Paul Gauguin.

"Do you think 'we' means humanity? Or maybe Ms. Maker and friends?"

"That's an awfully difficult question to answer." Gauguin had probably envisioned it as meaning all of humanity, himself included, but the moment the painting showed up here, its meaning became anybody's guess.

I stared for a few more moments.

“It sure is a well-made reproduction, isn’t it...” When I turned around, I saw Miyoshi gazing intently at the painting as well, a serious look plastered across her face. “Something wrong?”

“Kei... This painting is genuine.”

“Genuine?! Have you ever even seen the actual painting?”

“I got to tag along on a trip to the Nagoya/Boston Museum of Fine Arts during Golden Week in my second year of middle school.”

The Nagoya/Boston Museum of Fine Arts was a sister institution to the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, and all of its exhibits were loaned from MFA Boston. Sadly, I never had a chance to visit it before it shut down in October of last year.

“I didn’t realize it ever came to Japan. But how on earth can you tell it’s genuine? I never took you for an art enthus—” I cut myself off. “Wait. Appraisal, right?”

Miyoshi gave a small nod.

“Appraisal can be used to verify the authenticity of a piece of art...?” I sputtered.

“No, for things that aren’t dungeon-related, I’m pretty sure it’s more of an analytical tool...” In other words, it could tell us things about a painting that could also be determined using modern tools of analysis, like the age of the pigments, but it couldn’t indicate whether the art piece as a whole was authentic.

“But if this is the real painting, what about the one in the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston?”

“The museum piece is the authentic painting,” came an unexpected voice from behind us.

We whirled around toward the entrance. There, seated in a massive chair behind a desk that had turned a faded brown from heavy use, was Dr. Tylor. He had brought his attention up from some kind of reading material and was looking directly at us.

I’m pretty sure nobody was sitting there when we came in...

“The one on the wall is a well-made replica. However, it *is* identical to the original at the subatomic level.”

So in other words, it’s authentic as far as the dungeon is concerned, I guess.

Maybe the reason people were created as singletons while

objects could be replicated without a problem was because objects had no spiritual signature? Even if an artist's soul did actually happen to reside in their art, it would just be something static trapped within the physical structure of the painting.

"I'm not certain what's happening with the quantum fluctuations"—Dr. Tylor clapped his book shut, stood, then gestured with his right hand toward the sectional couch in the middle of the room, indicating for us to take a seat—"but welcome to the study."

We did as he requested and sat down. The doctor poured black tea into the cups on top of the serving cart he had brought out, placed the drinks in front of us, then sat down across the table from us. A fruity aroma wafted up from the teacup.

I spent a while staring at the light dancing off the rippling surface of the tea, then turned to Miyoshi and pointed at my cup with a half grin.

"You don't think drinking this'll mean we end up stuck here forever, do you?"

The doctor laughed at my wisecrack, then brought his cup to his mouth and took a sip.

Uh, what exactly is drinking it yourself supposed to prove? You *already live here.*

"We're not in Kamuy Kotan, nor have Persephone or Izanami ever visited, unfortunately. If they ever do, though, I think they would love the black tea from Gopaldhara."

"Gopaldhara?"

"A tea estate located in the highest altitudes of the Darjeeling district of India," Miyoshi chimed in quietly. "Judging by its color and the time of year, I'd say this is an autumnal." According to her follow-up information, Gopaldhara meant "Gopal's streams," and supposedly one source alleged that the name "Gopal" meant "child of God."

"When it's freshly brewed, it gives off a sweet, fruity aroma, but after a while, it starts to gain some floral notes."

"Are you a tea connoisseur, Dr. Tyler?" Miyoshi asked.

The doctor chuckled. "I believe myself to be the straightforward type who pays no real mind to anything besides his research."

Apparently tea had been a pastime for his grandmother, the former owner of the actual manor. No doubt he had recreated it from his past memories and experiences.

Tea brewed from the streams of God's child, huh... I'd really love to quietly sidestep any risk of falling prey to the Persephone-stuck-in-the-underworld trap. Let's see if he's really as straightforward as he says he is.

I produced three red cans out of my Vault and placed them on top of the table.

There are two temptations that no American researcher in the world can resist: pizza, and this *beverage. (Ignore this blatant stereotype.)*

The doctor looked at the cans, letting out a short hum of curiosity as I handed him one. "They're even better in bottles," he remarked as he pulled up on the tab, then started pouring the ice-cold drink down his throat.

Coca-Cola. It's their version of soul food. (Ignore this blatant stereotype.)

After enjoying his drink for a while, Dr. Tylor let out a small burp, then spoke again.

"So, considering you took the time to come all the way out here, I presume you have something you wanted to discuss with me?"

Although it was likely he already knew, I explained everything that had happened so far.

"I'm afraid I won't be able to help with that. Once a rule has been set, it cannot be easily altered."

"A rule?" *Who, or what, is setting these rules, anyway?* "So that means the ore drop on the twenty-fifth floor will be stuck as a plutonium-gallium core forever?"

Dr. Tylor could only offer a helpless shrug.

"Oh no..." We had gotten our hopes up just a bit, and having them dashed like that hit us pretty hard. Not to mention, if word got out about the twenty-fifth floor, wannabe nuclear terrorists from all over the world would be swarming Yoyogi in no time, for sure.

"Kei..." Miyoshi looked over at me, her brow furrowed deeply.

"Wh-What?"

I knew that face all too well. Most of the time it was an omen that she was about to say something absolutely absurd. And not just absurd—usually it would be something really, *really* dangerous, almost to the point where we'd be better off just giving up and letting nature take its course.

"If we're out of options, then we'll just have to set a *different* rule."

"A different rule?" I understood the concept. If we couldn't reverse existing rules, then we might be able to deal with things by creating a new rule, provided it didn't conflict with the current ones. People involved in tax law knew *all* about that technique. Still, assuming it wasn't possible to stop the plutonium from dropping, what rule could she possibly hope to add? As the sinking feeling afflicting me grew even heavier in the pit of my stomach, I couldn't help but ask, "And what would that rule be?"

"Listen, Kei. The main problem we're facing is that there's an item dropping that should *not* be dropping."

"Okay..."

"So, if we just eliminate plutonium itself, voilà! Problem solved!"

Hearing that, I slumped over in exhaustion. *What kind of suggestion is that? First of all, we don't even have any means of just straight up eliminating— No, wait. Slimes can break down any substance. That means the technology already exists. Not to mention, considering what happened to us in Yokohama, we could have more flexible options at our fingertips, maybe even something on a larger scale. Even so—*

"There's no way we could possibly have the privilege level to eliminate an entire element from the planet!"

"Hmmm. But it's an element that hasn't always existed."

It was true that there wasn't much plutonium in nature—in fact, it was practically nonexistent. But that wasn't the main problem with her idea.

"Are you dense? The world of nuclear physics would be torn apart!"

For starters, transuranium elements with atomic numbers beyond plutonium tend to use americium as a starting point, which is made

by increasing the mass number of plutonium-239 via neutron capture and letting it undergo beta decay. Curium is made from americium as well, and those two are used as bases for all subsequent transuranium and transactinide elements.

"It's all going to end up as lead-206 through -208 or thallium-205 eventually anyway! We can just convert it all into those, can't we?"

"Like hell we can..."

Do you have any idea how many years it would take for that to happen in nature? The half-life for bismuth-209 to become thallium-205 is roughly nineteen quintillion *years, which is far, far longer than the age of the universe... Not to mention, the radioactive isotopes produced during the element creation process are utilized in the health care field.*

"But... But Kei, don't you think that if we surveyed all of humanity, there would be a whole lot of people who think plutonium-239 and uranium-235 should just go away forever?"

Dungeons are sort of like a survey of all humanity, in a way. I can't exactly deny that whole aspect. But still—

"Look, say what you want, but your plan is just way too shortsighted."

Miyoshi growled in disgust.

"Plus, I don't know how we're supposed to just make things vanish..."

"Well, why don't we start by focusing on the plutonium-gallium alloy that drops on the twenty-fifth floor? That would solve the problem for Yoyogi, at least!"

"Hmm, it just might... How would we isolate the target drop, though?"

We had no idea if we could even do something like that, but at least we had Dr. Tylor with us. Anything we weren't sure of, we could just ask him about.

"It's different when there's a prerequisite that the item is inside the dungeon, but once something is taken out, it's quite difficult to determine whether it was dungeon-generated," the doctor explained.

Considering that slimes only disintegrated substances that were brought in from the outside, there must have been a distinction

between substances based on whether they were native to the dungeon. And if that couldn't be determined based on the substance itself, it would likely be based on whether it was managed by the dungeon. That meant that if things like oranges and wheat were allowed to respawn, anything that had been harvested would end up becoming fodder for the slimes.

I frowned.

"That would mean that if something crafted from dungeon iron got cut off from dungeon management, there's a good chance it'd lose its property of being a dungeon item." *No idea if that would occur on drop, or on being taken out of the dungeon, but judging by the sign in Glen Lumberjack, it's probably the latter.*

"We'll just have to rely on either dungeon factories or fantasy alloys, then!"

We still had no idea whether nails manufactured inside the dungeon using iron that was sourced from within as well would be considered an actual dungeon item, but the fantasy metals clearly were—after all, they had stats.

"In that case," Miyoshi went on, "could you please tell us one more thing, doctor? If we specified a substance—say, a plutonium-gallium alloy—would there be any way to make it disintegrate?"

Dr. Tylor thought about that for a while, then spoke in a soft voice. "I suppose it's *possible*, yes."

"What?!"

"Did you hear that, Kei? I asked and he answered! It was kind of a weirdly *phrased* answer, but he did say it was possible!"

"Just stop and think about it for a sec. If that could actually be done, that means it would even be possible to eliminate things like *iron* from the planet..."

"Civilization would definitely collapse if that happened!"

"Forget civilization, *Earth itself* would collapse!" Earth's core was said to be composed mostly of iron—if it disappeared, let's just say the surface would *not* be in good shape. Humanity would be wiped out instantaneously.

"That's certainly an interesting idea—"

"It is *zero* percent interesting!"

"They say the earth is made up of roughly thirty percent iron, which by my estimates would be just under 1.8 × 10^21 tonnes total. At the present time, D-Factors do not exist in quantities that would be sufficient to disintegrate such a volume of matter."

"What do you mean, '*at the present time*'?!"

"Kei, the takeaway from this is that it's actually possible to erase the plutonium-gallium alloy!"

Compared to iron, the amount of plutonium-gallium alloy on Earth might as well have been nil. If the alloy were erased from existence within Yoyogi Dungeon, it would be impossible to take out any of the drops from the twenty-fifth floor. We wouldn't be able to do anything about drops that had already been taken out—though it would've been the same story even if we had been able to ban the substance from dropping, somehow.

"Even if that manages to resolve things in Yoyogi, what about the rest of the world's dungeons? There's no guarantee the same thing won't happen again in the future—in fact, I have zero doubt someone will try to do exactly that."

I have no idea how many dungeons have been cleared up to the twentieth floor or beyond, but even if the bad guys fail in Yoyogi, someone will definitely try the same thing in some other dungeon.

"Any futures that have a possibility of happening are guaranteed to happen eventually," Dr. Tylor stated.

In other words, if we wanted to prevent it, we would have to eliminate the possibility entirely.

"If only we could make it so that any substances with mass numbers greater than or equal to uranium would be unobtainable as drops moving forward..." I grumbled.

"Would you like me to do that, then?" the doctor offered.

I blinked.

"Huh? *What* did you just say?"

"I said, 'Would you like me to do that?'" he repeated.

"'That' being what?"

"The rule hasn't been created yet. Provided the two of you and the rest of humanity desire it, of course."

Miyoshi and I shared a confused glance. *The rule hasn't been*

created yet?

"I thought natural science was supposed to be the magic that explains the mysteries of the world around us?" I asked.

"Since when did it become magic that adds *new* mysteries to the world instead?" Miyoshi joined in.

"I suppose you could say it's a special privilege of sorts—one granted to dungeon pioneers," Dr. Tylor explained. "You explorers have created a good number of floors yourselves, have you not?"

Don't tell me the whole thing about floors being generated by the first person who reaches them is actually true...

"I get it! That must be how Mount Kenya on the eighteenth floor came into being."

"I've got a thing or two to say to whoever generated the tenth floor..." I grumbled. My gaze then drifted to the painting on the wall. "*Où allons-nous*? 'Where are we going,' indeed..."

That's a question humanity itself will have to answer. We have no idea what type of rule would end up being added, or what types of rules are even feasible to add—but at least we can make our wishes known. Beyond that, there isn't much else we can do.

"I guess that's pretty much that, then, at least when it comes to nipping future problems in the bud..."

"So now we need to deal with the *current* problem," Miyoshi added as a finishing note.

The fact that the bad guys had set their drop to be a completed core had led both Miyoshi and me to the same conclusion: They probably planned on using it *soon*. Meaning somewhere in Tokyo.

"What about eliminating certain elements from only a specific area, like Tokyo or within the borders of Japan?" Miyoshi suggested. "I'm pretty sure that wouldn't have too big an effect on global security. Supposedly there aren't any nuclear weapons in Japan anyway."

The same thought had actually come to me as well. If it was possible to limit the scope of the element elimination to within Yoyogi Dungeon, and the influence of the King of the Forest's powers was limited to the forest, then maybe we could apply a specified range to our effect—perhaps even national boundaries.

But there was still a problem.

"Look, Miyoshi. If we actually have the ability to eliminate plutonium-gallium alloys across the entire world, that means every single plutonium-based nuclear weapon out there right now would turn into a giant paperweight." *Of course, if that were to happen, the nuclear powers of the world might just start rebuilding their stockpiles from scratch using metals like iridium or thallium.*

"They sure would."

"But if the scope were limited to Japan only, instead of the entire world at once, do you realize what would happen?" *The rest of the planet would continue to function on old-world logic, while Japan alone would experience a paradigm shift.*

"Hmmm... Japan would become the only nation that could never possibly have any nuclear weapons?"

"That's part of it. All that would effectively mean, though, is that instead of just being outlawed by our constitution, they'd also be physically impossible to obtain. Which wouldn't change things all that much, you'd think—until you realize that Japan would also become the only nation that traditional nuclear weapons *wouldn't work on*."

"What?! Oh, whoa, you're right!" she gasped.

Any plutonium-gallium alloy that crossed the border into Japan would disappear—including pieces that might be components of incoming missile payloads. The moment any nuclear weapon entered what would be considered Japanese territory, it would instantly become a dud. Even things like multiwarhead missiles and hypersonic technology would make no difference whatsoever. Our country would become invincible against all nuclear weapons.

"If Japan were to create and deploy a flawless missile defense system, how do you think the rest of the world would respond?" There were some nations that had sensitive reactions and adopted hard-line stances at the mere attempt to deploy THAAD, even though it was unclear whether the system would even work. Some *other* country suddenly having a perfect missile defense system would be an absolute nightmare for those nations. "Limiting this to Japan would end up putting everyone else at a huge disadvantage."

"We'd be the first nation capable of unilateral nuclear attacks."

"Or to have the potential for it, yeah." Potentialities had always been a huge concern in the realm of global security, though. Sometimes those potentialities were used as leverage to force others to submit to certain demands. In certain domains, being constantly suspicious of another party's every move actually worked out in *the suspected party's* favor.

"So can we just perform the erasure once within Japan, and let that be the end of it?"

"That wouldn't count as a *rule*," Dr. Tylor pointed out with a grin.

Fair enough. If temporary rules were allowed, reversing an existing rule probably would've been simple as well.

"Hmm..." Miyoshi tilted her head as she mulled things over. "I'm starting to think making it happen across the entire world at once is the better option here."

"Yeah. But should *we* be the ones to make that decision?" *For that matter,* could *we?*

"If we did, Kei, the global security situation would be turned completely upside down."

"I'm aware of that."

Nearly all modern nuclear weapons were plutonium-based. If nothing else, every nuke in the United States was assumed to be. However, at least a small quantity of nuclear weapons that used uranium-235 instead existed elsewhere in the world. The moment the United States lost its arsenal, nukes that use highly enriched uranium would suddenly carry an entirely different significance.

"Would *you* feel comfortable pulling the trigger?" I asked Miyoshi.

"Right now I kind of just feel like curling up in bed, pulling the covers over my head, and hibernating."

I'd like to believe that in the present-day ethical climate, there aren't any nations out there that would go to war with the United States based solely on the fact that it had lost all its nuclear weapons. Still, it's all but guaranteed that someone would try to take advantage of it in the long term.

"If we want to avoid issues with the balance of power, we'd have to make sure we cover highly enriched uranium as well..." I

murmured.

"The concentration of uranium-235 in the fuel of a typical light-water reactor is between three and five percent. If we limit ourselves to disintegrating anything that comes in at ten percent or above, it shouldn't have any effect on nuclear power plants..."

The plutonium-gallium alloy was one thing, but could we even target a specific concentration of a substance? Even if we could, should people like us with superficial knowledge of these substances really be deciding where the cutoff should lie? I clutched my head in frustration.

"*How.* The *hell.* Are *we.* Supposed. To *decide* these things?!" The words tumbled out of my mouth in a loud staccato.

"Uh-oh, we've lost him!"

"Listen! We're not the world's presidents, and we're not its dictators! We're just ordinary people, like anyone else you'd see walking around! We've got nothing to do with the fate of Tokyo, or of Japan, or of the world! We're ordinary, insignificant people at the mercy of fate!" I stood there for a moment catching my breath after this tirade.

"Right! So what's the plan?"

I grumbled at my teammate's lack of sympathy and her impeccable comedic timing. *Curse you, Miyoshi.*

"There *is* no damn plan. We can't make a decision like this right now."

"If we leave things up to the government, it'll probably be way too late by the time any decision gets made." Apparently that was how things had played out in Yokohama.

"I know." I sighed. *Only shallow, ordinary people with no special ties or knowledge would be able to make a snap decision on something like this—especially if their own lives are at stake. Believe me, I'm* well *aware!*

"So does that mean you want to sit back and assess things up till the last minute?" Miyoshi asked, scrunching up her brow as if she were pondering something.

"Hm? I mean, I'd love that, if it's an option." *Procrastination typically doesn't make life any better, but at least it'll grant us some*

temporary reprieve from our current predicament. Who knows, maybe someday in the future, nobody will need to make any choices at all. Three cheers for lazy evaluation! I thought, invoking a concept from computer programming.

"So, how do you plan on proceeding?" Dr. Tylor had been snickering in amusement as he watched us hem and haw. *Sheesh, what a happy-go-lucky guy.*

Instead of answering the doctor's question, Miyoshi pulled out a clamshell laptop that she had been keeping in Storage, and the doctor raised an eyebrow.

"What's that?"

"If I'm not mistaken, it's what Ms. Maker wants more than anything else right now," she declared, placing the computer on top of the table.

"Well, that's quite the assertion," Dr. Tylor responded, then flipped the device open.

The laptop immediately woke up from sleep mode, and there on its screen was a message board, albeit an offline one, titled "Ask Ms. Maker!"

"Don't you think she'd be interested in chatting with normal humans?"

"That...would be an awful temptation," the doctor murmured, his eyes wide.

"I think she probably struggled, at first." Miyoshi turned toward the Gauguin painting, closing her eyes and raising an index finger as she began to explain, doing her best mystery-solving detective impression. "After all, the Earth isn't united under a single government like she'd expected, but is divided up into nearly two hundred countries instead, each with their own cultures and rules. She probably had no idea where to even start with any attempts at communication."

Obviously she had learned about the United Nations by reading the minds of the twenty-seven people caught up in the formation of The Ring—including Dr. Tylor—but she also likely understood that it hadn't been particularly effective at unifying the world in actuality. Miyoshi looked back to the doctor for confirmation before

announcing her grand conclusion.

"That had to have been what led her to create the dungeons. It was a last-ditch effort to reach out," she asserted.

"And *that's* why you believe she wants to speak directly with normal humans?"

"When someone encounters an unknown civilization that's much more advanced than their own, I believe it can create an entirely different way of thinking among peoples and nations." Ms. Maker wasn't interested in serving nations, though—she wanted to serve all humanity.

"That's a rather interesting theory. Though there don't appear to be any messages yet."

Well, of course not. Heck, I didn't even know she had been working on this stuff at all.

Nonetheless, I understood what Miyoshi was scheming. She wanted to use this laptop as bait to establish a communication channel from the inside of the dungeon to the outside—which would allow us to let the outside world know what was going on before we were forced to act.

Initiating a sudden close encounter of the fifth kind with a being that no other nations had contacted yet would definitely stir up controversy. However, explorers the world over had already been unwittingly having conversations with her through the dungeon itself over the past three years. Considering that fact, dealing with the clear and present danger far outweighed the issue of implicit conversations becoming explicit.

"Still"—a smile formed on Dr. Tylor's face—"it seems you have successfully piqued her interest."

We followed the doctor's gaze, and there she was, sitting flat on her knees on top of the timeworn, expensive-looking, high-quality, brownish-toned carpet, peering intently at a laptop.

Wait, a laptop?

I whirled back around to the doctor, but the original laptop was still exactly where he had left it. The two machines looked identical.

"I knew she could copy things perfectly after seeing the Gauguin, and it looks like electronic devices are just as easy to replicate,"

Miyoshi observed.

"I mean, it's probably easier than reconstituting actual human beings..." *When synthesizing things at the molecular level, smaller volumes are obviously easier to deal with.* "Question, though: If the laptop is an exact copy, won't she need to differentiate the MAC address and IP?"

Ms. Maker was happily typing away. I wondered if her ability to comfortably operate the laptop was because Dr. Tylor and his team had been incorporated into her.

Miyoshi blinked.

"She's just using the computer the same way anyone else would."

"I honestly thought it might be more science-fictiony, with her just scanning and inputting all the information instantaneously or something."

Once Ms. Maker was finished typing, she hit the "send" button—then tilted her head in confusion.

Now's our chance, Kei! Miyoshi told me via telepathy.

Gotcha, I responded.

Cutting off the telepathy, I continued thinking to myself. *She can probably hear our telepathic communication, though—and who knows, maybe even our thoughts.*

Miyoshi handed me a piece of paper with a number of different frequencies listed on it.

"You won't be able to send your message quite yet," I explained. I read off the frequencies on the paper. "If you allow transmission of radio waves over these frequencies, you'll be able to connect and send messages."

The moment I finished speaking, a notification sound rang out from her laptop indicating a successful connection to the mainframe.

"Kei!"

I turned back to Miyoshi, who was holding up her cell phone. The network connection indicator on her screen showed full bars. And so began a new age of communication within dungeons—with more of a whimper than a bang.

"It seems the two of you have accomplished what you set out to do," Dr. Tylor observed, a hint of teasing in his voice, and he gave us

a little wink. *I knew it—he knew all along*.

"Oh, by the way, Doctor," Miyoshi leaned in toward him, a serious expression on her face. "That laptop has a program installed on it that displays an alert only *I* can send."

"Oh?"

"If that alert happens to activate—"

"Say no more," he responded with a nod that said he knew exactly what to do.

"You're an American, Dr. Tylor. Do you have any objections to this?"

"There isn't a scientist out there who truly believes we should've created those horrible things—not the people who were a part of the Manhattan Project, nor anyone else."

There's no way we can know for sure whether he'll actually do what we ask. But we have no choice but to believe in him.

"Oh, one more thing. I doubt we'll be coming back to see you for a while..." I pointed at the laptop on the desk. "Any idea what to do about the battery on that thing?"

"I should be able to figure something out," he replied.

"Great! We appreciate all your help with this."

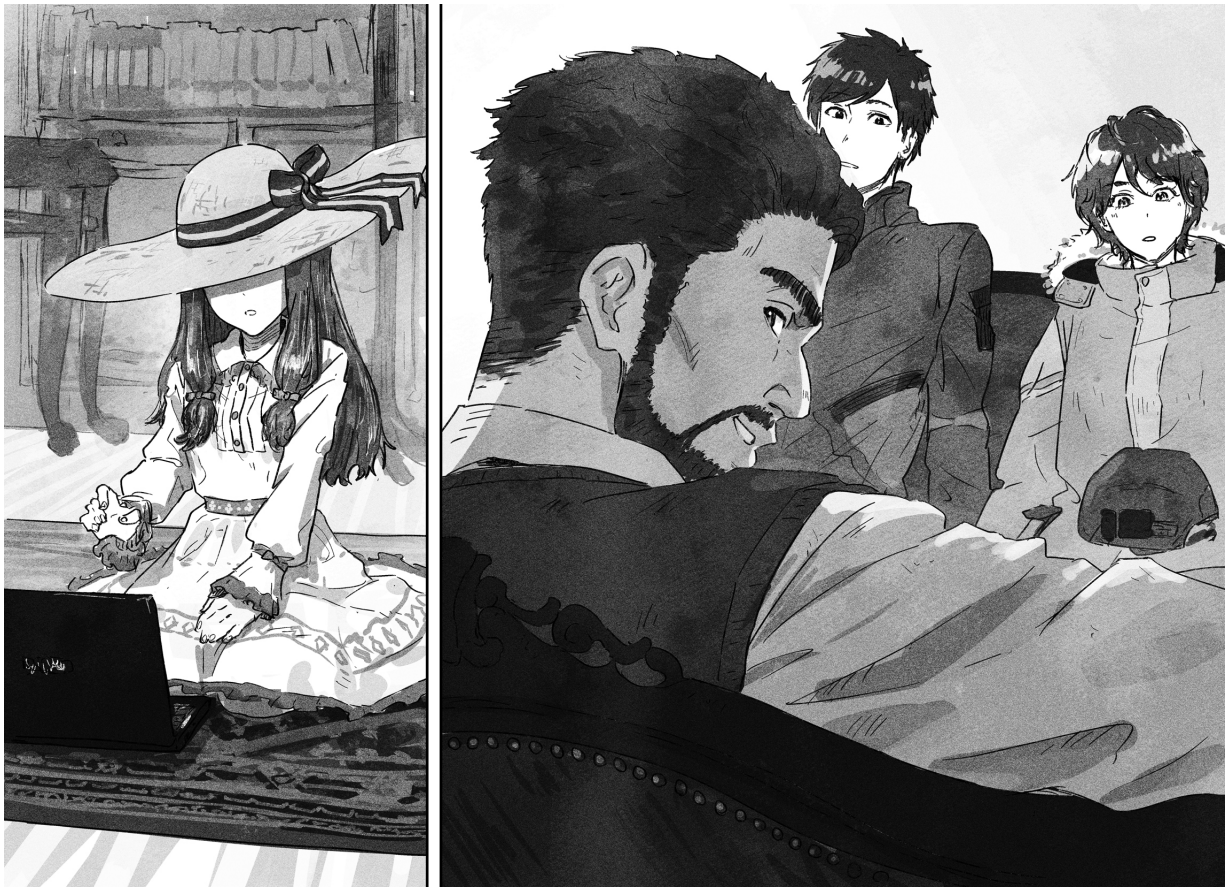
We bid the two of them farewell and headed out of the room. As we were departing, we saw Ms. Maker staring at us from her spot on the ground, smiling and waving.

"All right, Kei, now what?"

"Now, we head down the stairs by the kitchen and escape out the rear entrance. Lead the way, Rosary!"

Above my head, Rosary let out a little chirp. If the route back outside was set up in some kind of magical pattern like the route in had been, it would've taken us far too long to find our way to the correct exit on our own.

"Well, thanks to us, now Ms. Maker knows the internet exists."



"I'm pretty sure she's known *about* it for a long time," Miyoshi countered, keeping her gaze focused on following Rosary's trail. "You saw the laptop she copied, didn't you? If she'd planned on doing something using an internet connection, she would've done it a long time ago. I mean, she's had loads of other things she could've copied for that purpose."

"Really? Loads?"

She held up her cell phone again, waving it at me pointedly.

Of course. Tons of people must've been bringing their phones into the dungeon with them. Phones had plenty of other useful functions even without a working network connection. Ms. Maker could've copied any piece of hardware or software she wanted, if the fancy had struck her.

"Hypothetically—and this is *only* a hypothetical—what do you think an average person would do if they happened to see something posted by Ms. Maker on social media? Let's say she posted something really outrageous."

"Most people would probably just say 'I'm out' and be done with it," I responded. "Normal people tend not to interact with that kind of stuff."

"Bingo!"

"Wait a sec—"

Ms. Maker didn't want to destroy humanity's infrastructure—she wanted to communicate with us. So even if she did have the power to slip into any location on the entire internet, it was unlikely she had any real interest in doing so. At least for the time being.

"Hey, doesn't it feel like she could've already tried this out ages ago?"

It was true that no signals had been able to reach the various underground floors of the dungeon before, but there were also areas of some dungeons that were on the surface. I wouldn't have been surprised if she had decided to access the internet from there at some point.

"It's always possible," I replied.

It might've been possible to locate potential posts from her by searching through the past three years of social media site logs, but

that would have been a herculean task for either of us. Therefore it was practically impossible to verify. However, maybe the reason she had been so happy to see that site was precisely because she *had* had that experience before. Obviously, that was equally impossible to verify.

"Of course, the moment we start having any suspicions or concerns like these, she might instantly know too," I pointed out.

"Negotiating with mind readers is pretty rough business, huh?"

I pulled out my cell phone and took a look at it. Just like Miyoshi's did, it had beautiful, full bars showing up in the network signal display area.

Humanity had taken the risk of establishing communication with Ms. Maker and had gained the ability to communicate within dungeons. As for who had gotten the better end of the deal, though —that part was still up in the air.

Annotations

***THAAD*:** "Terminal High Altitude Area Defense"—an American antiballistic missile defense system.

***MAC address and IP*:** A MAC address is an ID used to differentiate between different machines on a network. Typically there are no duplicate addresses. An IP address is an ID used to communicate between different machines using the Internet Protocol (IP).

March 2, 2019 (Saturday)

Dungeon Management Section, JDA Headquarters, Ichigaya

"Understood. Naturally you can expect our full cooperation." Saiga leaned forward as he spoke into the phone; on the other end of the line was Tanaka from the Cabinet Intelligence and Research Office.

In the early hours of the morning, one of the two men sent over

by Public Security disappeared after checking an explorer's belongings then saying he was going to the restroom. After a long while, he still hadn't come back, and when a JDA employee went to check up on him, they couldn't find him anywhere. All they knew was that according to the exit records, he never left the dungeon gate area.

Upon further search with additional personnel, investigators opened a locker located inside a chamber that was being used as a break room, and a body with a broken neck tumbled out. The prime suspect was a foreign man who had gone with the officer to have his belongings checked. Saiga had wasted no time in sending over dungeon gate security footage of the men involved.

"We appreciate it," Tanaka said.

"Is there anything else we can do?" Saiga asked.

"The investigation is ours from here on out. It's likely the man in question did indeed smuggle out the plutonium-gallium alloy, but we'll continue surveillance of all leaving the dungeon until 'Mitsuo Maruyama' comes out." There was a high likelihood that Mitsuo Maruyama was working with the other men. It was possible they could get some answers by questioning him.

"Understood," Saiga said again, then hung up the phone.

Miharu looked at him with concern.

"Chief..."

"It seems the situation has escalated beyond our scope of duty." The person who had been killed was an officer from the Tokyo Public Safety Bureau's Fourth Foreign Affairs Division, and the individual under investigation might have links to nuclear terrorism, so no further details would be disclosed until they had concrete information.

Thankfully they had only closed off the second floor of the building, so the measurements and camps that had been taking place on the first floor were largely unaffected. However, there were likely plenty of explorers who had an inkling that something strange was going on after noticing the increased number of investigators running around the area.

"What should we do, then?"

"There's nothing we *can* do. From this point on, it's the police's job. If they ask us to help with anything, we'll do our best to provide whatever they need."

"Understood, Chief."

Just then, Miharu's phone started to vibrate.

"Oh, excuse me for a moment." When she checked to see who was calling, her eyes went wide with surprise, and she immediately picked up. "This is Naruse."

"Uh, hi, Naruse. It's me, Yoshimura."

"Wow, you're back already?" It had only been yesterday that D-Powers had contacted her via the Arthurs. If they had already exited the dungeon, it had only taken them a day to make it all the way back from the twenty-fifth floor.

"No, actually, I'm calling from the eighth floor of Yoyogi."

"Wh-What?"

Unable to comprehend what she had just heard, that was the only response that could escape Miharu's mouth.

"Hello? Naruse?"

"O-Oh, sorry about that. It kind of sounded like you said you were calling from the eighth floor of Yoyogi."

The fact that Miharu had answered her phone while she was in the middle of talking to Saiga meant it was definitely not a private call. When Saiga, who had been listening to the conversation, heard what she said, he immediately shot up out of his chair.

"A phone call from the eighth floor?!" That fact alone was surprising enough, but it also threatened to obliterate Yoyogi Development Plan #6, something their sales department appeared to be investing heavily in. While the end result for the JDA might have been the same either way, this development was going to be a nightmare for anyone who had hoped to make a profit off the development of dungeon communication. "Well, crap..." Saiga dropped back down into his chair, suddenly mentally exhausted.

"Yeah, we're on the eighth floor of the dungeon. I'm glad the call actually went through."

"Wh-What do you mean, 'actually went through'? What exactly is going on?!"

"Well..." Miharu hurriedly jotted down notes as they explained what had happened, but nothing that he was saying seemed real to her at all. When he'd finished his explanation, he asked, "So what's the situation out there?"

"About that..." Miharu glanced at Saiga, who responded by nodding. "One of the officers we brought in from the Fourth Foreign Affairs Division was killed inside the dungeon gate area."

"Oh no..." Yoshimura fell silent for a while, then let Miharu know that they were on their way out. "Oh, by the way, we have one more favor to ask you."

"What might that be?"

"We're going to send you a URL, and we'd like you to release it on the Yoyo-D Information Bureau site. We promised we would."

"Excuse me? Promised who?"

"Aaaaaanyway, thanks for taking care of that! And by the way, before you ask—it's really her."

"Huh? What? Who is? What do you mean, 'it's really her'?"

Miharu was bewildered enough by their unexpected request, but the moment she opened the URL she had been sent, her jaw dropped nearly to the ground.

***

"So what would that mean, exactly? Even if someone set a drop with Mining, any substance containing an element with a mass number equal to or above uranium just wouldn't drop at all?"

"That's what they said, at least..."

"I'd say it's some kind of crazy joke...but it's definitely not, is it?"

"Chief, we would be better off not reporting this, right? I imagine it'd be even more problematic to come out and say it happened because someone *asked*..."

Asked who *though?* Saiga wondered silently. *If they're talking about the being on the other side of the dungeons, does that mean they've already gotten far enough in to make contact?* Saiga had no idea what exactly to press D-Powers on first.

"You may be right, but they're still gonna give us the third degree

over the whole communication thing."

"Maybe we could just say something like 'We don't know why it happened, but it happened! Isn't it great that everyone gets to benefit from it now?'"

"Naruse, I've been getting concerned about something lately—are those two starting to corrupt you?"

"If we want to try to counteract their complete lack of common sense, we'll never keep up unless we fight on their level!"

After forcing a pained smile at Miharu's response, Saiga pointed to the next part of her notes.

"Moving on, what on earth is this 'fantasy metal' business?"

"According to them, it's substances like mithril and orichalcum."

"I get that part. I get it...but are they saying those things are *real*, now?" *It's possible they're some kind of alloys—but* what *kind, exactly?*

"Also, according to Miyoshi's Appraisal skill, the fantasy metals have stats."

"Stats? As in the kind you measure with SMDs?"

Miharu gave a small nod, and Saiga's eyes went wide. Even in fiction, he had never heard of anything nonliving having actual stats. *Metals with stats.* He couldn't even imagine the implications of such substances existing.

"Well, color me curious on that one, but we've got to actually get our hands on the stuff first." He let out a sigh, then looked at the nearby monitor, which displayed the web page at the URL D-Powers had provided at the end of the call. "So this is the site, huh?"

It was a message board with a ridiculous title displayed at the top: "Ask Ms. Maker!" Apparently the page had been set up with the intention of it being a new subreddit-style offshoot of Yoyo-D Information Bureau's existing Reddit-style board. Each post could be set to public, restricted, or private.

The problem was, the first post was titled, "Hi, I'm Ms. Maker. Nice to meet you!"—and it was more or less an AMA, or "ask me anything," thread. That meant people could leave comments with questions, and she would answer them directly. So, if that *was* actually her, it would be classified as a close encounter of the fifth

kind.

"So is it *really* her?"

"That's what they said, at least."

"Should we even report this to the JDA at all?"

"I don't know," Miharu replied. "I just don't know—but they asked me to set up the page because they 'promised.'"

"Promised who?!"

"I really don't know...but Chief?"

"What?"

"This may just be my opinion, but doesn't it seem pretty unlikely that anyone would actually believe it's the real Ms. Maker posting?"

"Hmm, you've got a point..." *Why would the entity on the other side of the dungeons post an AMA on the official JDA website? I doubt anyone would think it's actually real. They'd think it's some new form of entertainment we cooked up—at least until someone posts something proving the truth.*

Saiga continued his musing.

"We've already found something that is basically telepathy, after all..." *The revelation and confirmation of the party system ended up boosting the credibility of Heaven's Leaks. We can't rule out the same happening with this new site. We can't rule it out, but still...*

"All right, have Sakurai from PR connect the site."

"Chief?!"

"But don't make it connect directly. I want it set up to where anything posted from her end gets forwarded through us first, so we can moderate the content before the public sees it."

We have no idea what she might end up posting. If it really is Ms. Maker, she probably wouldn't want us to do this, but we need the ability to selectively eliminate any info that could lead to misunderstandings. If we set her up to post directly to the JDA site, that would be the end of that. We need to hang on to any tiny threads of control we can.

"Understood. Who's going to moderate the site, though?"

"You will, Naruse."

"What?!"

"I mean, they *did* ask you specifically. Even if they hadn't, it's not

like we could entrust a job like this to some outside specialist...”

“Maybe not, but still...”

“Just try it out for a while, okay?”

Miharu could only let out a defeated whine.

And so the stage was successfully set for mankind’s first close encounter of the fifth kind—not that any of the people participating would actually believe it was genuine.

Saiga’s eyes scrolled down through Miharu’s notes, then stopped at the bottom.

“Well, the JDA can probably more or less manage things up to *this* point, at least...”

Naruse is right—most of these items don’t need to be reported immediately, and we could probably just pass them off as unexplainable phenomena if need be. But this last one is a doozy...

He crossed his arms as he stared at the final item. “All nuclear weapons on the planet might cease to exist?” A sense of vertigo washed over him. *What the* hell *are we supposed to do with* that *piece of information?!*

Yoyogi Dungeon, Third Floor

A short while after we had reached the third floor, Rosary poked her head out from my backpack.

“Hm? What’s wrong, Rosary?”

She darted out and flew off toward a wooded area just off the main route.

“Wonder what that’s all about?”

“Just Rosary being Rosary, probably! I bet she found something.”

“What is there to find? We’re on the third floor...” I pointed out.

“We’ll just have to follow her and find out!”

“I thought we were in a hurry?”

“We can’t exactly leave her behind, can we?”

With that, Miyoshi ran off after Rosary, and we made our way into the woods. After proceeding for some time, we began to hear the faint sound of moving machinery.

I squinted.

"Is that...?"

In the distance ahead of us, a man with blond hair was walking alongside a porter. According to the third floor map, he was walking exactly along the shortest path between the entrance and the exit.

The main paths between the entrance and exit on any given floor had come to be known as *routes*, and they had been chosen empirically as the most cost-effective travel routes based on various factors such as terrain. The amateur-difficulty-level floors weren't very lucrative, so anyone headed further down tended to want to minimize their time on the upper levels. Naturally, those people started out by trying to head in a straight line toward the exit.

In other words, the most likely reason this man was heading along a straight line was because he was a beginner to Yoyogi, with no connections to any other explorers, and he was trying to move as quickly as possible. Even without that deduction, though—he was also a foreign man with a porter.

I rubbed my chin.

"Mitsuo Maruyama, I presume?"

"What's the plan, Holmes?" Miyoshi asked as she turned to me.

"What's the plan indeed, Watson..."

Judging by the man's leisurely pace, he probably had no idea about the huge uproar going on at the surface. Phones had only started working in the dungeon yesterday, and it was doubtful anybody had tried to contact him, since nobody would've anticipated the possibility of phones suddenly becoming usable.

Miyoshi furrowed her brow.

"According to the dungeon entry records, his Arche was packed full of weapons. If he makes it to the exit gate without realizing they're looking for him and gets stopped, there might end up being a shoot-out, and a lot of people could get hurt!"

If his porter was equipped with a 12.7-mm weapon, nobody would be able to stop him. Falcon had supposedly tested up to 20-mm weapons back in Yokohama, and if this guy had anything similar on board, it would tear through walls like a hot knife through butter.

"True, but if we try to take him down directly, then we'd end up

criminals ourselves, right?"

"Hmm... In that case, it looks like our options are either evacuate everybody up top, or take him down and claim self-defense."

"Didn't you just say that thing was packed full of weapons...?" I rolled my eyes. Claiming self-defense would kind of require *him* to attack first.

"What? It's not like he'd actually be able to hit you."

"I mean, I guess..." Sure, dodging bullets fired by a normal human being wielding a gun was well within my capabilities, but still... "Oh, all right. I suppose it's kind of our duty, since we did end up revealing Mining drops to the world."

Ah, I think I'm getting the Monday blues. After a long weekend of fun, back to work I go. Five more days until I get to feel like a human being again. Heck, it's even drizzling a little bit this morning.

As I got in touch with my Monday mood, I sped up my walking pace and headed toward the man.

I never used to have weekends back in the day. I don't "get" them now either—just in the completely opposite way. Talk about extremes.

At that point, Miyoshi started talking to me via telepathy. *Oh, by the way, I'm gonna be recording this to use as evidence, so do your best to make it look like you avoided the bullets through sheer luck, okay?*

Are you kidding me?! I griped. *Tell me these things in advance, for cripes' sake!*

Thinking to myself, I mused, *In recorded video, you can tell exactly how long something takes using the frame count, so I guess superhuman speed is out...*

Should I have just done this as the great Phantom, then? I asked telepathically.

It would be me recording video evidence again... Miyoshi pointed out.

Ah, yeah... I murmured in my head.

This was crime-related, after all. It would be difficult to pass it off as her recording accidental footage of me, like we had with the orb.

All right, here's the story, Kei. You tried to strike up a

conversation with him and he attacked you out of the blue. You freaked out, tripped like a total goober, and managed to avoid the first shot.

Is the "total goober" part really necessary?

Miyoshi ignored my query. *Then the video cuts off, and we somehow manage to tie him up.*

That's a pretty half-assed story... I grumbled.

It'll be fine, as long as we hand the video over to good ol' Secret Agent Tanaka! We do this all the time, remember?

Wait, so I'm being a decoy for the Arthurs? Isn't it usually the other way around?

I mean, if you'd rather take this guy down like a badass instead, I'm not gonna stop you.

Ah, sorry... I'm counting on you, then.

Okay, the man's name is René Lambert. I can't see his STR or VIT, but given that there's no way to massively increase those stats, I'd put him as a rather powerful beginner.

In other words, his STR and VIT were higher than Miyoshi's, but since the rest of his stats were lower than hers, she used those values to estimate the other two as being somewhere in the teens. Appraisal might as well have been a cheat code.

Got it. Here goes, then.

"*Hey, what's up, my man?*" I asked cheerfully in English.

As soon as I said that, Miyoshi burst out laughing inside my head. *I mean, what the hell did you expect me to say...?*

Surprised at hearing the sudden voice, the man whirled around with his gun in hand, but upon seeing it was just a defenseless man along with a woman standing slightly farther away, he didn't immediately point the weapon at us. He had no idea who we were, so he probably figured it was best to avoid trouble as much as he could.

"*Who are you two? Do I know you?*"

"*I don't think so. You, on the other hand, are getting to be pretty well-known around here...Mr. Maruyama.*"

The moment I said that, he sprang to the side, aimed his gun at my chest, and pulled the trigger twice. I took a step away and

managed to tumble convincingly backward at that same moment, but then he pointed the gun at Miyoshi and fired, and I panicked for a second.

"Miyoshi!"

However, the bullets he fired at her were sucked into a black hole that appeared in front of her, and she waved at me as if nothing had happened.

"Don't freak me out like that..."

As I stood up, brushing off my behind, I saw Mr. Maruyama, already wrapped up in a shadow bind, unconscious.

"You pulled that off pretty darn well!" Miyoshi said with a grin.

"What, the 'tripping over my own feet like a total goober' part?"

"It was super realistic!"

"I don't wanna hear it."

Miyoshi then dealt with the abandoned Arche by putting it away into Storage.

"Okay, Kei, now it's your turn!" She stuck out her thumb and pinkie finger, waving her hand next to her head in the universal phone gesture.

"Oh yeah, we can call from inside, now, can't we..."

Yoyogi Park

Even though it was a Saturday, the area around the benches near the fountain at Yoyogi Park was deserted. Cherry blossom season hadn't begun yet and temperatures were chilly, so there was little reason for people to gather here.

As soon as Terasawa stepped into the designated stagelike area on the south side of the park, to his left he noticed a man in a worn-out coat seated on a corner bench with his left hand raised. He walked over to the man at a brisk pace and sat down next to him.

Tanaka, who had come with Terasawa, took a quick glance around the area, then sat down on the same backless bench as the others, but facing in the opposite direction.

"First Sotobori Park, now Yoyogi Park. I heard that the JDA and

Public Safety have an awful situation going on—do you really have time to be running around doing all this spy movie stuff?"

"Calm down, Terasawa," Saiga replied. "This may be Yoyogi Park, but it's also a nice open area with relatively good visibility. There aren't any trees nearby for anyone to hide behind. It's a pretty nice place to hang around for an idle chat, don't you think?"

Tanaka sat there silently listening to the two men talk, but his gaze was focused downward. It certainly wouldn't have been impossible for someone to sneak in right under everyone's noses if they had hidden in the pond beforehand, but the location had been decided on a whim. As deserted as the place might've been, it was in plain sight of the residents of Tokyo, so slipping into the pond undetected would've been no easy feat.

After following Tanaka's gaze for a brief moment, Saiga let out a sigh and went straight into the matter at hand.

"Anyway, you're right. It's an awful situation, but there's nothing we can really do about it. Freaking out isn't going to get us anywhere either. Besides, it turns out there are a few things I need to tell you about too." Saiga rested his elbows on his knees and clasped his hands together. "First of all—radio communication is now functional inside Yoyogi Dungeon."

At first, Terasawa thought that a project he had heard rumors about recently had gotten off the ground. It had happened faster than he had anticipated, but was that really grounds for calling him all the way out here in the middle of their emergency?

"I thought Development Plan #6 was still in the planning stages?"

"You know about that?"

"Your executive director—a voluble old fellow—has been, how should I put it, spreading some info here and there, including to JDAG, about some kind of groundwork they've been laying."

"My goodness."

"If you were actually moving forward and the project was underway, you'd start with the first floor, right? Did you call me out here just to tell me that?"

Instead of responding, Saiga took a look at his watch.

"Any moment now," he murmured.

Terasawa barely had the chance to sputter a "Pardon?" before the cell phone in his pocket started to vibrate.

"Go ahead and take that," Saiga offered with an earnest expression.

When Terasawa pulled out his phone and looked at it, his eyes widened at the impossible name on the caller ID.

"Lieutenant Kimitsu...?" *She's supposed to be on the thirty-second floor. There must be some kind of trouble—*

He hastily put the call through, and soon, a familiar young woman's lively voice came through. "Colonel? This is Kimitsu." It didn't sound like anything serious was going on, but he heard a surprised voice in the background say, "It actually went through!"

He paused for a few moments, dumbstruck, but snapped out of it just as quickly.

"Sorry about that, Lieutenant. Where are you right now?"

"I'm on the thirty-second floor of Yoyogi. I got word from the JDA that I should try to contact you, but I had no idea it would actually work. I can hardly believe it!"

Their current dive into Yoyogi was supposed to serve as a training exercise in preparation for a full-fledged caravan escort mission, but no large-scale resources had been deployed that would've allowed for communication like this. And they weren't even talking on a military radio line—they were on regular cell phones.

"Impossible..." he murmured, but thankfully, nobody on the other end of the line seemed to have heard it.

"So, is there anything you need me for?" Kimitsu asked.

"No, nothing. I appreciate you testing out the connection. Go ahead and get back to your duties."

"Yes, sir. Getting back to work."

After she had hung up, Terasawa merely sat there in silence for a moment, staring at his phone.

"What do you think?" Saiga asked.

"What do I think...? What the hell kind of magic did you use to pull this off?"

Saiga took in a deep breath, aware that he was about to say something that was difficult to swallow.

"Actually—all it took was for someone to ask."

"Ask? Ask who?"

"The being on the other side of the dungeons, or so I'm told."

Terasawa's jaw dropped. It was a rare expression to see on a man who was typically the very picture of cool, calm, and collected. On the other side of him, Tanaka's expression was basically unchanged, but the momentary twitch under the agent's eye didn't escape Saiga's notice.

"So they...*asked* for this as a favor?"

"Correct."

"From a being on the other side of the dungeons?"

"Supposedly."

"I've never heard of anything like that..."

"This is the first time I've mentioned it."

Terasawa stared at Saiga.

"You work for the JDA, don't you?"

"I do, and I take my job very seriously. I just figured I needed to let the two of you know before I talked to my superiors about it."

"You've taken this charade far enough." Tanaka, who had been silent up to that point, suddenly spoke in a quiet yet strangely penetrating voice.

He was staring past the waters of the fountain at five distant zelkova trees, which didn't look particularly pretty. Saiga felt the same type of pressure from him that he had felt when pitted against a judo expert in a large tournament when he was younger, and that long-forgotten nervousness resurfaced in his mind.

"So that's what you're really like? Scary stuff," Saiga quipped.

"Japan may be peaceful, but if you think it doesn't have a dark side to it, you must truly have lived a charmed life."

"I could do without knowing about the dark side for the rest of my life, honestly."

"It may be too late for that now. So Azusa Miyoshi is at the center of all this?"

From not too terribly far beyond the fountain, voices from an exercise group starting some kind of warm-ups could be heard. Terasawa, who had been sitting there in a daze listening to the two

other men, suddenly came back to his senses.

"Hold on a second. So you're telling me the reason I was able to get that call just now is because Azusa Miyoshi *asked* some being on the other side of the dungeons to make it happen?"

"At this point, it doesn't matter who did the asking. The thing I wanted to talk to you about is—"

Tanaka interrupted, making an educated guess on how to finish Saiga's thought.

"You wanted to ask us what to do about the fact that you contacted someone, or some*thing*, on the other side, right?"

Terasawa crossed his arms, scowling.

"But nobody's gonna believe a story like that without some kind of proof."

It had definitely come as a surprise to everyone when communication within Yoyogi suddenly became possible. It was easy enough to claim *that* as evidence that someone had contacted something on the other side of the dungeons, but that by itself didn't conclusively prove anything. Even the *creation* of the dungeons hadn't been due to contact with said thing on the other side—at least not as far as Terasawa and Tanaka were aware.

"Nope," Saiga said in response to Tanaka's supposition. He stood and looked up into the cold sky as he let out a white puff of chilled breath, then tightened his coat collar with both hands. "Make no mistake, that's a very serious concern for us as well. But our current problem is what happens *next*."

"Next...?"

"If what's supposed to happen next does indeed happen, even the most skeptical people out there will have no choice but to believe."

"Believe what?"

"That we've actually made contact with something on the other side of the dungeons, I suppose."

"What, are they gonna come out of the dungeon and have us take them to our leaders or something?" Terasawa sneered.

"If that were all, we'd be getting off easy," Saiga remarked. If they met with the Japanese government, then other countries and

perhaps the UN would be clamoring to meet them as well, but that would be about it.

"What do you mean, 'if that were all'?"

"The next thing being offered is what some people might consider a miracle. I wanted to have a discussion with the two of you about how we should explain it to the rest of the world—or alternatively, whether we should just play dumb and claim to have no idea what happened." After all, the stage was set for something absolutely unimaginable. Some countries might even consider it an actual attack coming from the other side of the dungeons.

"A miracle? Have you joined some kind of cult, Saiga?" Tanaka said, scoffing.

"If a cult could actually save me from this situation, I'd join in a heartbeat."

"So what the hell happened?" Terasawa asked in all seriousness, having noticed how genuinely worn out Saiga was looking.

Saiga shrugged, speaking in a casual voice that made it sound like what he was saying was some kind of joke.

"All right, here goes: Apparently all nuclear weapons on the planet might cease to exist."

"Huh?" Terasawa went straight past shock to a state of utter confusion. "W-Wait, slow down for a sec. Is that even—"

—*possible*, he was about to ask, but stopped himself. Team I had vanished from Yokohama and was subsequently rediscovered in Yoyogi. Dungeons had always transcended the bounds of common sense. There had even been rumors that the US Army might have already brought a nuclear weapon inside a dungeon. Maybe it wasn't such a far-fetched idea after all.

"Why exactly do you believe this might happen?" Tanaka asked, eyeing Saiga skeptically.

"Apparently, the group that Public Safety is going after made a plutonium-gallium alloy core drop inside the dungeon—one that's ready to be placed inside the pit of a nuclear weapon."

"I heard about that yesterday," Tanaka responded.



The Tokyo Public Safety Bureau's Fourth Foreign Affairs Division had been in an uproar since last night thanks to that. Now that someone had been killed in the line of duty, even the people who had been skeptical at first were taking things seriously. After making a few inquiries based on the security camera footage the JDA had provided, it turned out that their suspect was a known notorious mercenary.

Saiga took a deep breath.

"This 'miracle' would be a means to clean up that mess."

"You're not making any sense. How does the bomb core in Yoyogi lead to the complete elimination of nuclear weapons?"

"Listen, Terasawa. The plutonium-gallium alloy that dropped was spherical—already in the exact shape needed to insert it into the pit of a nuclear weapon. A certain someone theorized that the fact that the culprits made it drop in such an awkward shape for transport means they intend to use it sooner rather than later. Starting from that theory, they ended up with a plan to eliminate all plutonium-gallium alloys."

"What kind of plan is that...? It's crazy! It's impossible, right?"

"Perhaps. For now, just listen to the rest of the story under the assumption that it *is* possible."

"R-Right..." a chastened Terasawa replied.

"So at first, they figured they would make the elimination apply to the inside of the dungeon."

"Solving the problem by making any of the stuff that drops instantly disappear?"

"Pretty much, yeah. But that wouldn't help if the culprits had already taken the alloy out of the dungeon. If they're building a nuke, it has to be in Tokyo, or at least somewhere nearby. So what do you think they considered next?"

"Well, if they were building on that same approach, I guess they'd try to widen the range of elimination to the Tokyo metropolitan area? Maybe even all of Japan?"

"Exactly. But there was one *huge* problem with that." Officially, there were no nuclear weapons within Japan's borders. So if the alloy in question were to vanish from a US military vessel in port, it

shouldn't end up being a big issue. On the surface, at least.

"I don't imagine there would be any official complaints from the United States if they ended up losing nuclear weapon material that had been secretly brought into the country."

"Maybe not, but think about this: If they *did* make the material vanish inside Japan's borders, it would be the same as giving us a flawless nuclear missile defense system." Any nuclear core that entered Japan would just harmlessly disappear. It didn't matter what kind of technology another country used in their missiles—they wouldn't be able to use them against Japan. "Also," Saiga continued, "Many people believe Japan has the potential to become a nuclear power." They had stockpiles of plutonium, and sufficient technology and budget for it. "If we loaded the necessary equipment onto an *Izumo*-class destroyer, for example, and assembled everything out on the high seas, we would be the only nation that could neutralize any incoming enemy nukes and be capable of launching our own attacks unopposed."

Terasawa scoffed.

"No, there's no way we would actually do anything that stupid—"

"Considering your line of work, you of all people should know that having the *ability* to do something is where the problem begins."

To that, Terasawa had no response.

Tanaka, for his part, had been listening quietly the whole time. A strange gleam shone in his eyes—too intense to be called resignation, but too calm to be called anger.

Saiga moved on.

"So, this individual, who was trying to come up with the right thing to ask for, figured the next best option would be to kick off an era in which every country in the world has a flawless nuclear missile defense system. It's something that would have happened eventually anyway."

"Unbelievable..."

"Some of it may just be pretense, but the world does seem to be gradually headed toward the abolition of nuclear weapons. Right now, nations can't give up their existing stockpiles out of fear that their enemies will take advantage of them doing so. But if someone

forcibly eliminated them all at the same time, that'd be a huge step toward true world peace."

Tanaka gave a sarcastic smile.

"The responsible party sounds like a shoo-in for the Nobel Peace Prize."

Saiga grinned at that comment as if he agreed, but quickly reined in his expression and continued.

"That being said, this is definitely a huge deal, as impossible as the concept may sound." He gave a helpless shrug. "Anyway, the person who's asking for this to happen decided to postpone actually putting anything into action until as late as possible."

Terasawa raised an eyebrow.

"Postpone? Why?"

Tanaka crossed his arms and connected the dots.

"So you're saying this 'miracle' won't end up happening if we manage to retrieve the core that's currently MIA?"

"Exactly. Apparently the whole reason they enabled network communication within the dungeon was because they needed to be able to contact the entity in real time," Saiga explained.

The other two men were at a loss for words at this unimaginable development. Eventually, though, Terasawa spoke up.

"So you're saying if we can't get the core back from the people who took it out of the dungeon, all the nuclear weapons in the world will disappear? And if we *do* get it back, everything stays as is..." Terasawa muttered, uncertain what to say about either option.

"Perhaps the better choice for the world would be to call off our investigation," Tanaka quipped, an ironic half smile plastered on his face.

However, the Fourth Foreign Affairs Division was calling for vengeance after the death of one of their own, so they would never suggest such a thing, and besides that, it was out of the question both legally and ethically for them to make the decision to call things off.

"Even if every nuke in the world became unusable overnight, there's no way any nuclear power would make that fact public," Terasawa said, imagining the scenario. There would be a huge

uproar internally, but unless one former nuclear power knew that every other nation in the world had the same thing happen, they wouldn't expose that weakness to the world.

"That's why just doing it and pretending we know nothing is one option—the problem is, there are also uranium-based nuclear weapons out in the world, though not nearly as many." If plutonium-based weapons went away, the antiquated uranium-based ones would suddenly hold huge significance. The development would have enough impact to overturn the very foundation of global security. "So, on that note," Saiga added, "apparently they plan to target highly enriched uranium, as well."

Terasawa squinted.

"That's not good..."

"It shouldn't affect nuclear power plants," Saiga pointed out. The concentration of uranium-235 in nuclear fuel was only a few percent, and weak concentrations wouldn't be included in the planned element elimination.

"Yeah, but highly enriched uranium is used as reactor fuel in nuclear submarines and nuclear-powered aircraft carriers," Terasawa pointed out. They had apparently chosen that form of uranium because it took so much effort to change out the pellet-style fuel; the lifespan of many reactors was longer than the hulls of the ships that housed them. If nuclear-powered vessels weren't notified in advance, their fuel supplies would suddenly be empty. Anything above water would remain afloat, but the submarines wouldn't be so lucky.

"What would happen if a submarine reactor suddenly stopped?" Saiga asked.

"There are two main propulsion systems used in nuclear submarines," Terasawa explained. "The turboelectric type is less common, but it could move on battery power for a while after its reactor stops working. The problem would be anything that uses direct steam turbine propulsion. If the reactor gives out on one of those, the propellers will slowly come to a stop. As long as their emergency blow systems are in working order, though, they shouldn't sink."

An emergency blow system was a feature that ran on high-pressure air, and was completely separated from other portions of the vessel. The system was operated manually, forcing high pressure air into the main ballast tanks so the submarine could rise to the surface. It required no hydraulic pressure, electricity, or other systems on the vessel to operate.

Saiga rubbed his chin.

"If nukes are going away anyway, there'd be no reason for strategic nuclear subs. At that point it wouldn't matter if they were forced to surface and their locations were given away. Well, maybe it would be a big deal at first, but eventually, nobody would care."

"That's *if* they surface at all," Terasawa pointed out.

"You mean there are people who would just let them sink?"

Since nations couldn't give away the locations of their strategic nuclear subs, if they had some kind of accident and were going to be forced to surface in a location they shouldn't normally be—

"Some military personnel would definitely do that, yeah."

"I guess we need to notify the six countries that own nuclear subs, then..." Saiga muttered, turning his gaze to Tanaka. If they were warned in advance, they could send out the order to have their subs surface.

Tanaka shook his head cautiously.

"I can't make that call. I *can*, however, relay the info to the right department," he said. "It's interesting, though. It's almost as if we have intermediaries with the being on the other side of the dungeons, now."

"Who knows?" Saiga said with a shrug. "I've got no idea what their plans are."

"People with a connection like that have the potential to be very dangerous."

"Is that so? I'd say it's probably even *more* dangerous to seriously entertain the idea of eliminating those people for the sake of the country."

Tanaka didn't respond to that, nor did Saiga press the matter any further, but the two locked eyes for a moment.

"Intermediary or not, what's done is done. No matter how this all

ends, they're gonna be brought in for questioning. There's no avoiding that part," Terasawa said.

Saiga, who had calmed down, shook his head and offered a word of warning.

"I think Tanaka is already well aware of this"—Tanaka's ears perked up at that—"but the individuals you have in mind are fundamentally good, ethical people. When politicians or people who throw around their authority start treating them unfairly, though, they tend to get a bit cantankerous."

Looking a bit annoyed, Tanaka threw in his own two cents.

"And when they get cantankerous, there's really no telling what they'll do next."

"See? You know exactly what I'm talking about. Lately I've been finding myself wishing I was Supreme Dictator-for-Life, for some reason. Anyway, I just thought I'd warn you in advance, Terasawa."

The corners of Tanaka's mouth curled upward ever so slightly. Try as he might, he couldn't quite keep from smiling at Saiga's jest.

"Free spirits with talent are the absolute *worst* type to deal with in an organization," Terasawa muttered, a bitter smile on his face.

"Are there people like that in the JSDF too?" Saiga asked.

"Sorry to inform you, but pretty much every extremely talented person out there tends to be like that." Terasawa shrugged, having resigned himself to that fact long ago. Still, soldiers were at least a *little* bit better, since they had a thorough sense of the chain of command.

These particular people, though, were all about personal freedom. Their mentality seemed to be that if they got sick of Japan, they'd have no problem defecting to some other country whenever they felt like it—and any other country would probably welcome them with open arms. There were pretty much no drawbacks whatsoever.

"Anyway, I think we've gotten the gist of the situation." Tanaka said. "So the being who resides on the other side of the—" He faltered. "That sure is a mouthful to say."

"Demiurge is one name we use. Some of us call *her* Ms. Maker, though."

"Demiurge is quite fitting, but Ms. Maker sounds like it could end up being the more popular option."

"Probably so, yeah."

"So, may I presume you have some means of communicating with this Ms. Maker?"

"We're currently still working on verifying that, but probably."

"Verifying?"

"Well, how can I put this—a special method has been recently proposed." The thoughts Saiga left unstated were *Who could've guessed it would be a message board where you could talk to her directly, though? There's no way anyone would possibly think they were chatting with the real thing. It could all be an elaborate prank by the JDA—not that we would ever do anything like that. Still, there would be no point in telling anyone about the fact that if you manage to obtain a soul-like item, then place it into an appropriate vessel, you can get invited to a secret garden. That would be just as impossible to verify.*

"Again with the special methods... Perhaps the JDA is being a bit too secretive about this?"

"At this rate, people might start to suspect the JDA of intervening behind the scenes."

Tanaka and Terasawa were both trying to press him for more info, but there wasn't anything else Saiga could say.

"People can suspect whatever they want, but we're not actually doing any of those things, so it doesn't bother me too much."

"Even so, a lot of experts out there are gonna start saying things, you know," Terasawa said.

"I appreciate the warning."

Tanaka let out a small sigh at Saiga's unconcerned responses.

"Very well. I'll bring these things up with the Cabinet, including the nuclear weapons issue we discussed."

"Appreciated. Oh, I should probably mention this just in case—if you're thinking of suddenly going through the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to try and establish diplomatic relations with Ms. Maker, I'd recommend against it."

"Why?"

"She may not want that."

"Then what *does* she want?"

"Apparently she's looking to be of service."

"So that info in the report we got from you a while back was true?!"

"Of course. The JDA doesn't submit false reports."

They sure as hell aren't shy about leaving out details, though, Terasawa thought bitterly.

"Service, you say... I'm not sure I quite understand... What does Ms. Maker want in return, then?" Tanaka asked.

"Your guess is as good as mine." *I honestly don't have any idea what she wants*, Saiga thought. *If humanity were to colonize other planets, they'd probably expect the planet's resources in return. This entity, though, can apparently create anything humanity wants out of thin air. If what Naruse and the others told me was true, she can even recreate human beings. What on earth could an entity like that possibly need from us?* "Maybe she wants humanity itself," Saiga blurted out in a vague murmur.

The other two men offered no response.

As a cold wind blew across the fountain and the discussion was nearing its conclusion, Tanaka's cell phone began to vibrate. Glancing at the name, he showed a rare frown. "It's from one of our free spirits," he said, putting the phone to his ear.

"Yes?"

"Hello, Tanaka? I've got some info—"

The others couldn't make out what the caller was saying, but they could tell from the look on Tanaka's face that something strange was going on.

"What?!"

After some additional back-and-forth, he finally hung up the phone.

"Did something happen?" Saiga asked.

"They said they apprehended our Mitsuo Maruyama. Also, apparently his real name is René Lambert."

"D-Powers *apprehended* him?"

"They ran into him by coincidence on the third floor. They insisted

it was justified self-defense."

"Self-defense?" Saiga wondered. "How did that end up happening? And how did they find out his real name?"

Saiga wasn't sure what exactly had happened, but for the name part, there was no way they had actually known him previously—it had to have been Miyoshi's Appraisal skill. Pseudonyms and aliases were useless against D-Powers.

"Anyway, I'm heading to Yoyogi to take the suspect into custody," Tanaka said.

Terasawa stood up.

"I'll go with you."

"If the JSDF is coming out, we may as well already be at war."

"Well, there's definitely already a threat to our country. I guess I can check things out on-site, just to be safe." *It doesn't seem like it has anything to do with JDAG*, Terasawa thought, *but I'm in this far already—should probably see things through to the end.*

Saiga stood up in silence, following the others as they started heading down the path leading south.

I told them what needed to be told. Now they should be able to guide that information to the proper places in their respective organizations. Anything that happens after that is beyond my control.

What *was* stressing him out, though, was figuring out how exactly he was supposed to report everything that had just happened to Director Michiyo Tachibana, his direct superior.

Yoyogi Dungeon, Surface, Inside Gate

"All right, we'll leave the rest up to you!"

We met Mr. Tanaka in an inconspicuous corner inside the Yoyogi Dungeon gate, where we transferred custody of René and the Arche to him. We were shocked to see he had brought two other people with him for some reason: the Section Chief of the Dungeon Management Section, and a man we had met before at the orb exchange, who I was pretty sure was from the JSDF.

"So, Tanaka, how is the investigation going?"

"And what exactly do you plan to do with that information...?" he asked, squinting.

"Hmmm... Well, if you told us there was a nuke about to blow up Tokyo, we'd probably get out of the country while we could," I said jokingly.

"If you do, you'd better make sure to take all of your relatives with you."

Miyoshi's eyes shot open wide.

"What? Really?!"

Here I was just trying to make a lighthearted joke, and he has to go and be a killjoy about it. Why so serious, bruh?

"We're doing our best to make sure none of that will be necessary, though," Mr. Tanaka assured us.

"It's looking to me like they probably haven't found any leads yet, Kei." Miyoshi took a deep breath. "If they ran facial recognition on the train station security camera footage, but didn't get any hits, that means they didn't use the train. I'm sure they checked the taxi company footage as well, so that's out too. That just leaves cars, but if the suspects weren't picked up by any N-system, T-system, or Orbis cameras, they'd need to do an exhaustive search of all the private security cameras in the area, and use those to figure out what direction they were headed. But that would require a massive amount of resources, and frankly, there probably isn't enough time anyway."

Mr. Tanaka listened to Miyoshi's speech with interest.

"Have you considered that the investigating agency might be focusing too hard on finding the missing men," she asked, "when they could be coming at this case from a different angle?"

"And what angle might that be?"

"Well, that core is ultimately going to be inserted into a nuclear bomb, right? This isn't a work of fiction—not just any Joe Schmo can build a plutonium pit."

"So you think we should find the location where the bomb is being built?"

"Designs for an implosion-type lens are a bit difficult to calculate

and actually create on a computer, even using the ZND detonation model, to say nothing of the latest multidimensional model. Even if they've already designed the real thing, they definitely can't perform any live tests, so I bet they're running simulations."

"Well... Provided they're in the right environment for it."

"If they weren't in the right environment, they wouldn't have been able to make the bomb in the first place!"

It definitely wouldn't be a realistic scenario for some random middle school teacher to cobble together a plutonium-based nuke on their own. Only Makoto Kido could pull that off.

"Right now, it seems like there are a limited number of places offering those kinds of simulations," Miyoshi observed, "and if they chose a place that specializes in a nonnuclear field, they would attract too much attention. These types of researchers are very sensitive to cutting-edge technology, so I bet they're using AMReX or something similar to run detonation simulations as we speak!"

"The usage logs from the computer labs at universities and research centers!" Mr. Tanaka exclaimed. A fair number of places kept logs that showed lists of what programs were run. That would be a good place to start—and if they were lucky, they could hit the jackpot.

Mr. Tanaka had been taking notes as he listened to Miyoshi, and once she was finished, he took out his cell phone and made a brief call.

"As thanks for your intriguing theories, I'll let you know who we're after, if nothing else."

"Oh? You know who they are?"

"We do. The people of the First Middle East Division of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs were able to identify them."

"The Ministry of Foreign Affairs?"

"The man pictured with the suspect is a notorious mercenary who goes by the name Ratel. He was a well-known and rather feared figure in the Second Libyan Civil War. The main suspect is his adjutant, a fellow who goes by Facile."

"They're mercenaries? So this isn't a racial or religious thing?"

"Correct. Therefore we believe that bargaining could be an option

—as unfortunate as that would be for the Fourth Foreign Affairs Division."

If that was the case, they might be able to resolve things via some kind of extralegal deal before things blew up, in either sense of the word. Or at least we could hope so.

Annotations

***Makoto Kido*:** The protagonist of *The Man Who Stole the Sun* (1976), played by Kenji Sawada. The character is a middle school science teacher who creates a plutonium-based atomic bomb. There are plenty of things to criticize about the film, but it's still an enjoyable piece of Japanese cinema.

***It seems like there are only a limited number of places offering those kinds of simulations*:** I looked it up later, and there are way more than I thought. Don't tell anyone.

***AMReX*:** This is an Adaptive Mesh Refinement (AMR) library developed as a part of the Exascale Computing Project (ECP) managed by the US Department of Energy (DOE). It can be used under what's known as the BSD license. Just FYI.

Katsushika, Niijuku

After Ratel's team had slipped through a complex network of narrow one-way streets and crossed the Naka River, the Katsushika campus of the Tokyo University of Science—which was focused on researching the field of advanced fusion—came into view ahead of them.

As at many universities, security access was relatively lax. There was a token guard shack set up at the front gate, but there were plenty of other entrances by which people could access the campus, and unless someone was dressed really strangely and stood out, they probably wouldn't get stopped. With some exceptions, nearly nobody would bat an eye at people accessing the labs either—and sneaking in via the fire escape proved even easier.

When the scrawny-looking man heard the knock and went to

open the door, he was greeted by the sight of a disinterested-looking man standing there. He seemed somehow familiar.

"What? Who the hell are you?"

"*Sorry, I don't speak Japanese,*" Facile responded in French.

Not seeming to understand, the man switched to English after realizing that Japanese wasn't going to work. "*Come again?*"

"*Are you the weaponsmith?*"

When he heard Facile's reply in English, the man gave a startled flinch, then checked quickly back and forth down the hallway. Even though it was a Saturday night, some diligent weekend researcher could still have been passing by.

"*Not for nothing, but you guys stick out like sore thumbs, you know?*"

Two shady-looking foreigners showing up at the laboratory in the middle of the night—if anyone had caught a glimpse of them, "suspicious" would've been the very first word to come to mind. Not to mention, they had *actually* come there to conduct suspicious activities, so they didn't want to attract attention.

With a soft click of his tongue, the man led Facile and Ratel inside the room.

"*So what's up?*"

Facile placed a case on top of a nearby table before answering.

"*We're the couriers.*"

Picking up the case with a dubious expression, the weaponsmith opened it, then froze.

"*What's wrong? It should be exactly to your size specifications.*"

Inside was a plutonium-gallium alloy nuclear core with gold plating. The aura it gave off at a glance was enough to make him believe beyond a doubt that it was the real thing.

"*Wh-Whoa... Where did you get this?*"

"*That's not something you need to know.*"

The weaponsmith was both shocked and flustered to see that *it* was already in its final form. Sure, he had accepted the request to build the bomb, not only out of a desire for revenge against all the people who had treated him like dirt, but also to showcase how capable he was. Still, he had never expected to actually finish a

functional nuke.

How could anyone get a hold of plutonium-239 in modern-day Japan, much less process it into a plutonium-gallium alloy core? That should be impossible.

The only possibility he could think of was that they had brought it in from outside of Japan—but if they had, it would've been quicker to just make the bomb in whatever country they had come from. Unless, of course, they intended to detonate it in Tokyo.

"*When you're done verifying, let the client know it's been received. After that, we'll be out of your hair.*"

"*I'll take care of that right now... I have to ask, though, you don't think this is gonna go off in Tokyo...?*"

"*I'd recommend keeping your thoughts to yourself and just finishing the assembly. You know what they say about curiosity.*"

"*R-Right...*"

That was when the weaponsmith realized where he had seen the disinterested-looking man before. There had been a picture of him in an online news article.

If I remember right, this guy's suspected of murdering a police officer in Yoyogi...

Fearing for his life, the weaponsmith backed away from the man, intimidated by his sheer presence, then headed to the back of the room. Opening the curtain there, he then pulled the cloth cover off of the table behind it, revealing two metallic spheres. As he began to open them with shaky hands, he ended up dropping one of the screws he had taken out.

"*What's the matter?*"

"*N-Nothing, I just—*"

"*Don't tell me you're having second thoughts at this point in the game? You're in far too deep for that.*"

"*No, it's not that, I swear*"—the man suddenly became a lot more talkative, hoping to hide the fact that he had remembered seeing Facile before—"*it's just that this thing was a real pain to put together.*" He then began going on for a while about how difficult it was to design and implement an implosion-type lens in a miniaturized nuclear warhead.

"*If you want to negotiate on your fee, talk to the client. We're just the couriers.*"

At that, the weaponsmith let out a sigh and got back to his work.

"*Seems like he's nervous about something,*" Ratel said to Facile in French, which the other man hadn't seemed to understand earlier.

"*Hmm, perhaps it's this?*" Facile showed Ratel his phone. There, at the very top of the news site he had brought up, was an article about Facile being involved with the death of an officer at Yoyogi.

"*Hey, look at that. You're famous!*"

"*Oh, please.*"

"*Once we get home, you're gonna need to get plastic surgery and go on a little hiatus.*"

"*I might just do that,*" Facile responded with a grin. "*So with our plutonium transport job finished, what's our plan from here?*"

"*Well, let's see—*"

Just then, Ratel's phone vibrated, and a message displayed letting him know that money had been deposited into his account.

"*This guy's* fast*. He paid in cryptocurrency, though. This stuff always makes me feel like I'm getting ripped off somehow—but hey, it's perfect for people in our line of business nowadays.*"

Bitcoin was trading for as much as thirty-eight hundred dollars that day. As a currency, it had a lot of volatility and fairly low levels of confidence, though it provided a reasonable, if pseudo, form of anonymity when used for business transactions. If deals were taken care of quickly enough, it would be difficult to track anything down.

Ratel wasted no time in divvying up the money between his team members. The four others were probably already soaring through the skies to their individual destinations, using the fake IDs and plane tickets they had prepped in advance. After landing, they could all do whatever they wanted.

"*Anyway, first we'll have to do something about you.*"

"*Me?*"

"*You saw the article a second ago. Looks like you're really popular around here.*"

The part in the article about taking plutonium out of the dungeon was only speculation, but there was pretty much no way to explain

away the killing of the police officer. Claiming innocence would be tough, and with the article being so widely spread, it wouldn't be easy to disguise himself and board a plane with his fake ID either.

"*I see what you mean. So what do we do?*"

There was always the option of eliminating Facile and leaving on his own, but Ratel wasn't the type to do something like that.

"*If Burst stays on schedule, he should be coming out of the dungeon today, but it's starting to look like we're in just as deep shit as he is.*"

Ratel sat down heavily on one of the lab's cheap folding chairs, opened one of his Esplendidos cigars with a straight cut, and lit it with a torch lighter. "*Worse comes to worst, we'll use those,*" he said, cigar firmly in his mouth, pointing to the round objects the weaponsmith was fiddling with in the back of the room.

"*Really? Are we switching jobs from explorers to terrorists, now? I never thought I'd actually miss my mercenary days.*" Facile believed that *Japan is allergic to all things nuclear. If we use those devices to threaten them, they'll break in no time.* He rubbed his chin and spoke again. "*If we steal them right now, though, wouldn't we have to deal with the client being after us as well?*"

"*We don't have to worry about that.*"

"*Why not?*"

"*Think about it. I blasted holes in my cell phone back at that mansion, but that was a special device that Eics made, and there was no sign of any suspicious apps on it. We always use end-to-end encryption, so even if the SIM card he gave me had something fishy on it, it only would've captured encrypted data.*"

"*Meaning?*"

"*Unless one of us was a traitor, the only other person who would've known about the info in that email at that point in time was our client. Meaning the client we're dealing with...is David himself.*"

Upon hearing this, Facile crossed his arms in disappointment.

"*If you knew that, why did we bother taking that thing out of the dungeon? Wouldn't we have been better off just leaving it somewhere on the first floor?*"

"*That might've worked for the core, but then we would've had a*

hell of a time getting Burst out of there." Burst was supposed to come out of the dungeon later than everyone else, and the explorer card he was carrying belonged to a dead man. The plan had been to slip through the gate before anyone figured that out, but now that things had gotten so out of control, there was no way he'd get through the gate without a fight. They needed the nuke being made here to secure his release.

"*I understand. Why would David go through all this trouble, though? He spent quite a large sum of money too.*" Instead of hiring mercenaries and setting up such an elaborate scheme, he could've just directly ordered subversive operations in Tokyo from the start.

"*He probably wants to back us into a corner and make* us *use the damn thing. Maybe that would count as 'trampling on God's courts' to that asshole.*"

"*That's ridiculous... We would never do something so suicidal. And isn't David in Tokyo too? Does he think he's protected from on high?*"

"*Who knows what the hell that batshit asshole is thinking? All I know is that either way*"—Ratel put out his cigar on the top of the table, standing up—"*he's the one who sold us out to the authorities.*"

The JDA had reacted way too quickly, forcing Facile into making a dangerous play and screwing over Burst, who was due to come out later. Putting the nuke into play was out of the question; that would be playing right into David's hands. But Ratel had to settle the matter somehow.

Facile grimaced.

"*How are we supposed to look around for him when the heat is turned up so high, though...?*" With the sheer number of security cameras in place in Tokyo, even Chauffeur had struggled to move the team around.

"*Not a problem. I've got Hound on his trail.*"

"*Hound...*"

Hound was an alias for another mercenary. Facile hadn't heard anything about him after he arranged the flight for Burst, but apparently he had come along to Japan as well. For him, sniffing people out came as easily as breathing.

Ratel made a few pointed finger motions on his cell phone, then grinned.

"*Looks like the man of the hour is currently a guest at the Imperial Hotel.*"

Just then, the weaponsmith returned from the rear area, wiping his hands with a towel.

"*What's up?*"

"*It's ready.*"

"*And the detonator?*"

"*Here—it's a remote detonator. It's also equipped with a timer. Of course it doesn't come with a PAL lock or anything, so anyone can set it off. Make sure you're careful.*" The man handed the remote to Facile.

"*Is the bomb sensitive to impacts or heat at all?*"

"*Anything within the realm of reason shouldn't cause any problems, but if you drop it out of a building or expose it to some other excessive trauma, it could break on you. That shouldn't make it explode, though.*"

"*Perfect.*" Facile then pointed to the remaining sphere in the back. "*What's the other one?*"

"*That's the spare. If you've got another core, I could prep that one too, if you want.*"

"*No, there's no need.*" Satisfied with what he had been told, Facile put the completed sphere in his bag.

As he watched Facile taking care of his final prep, the weaponsmith worked up his courage and spoke.

"*H-Hey...*"

"*Yes?*"

"*So where do you plan on using it? Please, I've got to know. I don't wanna die yet.*"

That caused Ratel to speak up.

"*Oh yeah? You're worried about getting blown up by this thing?*"

"*Uh-huh.*"

"*Well, that's one problem I can definitely solve for you.*"

Reaching into his pack, Ratel pulled out a gun with a silencer. Before the weaponsmith even had a chance to gasp in surprise,

Ratel pointed the weapon at the man's head and pulled the trigger. The muffled sound of the shot echoing across the deserted weekend laboratory was quite a bit louder than he had expected.

"*Oh, Captain, Captain, Captain...*" Facile murmured in a somber tone, shaking his head in disappointment.

"*He was too spineless for his own good. Couldn't take the chance he'd rat us out.*"

Facile glanced at the weaponsmith and his splattered head, then quickly lost interest and looked over at the sphere in the back.

"*What should we do with the spare?*"

"*Leave it out in the open somewhere—they're gonna find this place soon enough anyway. Once they see it, they'll know to take our demands seriously.*"

"*Yes, sir.*"

"*All right, let's get moving. Time to put a few slugs in our old pal at the hotel.*"

***

Early the next morning, it was determined that someone from the Tokyo University of Science's Advanced Engineering Department had used the Tokyo Institute of Technology's TSUBAME computing service to conduct repeated detonation simulations. When investigators arrived on the scene, they found the body of a researcher who had been shot through the head, and a nuclear bomb that was only missing a core to be considered complete and ready to use. The body hadn't been discovered right away, as it was a Sunday and nobody else had visited the lab, but the time of death was estimated to be Saturday evening.



It was initially believed that the researcher had been killed for refusing to complete the installation of the pit, which initially allayed the concerns of those involved in the investigation. However, based on his purchase history, they discovered that there had been enough materials to complete two bombs, and the one they'd located was determined to most likely be a spare.

In other words, there was a high probability that the completed nuclear bomb had already been removed from the premises.

March 3, 2019 (Sunday)

Yoyogi-Hachiman, Office

"So you're really going after all, Kei?"

Miyoshi seemed worried. I had a map opened up on the dining room table and was poring over the spot Rosary kept pecking at.

"Now's my chance to give the cornucopia back to the dungeon and hop on a bullet train to who knows where."

With the discovery of the skill deletion command, I had the ability to delete Making. Even if I gave up everything I had, I wouldn't be hurting for money for the rest of my life. I could leave any future problems to people who actually knew what they were doing. I could, but—

"I've got this nagging feeling that just coasting along in life wouldn't be too far off from being dead, though."

"Kei, even fifty years down the line, I don't think you'll be cut out for the slow life."

"Oh, shut it. Although, Mitsurugi should be back from Paris soon, and Midori is already back from her trip, isn't she? Saito and Naruse are both here in Tokyo too. If we take off and something bad happens here afterward, we might end up regretting it for the rest of our lives."

If we manage to track down the culprits, they're complete beginners to the world of explorers. No matter how well trained they

may be, they're only human. And with the Arthurs' shadow pit and shadow bind at our disposal, I feel like we could handle whatever they throw at us.

"Same with the people from Hokkoku," I continued. "I'd probably even lose sleep over letting that jerk Enoki die."

"Do you want to just give Ms. Maker the signal right now, then?"

"I dunno about that..."

That decision could have an immeasurable impact on the world. How immeasurable, you ask? So immeasurable that even *we* had no idea what would happen. So immeasurable, in fact, that if we left the decision up to the bigwigs in charge, they probably wouldn't be able to agree on a course of action until it was too late. In the end, the world would sit there with decision paralysis until absolute disaster struck. And we were no better than anyone else in that regard.

Sighing, I got back to the task at hand.

"They said the suspects are mercenaries, right? People in that line of work don't go on pointless suicide missions. You'd think they would value their lives and their money more than nukes, wouldn't you?" The location Rosary had been pecking at was the intersection of Miyuki-dori and the Hibiya-Shibaura Line, right next to Hibiya Park. "As long as I don't push things too hard, everything'll be fine," I declared, folding the map back up. "What about you, Miyoshi? Any bullet trains in your immediate future?"

"Nope, I'm going with you! It's my duty to record all of your unmentionable exploits for posterity's sake!"

"Oh, come on..."

"Think about it, Kei! You, dressed in your Phantom outfit, standing atop the Takarazuka Building, facing off against the culprit, who's standing atop the Nissay Theatre! Doesn't that sound *awesome*?"

"Your ability to imagine those kinds of scenarios at a time like this is...something else."

"It's like the thrilling climax of a sentai series!"

"With only one ranger?"

"That's why *I'm* going with you!"

She's impossible, as usual.

"If you include me and Rosary, that's three team members. There've been plenty of sentai series with three rangers since the nineties."

"Fine, fine. In that case, you'll be on Ms. Maker contact duty."

The Arthurs popped in as well, as if to signal that they were part of the team too—but, well, they were more like pets, or maybe a witch's familiars.

Shibuya, Third District, Shibuya Police Station

After Tanaka had handed Burst over into custody at the Shibuya Police Station, he was made to remain at the new investigation headquarters that had been set up there. Because of the advanced decision-making abilities required for the job, and due to his deep involvement in the case, Tanaka had in fact been *forced* to assume jurisdiction as a proxy for Director Murakita of Cabinet Intelligence.

"Hey, Tanaka," one of the investigators said, seeming to be at a loss about something. "We just had an unusual call come in. It's from someone claiming to be the culprit..."

News about the murder that had taken place inside the Yoyogi Dungeon gate had already been made public, though the plutonium bomb core portion of the incident remained undisclosed. However, because the massive scale of the ongoing police investigation within Tokyo didn't seem to be appropriate for a single murder case, the press had started to throw out some wild, laughable speculations, such as implying it might be some kind of retaliatory investigation. Those types of cases tended to invite quite a few confessions from people with no connection to the incidents whatsoever. Still—

"He asked if we were interested in the 'item' he took out."

As soon as he heard that, Tanaka immediately had a trace set up on the line and ordered the SAT to be ready to deploy. After nearby staff had put their headphones on and made sure the line was being recorded, Tanaka picked up the receiver.

"*Hello?*" he said in English.

"*Are you the guy in charge?*"

"*Yes, I'm the lucky man who pulled the short straw.*"

The man on the other end let out a deep, throaty laugh.

"*You and your people are in just as much of a bind as we are, wouldn't you agree?*" Tanaka continued. "*We'd be more than happy to take the 'item' you've got off your hands, if you're interested.*"

"*Y'know, that's not a half-bad idea.*"

The investigation into René Lambert had revealed that he wasn't any kind of extremist, but rather a member of Ratel's mercenary group. In other words, the men involved were only concerned about profit. That meant they could be bargained with.

"*It would help us out a great deal,*" Tanaka said.

"*Still, we went through a lot of effort for this thing. Can't exactly let it go for free, can we?*"

"*I understand. How much do you want?*"

"*Glad we're not beating around the bush. One of my men came out a little late—and I hear you've got him in custody right now.*"

"*If you mean René Lambert, then he's alive and well, yes.*"

"*Huh... Guess the Japanese police have a little more brains than I gave 'em credit for.*"

"*How kind of you to say.*"

"*Tell ya what. Give us back René and get us out of the country, and the package is yours. Oh, and if you could throw in some travel expenses too, that'd be great.*"

"*We can arrange for that, but how do we know Tokyo won't be blown sky-high the moment you leave the country?*"

"*How do* we *know whatever plane or helicopter we leave on won't fall mysteriously out of the sky?*"

"*It sounds to me like we may be able to build a relationship of mutual trust.*"

"*I like that idea. Let's try to make sure we both live long lives after this.*"

"*What do you propose?*" Tanaka asked.

"*Put René on a helicopter and bring him to me. Pretty sure you already know where to find me, right?*"

Hearing that, the operator quickly pulled up the location

information for Tanaka.

"I only see two places nearby where a helicopter could land: the helipad on the Peninsula Tokyo or Flowerbed 2 in Hibiya Park. Everywhere else is reserved for emergency rescue use only." Spaces reserved for emergency rescue use weren't suited to actually landing helicopters—they were only made for hovering, which would probably be a no-go for the man on the other line.

"*If you want a helicopter, your options are the roof of the Peninsula Tokyo one block north or the park nearby. Which do you prefer?*"

"*The park, then.*"

"*How much for your travel expenses, then?*"

"*Let's see. If it's gonna be in Japanese yen, maybe five hundred million should do it.*"

"*It'll take us a while to put together that much—*"

"*Listen, buddy, this ain't some kidnapping. I hate haggling, okay? Try to show up before I start getting tired, or my hand might slip, y'know? I heard your government's Cabinet Secretariat has some kind of 'secret funds' that might come in handy.*"

"*I understand.*"

"*Remember, for both our sakes, don't do anything weird. See you in two hours,*" the man said, then hung up.

"The call was coming from 1-1-1 Yurakucho—the Nippon Life Insurance Hibiya Building," the operator stated, referring to the building known for housing the Nissay Theatre.

"The nuclear bomb was built in Katsushika. Why would they risk going further into Tokyo?" Tanaka mused.

While it was mostly just a straight drive down National Route 6 to get from the Katsushika campus of the Tokyo University of Science to the Nissay Theatre, it was also over sixteen kilometers away. At normal walking speed, that would take four hours by foot. If he were just going to ask for a helicopter, there were plenty of perfectly good places in Katsushika to land, like on the flat banks of the Edo River or somewhere along the Naka River.

"Hmm. Maybe he was trying to make it harder to pinpoint where they hid the bomb." *It could be up to fifteen kilometers from the city*

center. No matter where it is along that line, the explosion would take out the entire northeast portion of Tokyo. But—

It just didn't add up to him, but Tanaka didn't have time to mull it over.

"There's no time. Contact the Tokyo Metro Police Aviation Unit and get them to bring in a helicopter to use. I'll get in touch with Kitamura to have him prepare the five hundred million. Escort Lambert to the Prime Minister's residence, and once they've got everything together at the helipad there, send the copter straight to Hibiya." Before the agents could rush out the door, Tanaka gave them a firm reminder: "Remember, *do not* set this guy off. Our objective *isn't* to arrest anyone—it's to secure the nuke."

It wasn't an impossible objective by any means, as long as they kept playing nice.

Annotations

***SAT*:** A special unit within the Japanese law enforcement system. SAT stands for "Special Assault Team." Officially, each unit takes the name of their parent prefectural police force, so in this case they would be the Tokyo Special Assault Team.

Chiyoda, Yurakucho

From Yoyogi Park Station, it took fourteen minutes on the Chiyoda Line to get to our destination. Once we got off at Hibiya and headed through Gate A12 up to the surface, Rosary was already there, perched on top of a fire hydrant near the station exit.

"Which way, Rosary?"

Reacting to my voice, Rosary took off from her perch with a flap, then flew off toward the roof of the Nissay Theatre.

"Up, then?"

"We can use this, Kei!" Miyoshi said, and a small drone popped out of Storage.

Hibiya Park was part of the Tokyo Metropolitan Park system. After some guy landed a drone on the roof of the Prime Minister's office a

while back, the City of Tokyo had enacted a policy stating that if anyone operated a drone in one of their parks, the police would be contacted immediately.

"The entirety of Tokyo is considered a densely inhabited district. We can't fly a drone in the skies here without permiss—"

"We don't have time to wait for the Regional Civil Aviation Bureau to give us the go-ahead! This is emergency avoidance!"

Any action a person was forced to take to avoid a clear and present danger to their own life or the lives of others was considered 'emergency avoidance' and was not punishable under Japanese law.

"Okay, we'll go with that. Not like we have any choice."

"All right, here goes!"

As Miyoshi manipulated the drone, footage began showing up on the screen attached to the controller she was using. The little flying machine headed out toward Hibiya Park for a moment before turning around, buzzing the facade of the Nissay Theatre, then zipping upward, capturing video all the while.

"There they are!"

One man on the roof was standing there looking imposing, while another man next to him worked on putting together some kind of rifle. The latter was presumably the man wanted by the police.

"So which one is Ratel?" I asked.

"He's supposed to be the captain, so he's probably the one acting like a big shot."

"Okay, so the one standing in a tough guy pose is Ratel, and the one getting his rifle ready is Facile. What about the other stuff they're carrying?"

"The only things I see that are the right size to fit the object we're looking for are the backpack the big guy is wearing, and—there's some kind of duffel bag on the ground next to the man with the gun."

"We could probably nab the duffel bag pretty easily, but would it even be possible for the Arthurs to steal a backpack right off someone's back?"

"We're not even sure if the target object is in either bag. If it's in some other location, we could be in huge trouble."

"Could you figure that out with Appraisal?"

"Kei, Appraisal only works when it has a visible target. If it could see the contents of opaque containers, it would've probably been called X-ray Vision or something."

"Yeah, I guess you're right," I muttered.

"What do you think they're planning on shooting, though?" Miyoshi asked.

"No idea—but should we really just let them do it?"

"If we tried to interrupt them right here and now, we'd lose the element of surprise."

Even though we may have no idea what their target is, the fact that they're targeting it at all in the midst of this craziness means there's a high chance it's related to the whole shebang.

"Anyway, we need to get to the top. How do we get up there?"

"The top floor is the business floor, meaning there's no way in without an employee ID."

"How did *they* get up there, then?"

"They probably jumped over from the Sky Garden on the Midtown Hibiya. There's barely even a gap between the two buildings, so they'd only have to climb over a modestly high protective wall to get to the roof of the Nissay."

"Got it. Let's do the same thing, then."

We didn't know any of the finer details about the route there, which meant it would've been harder to hitch a ride on the Arthurs. Just getting straight to the top would've been easy enough with or without visibility, but if we did that and happened to land right in front of our targets, the jig would have been up. If we wanted to give specific location instructions, we needed to have mental images of them—which was impossible if we had never been there before. That was why visibility was so important this time.

"Aethlem, play interference with their sniping—but make sure to make it subtle," I instructed. The usual play would've been to just make the entire bullet disappear, but if we did that, they'd immediately know something was up. "Just do what you can until we get up there."

A tail poked out of Miyoshi's shadow for a moment and wagged in

response.

"Let's move!" I said.

"Destination: sixth floor!" Miyoshi exclaimed.

"Got it!"

We began running toward the shopping building next door.

Chiyoda, Uchisaiwaicho

As he sat in a chair at the desk in his junior suite on the fourteenth floor of the main building of the Imperial Hotel, David took the incoming phone call from Ratel. On the other side of the room, an annoyed-looking Isabella sat on a love seat, her legs crossed.

"*Hey there, David. You really did a number on us this time, huh.*"

Standing up from his chair, David walked around the desk and over to the window. He could see the Nissay Theatre directly across Miyuki-dori from his hotel. On the roof of the theater, Ratel was standing there imposingly, while Facile knelt on the ground with his HK417 at the ready.

The HK417 was a fairly decent-performing weapon. It left a bit to be desired as a replacement for a sniper rifle, but it would've been hard to miss with it from their current distance.

"*Ha ha! Try not to take it too personally. Did you enjoy yourselves, at least?*"

"*Sure, it was pretty exciting, but I think you overprovided on that front a little bit. Figured I might offer you a cut of it yourself.*"

"*Oh, you don't need to be so nice to me.*"

"*No, I'm gonna have to insist on at least giving you back your change. Besides*"—Ratel thought back to the aerial view he'd seen of the hotel David was staying at—"*I can't think of a more fitting location for your 'atonement,' so to speak.*"

***

Kneeling on the ground, Facile stared through his scope at David.

Something about the whole situation was bothering him.

"*Captain, if he knows we're here, why on earth is he still standing by the window like that?*"

"*Maybe he* wants *to die,*" Ratel offered.

"*Maybe so.*" It sounded absurd, but Facile couldn't think of any other possibilities.

The target is only sixty meters away. Any soldier with at least a little bit of training wouldn't have any trouble hitting it.

Hoping to force the anxiety out of his mind, Facile gently squeezed his right index finger and pulled the trigger. The airy sound of a shot from the HK417 reverberated between the two buildings.

The bullet he had fired sailed through the air in a perfectly straight line at David's head, penetrating the window of the Imperial Hotel with a sharp shattering sound—

"*Huh?*"

The bullet had struck the window over one meter to the left of its intended target. David merely stood there, an eerie smile on his face.

"*A miss from sixty meters? We've got a pro on our hands, here!*" Ratel ribbed.

"*No, there's no way that should've missed...*"

Even if his adjustments had been slightly off, it would've been unheard of for a scope that had been zeroed at a hundred meters to skew to the left an entire meter when taking a sixty-meter shot.

How fast would the wind currents blowing between buildings need to have been to throw my aim off that much?

Taking a moment to collect himself, Facile took aim a second time, pointing one meter to the right of his target to compensate, and pulled the trigger once again. That time, however, the bullet stayed true to its course, striking at the exact point where he aimed it—too far to the right.

"*Impossible...*"

***

"*Hey, David, are you* trying *to die or something?*" Resting on a

love seat in the corner of the room, Isabella adjusted and recrossed her beautiful legs as she leaned back into the cushions. "*I didn't ask you to drag me into some stupid suicide attempt.*"

"*Die? Me?*" David glanced at the two bullet holes in the window nearby, then turned his head back to Isabella. "*No, no. The curtain will not fall for me until the final act is over.*"

"*Ugh, you are the* worst *company. So did you just want me to watch you get shot, then, or what?*"

"*No. I simply wanted to give you a front-row seat in case Tokyo ends up getting annihilated.*"

"*Excuse me?!*"

"*You've accumulated a great deal of sin yourself. You are more than entitled to witness God's miracle.*"

"*Give me a break...*" Isabella didn't have the slightest clue what David was talking about, but she knew from experience that something very unusual was going on.

"*No matter how insistent people may be in clinging to the relevance of their old world logic, a millennium has already passed, and the beast has long since been let loose.*"

"*So you think you're the beast from Revelation now?*"

"*If I am, then you are the one who rides atop me—the Whore of Babylon. Truly a fitting title for you.*"

"*Can I just go home now?*"

She didn't want to be there, but the door was on David's side of the room, and there were two large window panes she would've needed to get past to leave.

He may be a complete lunatic, but those are real bullet holes in the window. Somewhere across the street, there's a man with a gun pointed at us. It's way safer staying here in the corner behind this support beam than it would be waltzing around out there and getting caught in the cross fire.

As she thought this, Isabella sidled up closer to the support beam.

***

Park View Garden was an open aerial garden, but the far end of it on the Nissay Theatre side was in the shadow of a restaurant, limiting its visibility to everyone except people standing along the edge of the garden itself. At that moment, though, most of the visitors were facing toward Hibiya Park.

"Now's our chance, Kei!"

"All right, Drudwyn, get us on top of that building!"

A tail popped out of the shadows, and the moment we touched it, we appeared at our destination. We had done the same thing during the whole situation with Himuro, but it was a strange feeling having it actually happen outside of a dungeon.

"Wow, this place is a mess..." I murmured. The outdoor air conditioning units were making a loud racket, and the tangle of pipes connected to them made it difficult to walk around. "At least the noise around here should cover up any quieter sounds we make."

"It looks like we can get a better view from that gap over there—"

As Miyoshi was speaking, a single gunshot rang out, startling us. We hurried over to the Imperial Hotel side and peered downward from our vantage point. As we did so, we heard another sound identical to the previous one. As unaccustomed as most Japanese people were to hearing gunshots, these had been loud enough that someone might even consider calling them in.

"I don't suppose the Imperial hotel's windows are bulletproof?" I wondered aloud.

"The premier VIP suites' are, I hear," Miyoshi responded.

So in the rooms where top leaders of countries would be staying, in other words.

"That said," she continued, peering through a monocular she had pulled out, "their target is just a junior suite, even though it's on the Imperial Floor. I see some bullet holes in the window, and— Hold on a sec."

"What's wrong?"

"There's a guy standing by the window who looks awfully familiar for some reason..."

"If he's on the Imperial Floor, I guess he's some kind of VIP?"

"Even *you* could book a *junior* suite, Kei."

Well that's *an awfully rude way to put it.*

"Whatever. So the guy's still alive, then?" If so, that meant Aethlem had done his job.

"Not only is he alive, he's grinning from ear to ear."

"Excuse me? Grinning?" *So a sniper is shooting at him, his room doesn't have bulletproof glass, and he's just standing there by the window with a smile on his face? What the hell is this guy thinking?*

"Kei, focus. Remember, our objective here is to keep the bomb from exploding."

"I know, I know. Couldn't we just resolve this whole thing in an instant by shadow binding these two?"

"About that... Take a look at what the big brawny guy has in his left hand."

I took the monocular from Miyoshi, adjusted the focus, and noticed something familiar. "Whoa, hey."

"Hmm? What's up?"

"I think I've seen the big guy before. Didn't we run into him on the tenth floor once?"

"Huh? Wait, you mean during the whole 'Sirius Nova!' thing?" she asked, twisting her upper half into a dynamic pose as she invoked the spell name.

"You're never gonna let me forget about that, are you?" I dealt Miyoshi a quick, gentle karate chop to the head. "So that guy was Ratel all along...do you still have any footage from back then?"

"There's footage. But it's chronicling *your* activities—and since *I* 'wasn't there,' it probably wouldn't be a good idea for me to submit it as evidence. Besides, the footage Tenko posted is probably cleaner, and it was from a lot closer up."

"Oh yeah, I guess they *were* filming, huh?"

"He does need material for his show, after all."

I thought back to our encounter. "It was what, a team of seven we ran into that day?" Six people had come at us at first, then one last person who had been left behind in the stair area joined them.

"His mercenary buddies, maybe?" Miyoshi wondered.

"If some of them are still here in Tokyo, maybe there's a slightly lower chance that he'd blow himself up," I said, then turned my focus to Ratel's left hand. He had a tight grip on an object that looked similar to some kind of hospital nurse call system. "What do you think he's got in his hand? It looks like he's holding down a button on it."

"If that's the switch for the bomb, it's the type that makes it go off the moment the holder loses consciousness—the classic 'If I die, you're all coming with me' scenario," Miyoshi pointed out.

"Kind of like holding on to a hand grenade after pulling out its pin." Even if we used shadow bind to restrain him, there was no guarantee he wouldn't let go of the button in those moments. A normal grenade explosion wouldn't have been too big of a deal, but a nuclear bomb would be an entirely different story. I mused for a moment. "Could we just drop him into a shadow pit? Any signal from the remote shouldn't be able to escape that space." I didn't see any cables, so it had to be some kind of wireless device.

Miyoshi frowned.

"That could be dangerous, since we don't know exactly what kind of detonator he's using. If it's the type that explodes when it stops detecting the signal from the button being held down, then as soon as he falls into the pit, it would explode."

It's hard to believe that someone just holding down a button could make our options so limited. It really drives home the fact that when irreversible consequences are at play, even the slightest possibilities are enough to hold people in check.

"What if you used your full power to just *take* the remote from him?" Miyoshi asked.

"No, he's way too far away for me to pull that off. But what about if we slipped the *bomb* into a shadow pit?" I countered.

"Even if we managed to do that, any signal between the bomb and the remote would be cut off, meaning the bomb might explode in Arthur Space. We have no idea what effects that might have." Miyoshi sighed. "Besides, we don't even know for sure where the bomb *is*, yet."

"With a remote detonation system like that, it has to be

somewhere nearby. Should I have Rosary do another pass looking for it?"

"If we find it, what would we do with it?"

"Hmm, good question..." If we failed to dispose of it, millions of people would die instantly—ourselves included, of course. I let out a pained grunt. "I'm glad we've made it this far, but I'm starting to get a stomachache."

"I wonder if it's too late to catch that bullet train..." Miyoshi pondered.

***

"*What the hell kind of magic is he using?!*"

Ratel's expression furrowed in suspicion as he aimed a bitter glare at David, who was waving at them from behind the window.

"*I don't know...but the glass doesn't seem to be bulletproof. Shall I go ahead and switch to full auto?*" Facile asked.

"*How are you on magazines?*"

"*I've got about three left.*"

They'll be here to pick us up in about thirty minutes, Ratel mused. *It's not gonna matter if we run out of ammo at this point. We won't need any guns if we're being escorted out by the nation of Japan itself. And if that whole thing falls through, they'll end up paying for our three measly lives with millions of their own.*

Either way, there's no way in hell I'm gonna let David live after screwing us over like this.

"*Do it,*" Ratel ordered.

"*Yes, sir!*"

Facile flipped the selector switch to full auto, stood up, and opened fire. With a loud roar, the muzzle spat out all eighteen rounds in the magazine, the ejected shell casings clinking to the rooftop with a rhythmic cadence. The entire hotel window shattered, sending shards of glass scattering toward the ground, glinting spectacularly. And in the aftermath—

"*No way...*" Facile murmured.

There in the broken window, his hair disheveled by the sudden

burst of wind, stood David, still waving at them.

"*What the hell? Does that sonofabitch have some kind of special dungeon skill?*"

David's smile suddenly widened, as if he had heard what Ratel said.

***

"They're out of their minds..."

"The shooters? Or the target?" Miyoshi asked.

"Both! Miyoshi, do me a favor and hide in the shadows for a little while. Or you can stay just halfway in Arthur Space if you want."

"Huh?"

"That last burst of fire is gonna bring all the police in Tokyo out here." I could already hear police sirens in the distance.

The Midtown Hibiya and the Takarazuka Building behind it both extended way higher than the location we were standing. Though they probably wouldn't open fire considering the circumstances, there were probably snipers positioned somewhere up in those buildings. The helicopter would be flying in soon too.

"I figured they'd just be sent safely on their way home, but it looks like things are taking a really strange turn," I said in a subdued tone.

"So you'll be switching into Phantom mode, meaning I need to stay out of sight, right?"

"Exactly. Don't close off the space you're in, though—the moment I give the signal, I want you to send Ms. Maker the message. No hesitation."

Obviously, if we ended up having to do that, all nuclear weapons would disappear from the world. From our point of view as laymen, we couldn't even hope to imagine the full spectrum of potential problems that could cause. But what choice did we have...? I let out a sigh.

"Sorry, world. It turns out the lives of all the people living around us are more important to us than preserving the global security status quo."

"'Sorry, world' is definitely a new one!" Miyoshi commented.

"I guess that would be a program you'd write when you're quitting a computer language instead of starting one?"

I let out a short chuckle at my own joke, then slipped into a corner and transformed into the Phantom—aboveground.

***

Shortly before that, the SAT had finished getting into their positions.

"Takarazuka Building team is in position."

"U-1 Building, Imperial Hotel Tower, and Midtown Hibiya teams are all in position."

"Roger that."

Each of the four locations were roughly a hundred meters from the roof of the Nissay Theatre. Even the semiautomatic PSG1s had enough accuracy to hit within a 2.5-centimeter circle from a distance of ninety meters. Though obviously, the bolt-action L96A1s were even more accurate.

"The wind isn't much of a factor, so there's no way we'll miss from this distance."

A total of eight snipers, two in each of the four locations, had the targets in their sights, when suddenly, they heard what sounded like a machine gun being fired.

"What was that?!"

"The suspect started firing at the Imperial Hotel on full auto!"

"What?!"

"Report it to HQ!"

"This is Midtown. Looks like he was firing at the fourteenth floor of the Imperial Hotel. The window is completely shattered... What on earth? There's someone standing there next to the broken window!"

Someone's just standing there?

"The suspect is loading another magazine. If we let him finish, the guy by the window is toast!"

"Requesting permission to open fire!"

"Just say the word! It's a sure kill from this distance!"

"Hold it! We have to wait for orders from HQ!"

"Why the hell do we have to wait on some CIRO jerk's orders? People are gonna get killed right in front of our faces unless we do something! Just give the order!"

At that point, the commander of the unit made a fatal mistake. He *should* have followed his orders and prioritized *saving the lives of millions of Tokyo residents* over protecting the life of one man. However, he just couldn't let that one life get gunned down right in front of his eyes. As a field commander, he was only accustomed to dealing with cases of a relatively small scale; his strong sense of Japanese ethics played a part as well.

"Permission granted! Fire!!!"

In that moment, eight fateful bullets were fired simultaneously from eight sniper rifles.

***

"No—!"

Before I even had the chance to finish saying "—you idiots!" the bullets came flying in at over twice the speed of sound. They would strike a mere 0.11 seconds after they had been fired—and there were a bunch of them. It would be impossible to save both targets.

Since Miyoshi and I weren't the targets, the Arthurs didn't react instantaneously. Despite that, Drudwyn quickly popped out of my shadow and took care of two bullets, and an instant later, Cavall managed to handle one, but Aethlem wasn't able to fend off the final bullet coming from the U-1 Building because the Imperial Hotel was blocking his line of sight.

Gritting my teeth in frustration, I fired Water Magic at the last bullet aimed at Ratel, deflecting it off course just meters before it reached him. It grazed his cheek, then struck the air conditioning unit behind him with a metallic clank.

Ratel rubbed at the wound on his cheek with his right hand, looked down at his fingers, then slowly turned in my direction.

"*Oh, I get it... You're supposed to be the 'voice of him that crieth*

in the wilderness,' I bet." He held his left hand out, still gripping the detonator, and pointed it toward the broken glass window of the Imperial Hotel across the way. "*What the hell's the deal with Japan? Is everyone here really just a bunch of suicidal morons?*"

A professional would have never left himself exposed out in the open like that without having some kind of plan to deal with sniper fire. Ratel raised his left hand high into the air, showing off the detonator switch firmly in his grip, then took a few steps toward me. I didn't know for sure whether the snipers noticed, but no second volley of shots came.

The mercenary then leisurely pulled a massive handgun out of its holster, pointed it at me and, with no hesitation whatsoever, pulled the trigger. A thunderous blast rang out, and fire came out of the muzzle in the literal sense of the word, but the actual bullet, which could've taken down a grizzly bear, never reached me.

"*So how does it feel?*" He didn't seem surprised that his shot had no effect—he was even cracking a smile as he asked me.

However, I didn't respond; I was too busy thinking about whether I could take away his left hand. I might've been able to instantly grab his hand with my own, then slice the entire thing right off. To me it sounded possible, but *possible* did not equal *guaranteed*.

"*It happened the same way last time, didn't it? You're always up there sitting on your high fucking horse, looking down on the world below.*" Ratel spat onto the roof, as if the words themselves felt dirty in his mouth. "*How does it feel, watching people crawl around on the ground like ants?*" Having said his piece to me, he turned his back, walked over to his fallen comrade, and looked down at his corpse. "*Can't believe you went and died before I did, ya big bonehead.*" Pulling a cigar out of his pocket, he cut the tip off and lit it.

The rhythmic whirring of a helicopter someone had sent in got closer and closer. The blaring of police sirens swarming around us rose up in waves from the ground below, like fanfare for a stairway to heaven.

"'*Prepare ye the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God,' was it?*" Sitting down next to Facile, Ratel put

the lit cigar in the fallen man's mouth. "*That's all she wrote. Enjoy it while it lasts.*"

Not more than a moment later, though, the cigar fell out from between his comrade's lips and rolled away along the rooftop.

"*There goes the last Esplendidos too...*" Ratel murmured, his head down as if he were praying. He ran his free hand through his hair and clutched it tightly, emitting an audible swallow.

Eventually, he slowly brought his head back up and pointed an intense glare at one of the buildings where the police snipers likely were. "*Fine. I'll prepare a highway for your damn God. Let's start by making everything nice and flat!*"

Gripping his fallen comrade's shoulder tightly, Ratel scowled bitterly.

Shit!

"*I don't care what it costs, every last one of you assholes is gonna die!*"

Do it, Miyoshi! Give her the signal!

The moment my telepathic message was sent, I heard the sound of the implosion lens detonating. I instinctively clamped my eyes shut, but—

"*What...the hell...?*"

The seconds ticked by, yet the world around us remained intact. Ratel stood there staring, dumbfounded, as a metal sphere rolled out from its hiding spot underneath an air conditioning unit, emitting a thin wisp of smoke.

The mercenary let out a small chuckle, which quickly escalated into bellowing laughter.

Just then, a nearby service door burst open, and several men armed with rifles came rushing through it out onto the rooftop.

"*Freeze!*"

Ignoring the order, Ratel brought up his handgun and fired at the men. The unfortunate fellow struck by his bullet went flying backward as if he had been hit by a car.

"'*Freeze!' my ass.*"

As a volley of gunfire filled his ears and the sensation of objects riddling his body overtook him, Ratel sank into the darkness with a

smirk on his face, harboring one final thought: *Any idiot who gives their enemy the chance to shoot first is doomed to die young.*

***

Standing in the broken window of the hotel across the way, David was laughing hysterically, his mouth open wide.

"*Did you see that, Isabella?*"

Just as he had believed, God truly did exist—and, in defense of his courts, he had ended up sending down an apostle to perform a miracle.

Annotations

***A fitting location for 'atonement'*:** The Imperial Hotel is actually shaped like a cross when viewed from above.

***Esplendidos*:** The name of a Cohiba cigar. The word means something like "splendid" or "brilliant."

Hibiya Park

"We actually went and did it..." I groaned.

"We sure did..." Miyoshi confirmed.

We had managed to escape by slipping into a shadow pit right as the SATs came rushing in. Now the two of us were sitting on a bench next to the fountain in Hibiya Park, staring up at the sky.

The fact that the bomb didn't actually explode meant that Ms. Maker had received Miyoshi's *go* signal, and theoretically, all the plutonium-gallium alloy and highly enriched uranium on the planet had vanished.

Who the hell knows what effects that will end up having on the world...?

The faces of various passersby were reflected in the dancing surface of the water in front of me. The billowing fountain, with its 1/f fluctuations and high frequency, seemed to be playfully attempting to suck the alpha waves from the brains of the people as they walked briskly toward their slightly early lunches.

"Hey, Miyoshi," I mumbled.

"Yes?"

"I was thinking—maybe having you hide in the shadows wasn't enough?"

"Hm?"

"I mean, they already know that we're the ones who were going to get in touch with Ms. Maker, right?"

"That sounds right, yeah."

"So if the Phantom showed up at the scene, then right after that, the elements we mentioned vanished just when the nuke was about to explode..."

Miyoshi's eyes opened wide.

"Then it's obvious that the Phantom is connected to us in some way!"

Not that it probably wasn't already suspected, but this would fuel further speculation, without a doubt.

"Pretty much..."

"Kei, are we just two huge idiots?"

"I mean, we didn't really have time to worry about the consequences, did we?" *If those stupid damn snipers hadn't been there, none of this would've happened. Who's the piece of shit that sicced those guys on the mercenaries? Goddammit.* I breathed out heavily. "I mean, he was holding down the detonator button. If we hadn't been there, Tokyo would be devastated right now. The Japanese stock market would be in shambles. Millions of people would've died, and the nation would've been swept up in a massive economic depression."

"We would've lost a functioning government before that last part." Our center of government was right next to the blast zone; it most likely would've been blown away without a trace.

I turned my head skyward again, closing my eyes.

"If I hear about any government officials who took sudden trips to their hometowns this weekend, I'm gonna wanna punch 'em in the face."

"Kei..."

"Also, why the hell did those assholes rush in at the end? If the nuke switch had still been in play, it would've been game over right there!"

"Kei!"

"They even had the gall to say '*Freeze!*' in *English*! What kind of dipshit does that?!"

"I'll have to ask them," came an unexpected voice.

"Huh...?"

I opened my eyes, and standing there behind us, surrounded by the wide open sky, was Secret Agent Tanaka. As I jumped in surprise, Miyoshi put her palm to her forehead in secondhand embarrassment.

"Wh-Wh-What are you doing here?" I stammered.

"Oh, I was just taking a gander at Hibiya Park from the roof, and thought I saw the two of you down here," Tanaka said, gazing up at the Nissay Theatre on the other side of the fountain. He was right—we had excellent views of the Nissay and the Imperial Hotel from

our current vantage point.

"This area is quite easy to observe from the scene of the crime," he pointed out. "Though it would've been a different story had you been on the other side of the fountain."

"Ah..." I gave a brief, blank stare.

"Besides, *I* should be the one asking what *you two* are doing here."

"Oh, we just, um, well..." I sputtered.

"Oh, that's an easy one," Miyoshi chimed in. "We had to make sure we messaged Ms. Maker at the exact right time!"

"And how did you know when that time *was*?" Tanaka asked.

Miyoshi and I exchanged glances, and she pulled a small drone out of her camo tote bag.

"We'd like to have our use of this filed under 'emergency avoidance,' please!"

When he heard that, a rare scowl appeared on Secret Agent Tanaka's face.

"Apparently everyone at the scene was rather relieved that the bomb didn't go off—"

"Glad to hear that," I responded half-heartedly.

"—but it certainly appears that it *had* indeed been triggered," he continued.

"Anyone who would bet millions of lives on the highly improbable chance of a miracle like that happening probably shouldn't be in this line of work," I stated.

Thinking about it, though, those snipers were the catalyst that pushed us into eliminating every nuclear weapon in the world. If things hadn't played out like they did, I never would've made an appearance up there, Ratel probably wouldn't have let go of the button, and we never would've sent the signal to Ms. Maker. Even the darkest cloud has a silver lining, I guess. Someday, in hindsight, someone will probably tout their decision as the boldest of our era...

Nah, that's never gonna happen.

"At any rate, the two of you might well have saved Japan."

I shot Tanaka a disapproving glance.

"But at what cost to the world?"

"Oh, that reminds me. According to the sniper teams, someone wearing some kind of theater costume suddenly appeared on the roof and said a few things at one point. By the time the strike team moved in, though, nobody was there—the person had vanished, like some kind of *phantom*. Does that description ring any bells for you two?"

"Not particularly," I said. "After that ill-conceived sniper attack, we had our eyes glued to Ratel's left hand."

"I see. Well, either way, you did a great job out there." He gave a curt bow and started to head back toward the theater, but after a few steps, he stopped and turned back to us. "Oh, one more thing, Mr. Yoshimura."

"Hmm?"

"How exactly did you know that the men shouted 'freeze' when they raided the roof?"

"Oh! Uh, the mics on the drones these days are actually really sensitive," I managed to blurt out.

"Well isn't that something! I'll have to consider ordering some for my department."

With that, he turned away from us again and walked off into the distance.

Epilogue

Ask Ms. Maker!

Shortly after Saiga had given the go-ahead, a page showed up on the JDA website called "Ask Ms. Maker!" which asked users the question, "If there were someone on the other side of the dungeons, what would you ask her?" It didn't require any elaborate production to set up, and it was technologically simple, so it took nearly no time for Sakurai to add it to the site—though the baffling requirement to have the content forwarded to some random destination instead of connecting directly certainly caused some confusion.

The response, however, was massive. At first, the Yoyo-D message board and other social media sites treated it like some kind of joke site.

354: Anonymous Explorer
the heck's up with the AMA? can't even post yet, lol

355: Anonymous Explorer
It's probably leading up to some kind of April Fools' joke, right?

356: Anonymous Explorer
So we'll get replies to our questions on the first of next month? Gotcha.

357: Anonymous Explorer
That's still nearly a month off...

358: Anonymous Explorer
The JDA hasn’t made a single April Fools’ page since day 1.

359: Anonymous Explorer
there’s a first time for everything

360: Anonymous Explorer
Who the heck is Ms. Maker, anyway?

361: Anonymous Explorer
According to one online dictionary, “maker” can be an archaic way of saying “poet”

362: Anonymous Explorer
Oh, we have a lion named Miss Maker at the zoo in my hometown. It’s short for “Troublemaker.”

363: Anonymous Explorer
I know where yooooou’re froooooom, >362

364: Anonymous Explorer
Yep. There are actually a bunch of animals at our zoo with real eyebrow raisers for names. Sir Thrustwood (a beaver), Lady Fuzzypuss*

365: Anonymous Explorer
dont gotta censor yourself like that, LOL

366: Anonymous Explorer
There’s no y at the end, dammit! She’s a Siberian tiger!

367: Anonymous Explorer
still sounds wrong either way rofl

368: Anonymous Explorer
I just Goggled it and got a hit for some Lupin stories.

369: Anonymous Explorer
Lupin III?

370: Anonymous Explorer
Nope, the original Arsène Lupin by Maurice Leblanc. But I can’t find “Ms. Maker” anywhere in the actual book text

---

371: Anonymous Explorer
probably just a bug, then

372: Anonymous Explorer
Oops, guess it was somehow getting a hit on the word “dressmaker.” Weird

---

373: Anonymous Explorer
yep, sounds like a bug

374: Anonymous Explorer
Actually it looks like it was an OCR issue. A lot of the words were garbled.

375: Anonymous Explorer
“dreMs.Maker” lol

376: Anonymous Explorer
yeah, when they scan old books and documents like that,

if it uses fancy typeface or the pages are damaged, the OCR text comes out super weird sometimes

---

377: Anonymous Explorer
and good luck using text recognition on cursive too...

378: Anonymous Explorer
C’mon, we’re getting waaaaay off topic here. What the heck is Ms. Maker actually supposed to be?

379: Anonymous Explorer
Well, if she’s a lion, and she’s trying to get us all bouncy and hyped up for her AMA, why not just call her Ms. Lion Dance?

380: Anonymous Explorer
Ms. Lion Dance! The cute dancing lion on the other side of the dungeons!

381: Anonymous Explorer
I had to draw this. “Ms. Lionne Dance, Age 12” (https://URL/...)

The link led to a piece of artwork depicting a cute child wearing a partial lion dance mask on her head, striking a stereotypical roaring lion pose.

382: Anonymous Explorer
You are a LEGEND!

383: Anonymous Explorer
holy shit that was fast

384: Anonymous Explorer

why’s her name in French?

385: Anonymous Explorer
Sweet, time for me to draw Leonessa!

386: Anonymous Explorer
OK, guess I’ll go for Liūtė, then

387: Anonymous Explorer
uh, what language is that? I got the Italian one at least

388: Anonymous Explorer
Lithuanian

389: Anonymous Explorer
the hell? points for obscurity tho

390: Anonymous Explorer
Guys, guys! We should do it in Norwegian!

391: Anonymous Explorer
sounds pretty boring to me

392: Anonymous Explorer
Nope. Her name would literally be “Løve”

393: Anonymous Explorer
oooh

After that, various artworks of “Ms. Lion Dance” were uploaded. There were many different foreign interpretations of the word “Lion,” however.

Eventually, after that tangent finally ran its course, the posts

returned to the original topic.

502: Anonymous Explorer
But after they collect our questions for Ms. Maker, what do you think the JDA’s gonna do with them?

503: Anonymous Explorer
Hmmm. Maybe they’ll get someone to role-play as her and start writing up responses?

504: Anonymous Explorer
Or they’re gonna end up being messages sent out into the unknown, like the plaques on the Pioneer probes or the golden records on the Voyagers!

505: Anonymous Explorer
We’re supposed to ask actual questions, though. I’m assuming that means someone or something will answer them

---

506: Anonymous Explorer
is the JDA gonna debut their own VTuber? roflmao

507: Anonymous Explorer
peppy female voice “Hi there, I’m Ms. Maker, and I come from the Other Side of the Dungeons!”

508: Anonymous Explorer
LOL OMG stahp

509: Anonymous Explorer
For real though, the JDA hasn’t ever really done much of anything jokey at all.

510: Anonymous Explorer
Yeah. When it comes to stuff about dungeons, though, there's never been any way to know if something is a joke or genuine, no matter how absolutely insane it sounds. It's all just vague nonsense.

511: Anonymous Explorer
So do you guys actually think this might be real, then?

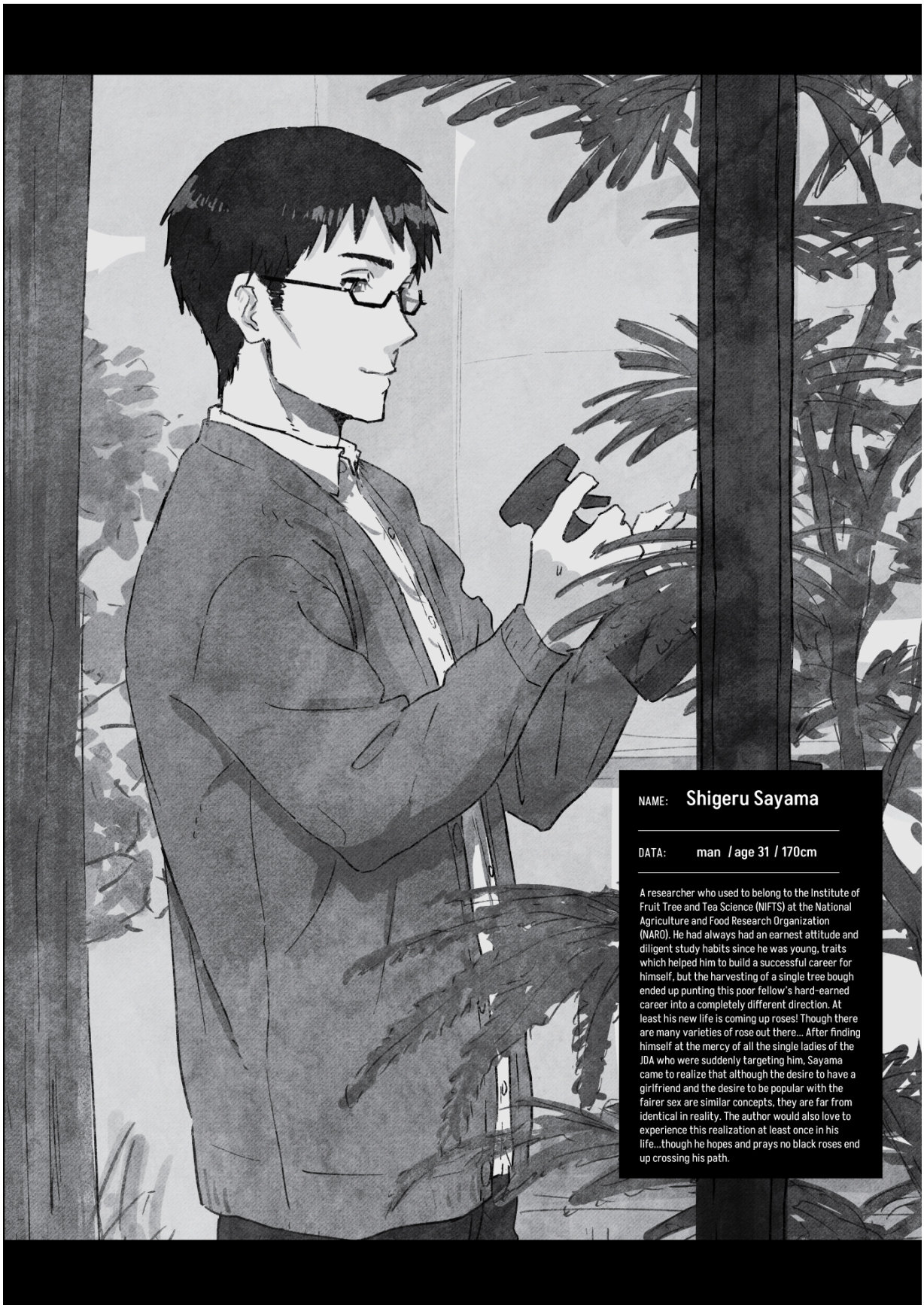
512: Anonymous Explorer
Dude, if it is, wouldn't that mean the JDA actually made contact with someone from the other side of the dungeons, or at least found a potential way to make contact?

After that, the vicinity of Yoyogi Dungeon started seeing a dramatic increase in activity. The significant progress that had been made recently in terms of attaining new depths, along with information Heaven's Leaks had revealed, seemed to be the main catalysts for that popularity—but some people began to fantasize that something *else* might've been involved in the whole process.

"I mean, we did actually locate a safe zone, didn't we? I could totally imagine someone locating some kind of info about what's on the other side of the dungeons."

With that single comment, people suddenly started seriously considering what they wanted to ask Ms. Maker.

Then, almost as soon as someone had translated the thread and posted it to Reddit, a massive influx of users from all over the world started visiting the JDA's local message board—despite the fact that the page looked like it had been thrown together on a whim.

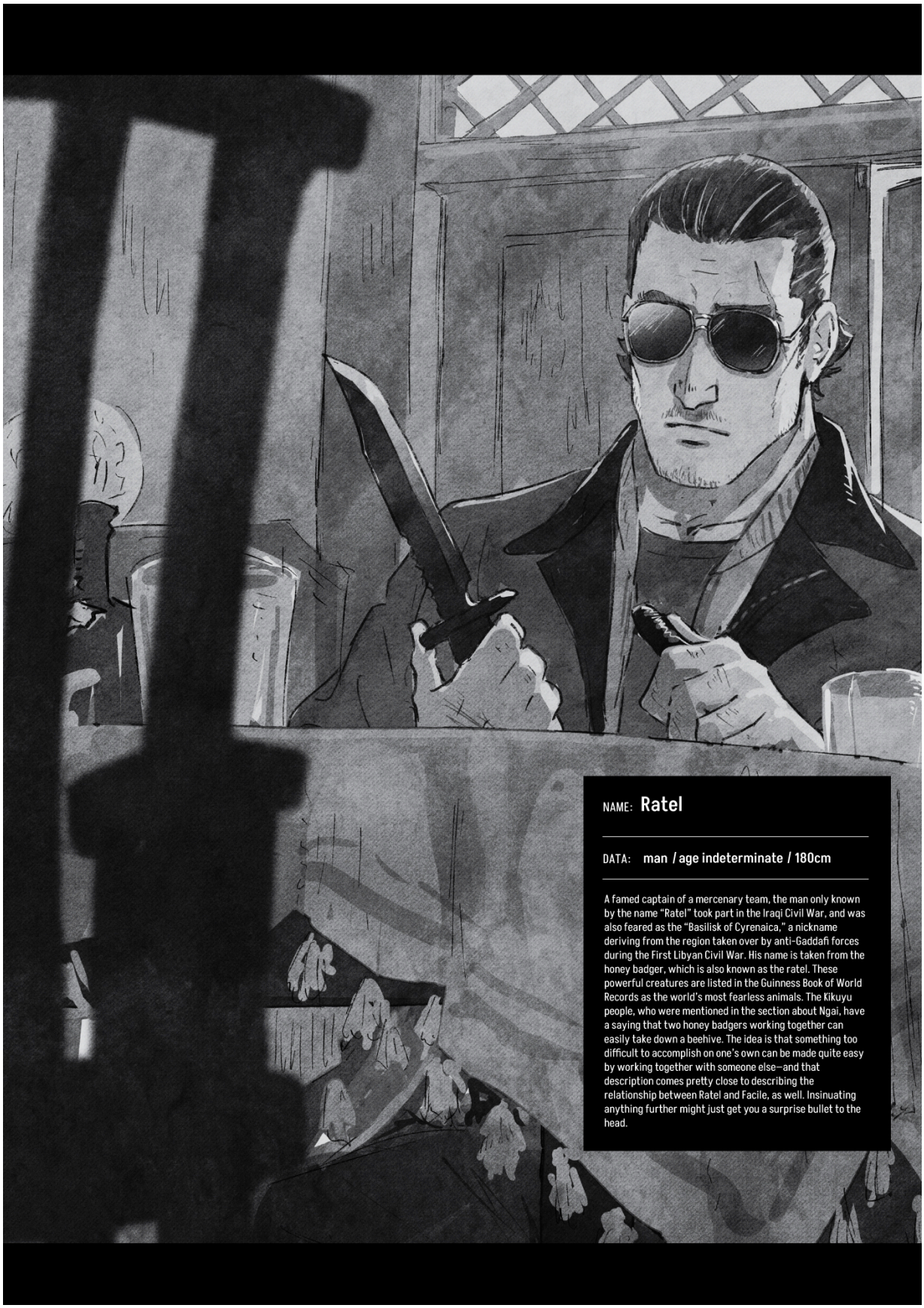


NAME: **Shigeru Sayama**

DATA: **man / age 31 / 170cm**

A researcher who used to belong to the Institute of Fruit Tree and Tea Science (NIFTS) at the National Agriculture and Food Research Organization (NARO). He had always had an earnest attitude and diligent study habits since he was young, traits which helped him to build a successful career for himself, but the harvesting of a single tree bough ended up punting this poor fellow's hard-earned career into a completely different direction. At least his new life is coming up roses! Though there are many varieties of rose out there... After finding himself at the mercy of all the single ladies of the JDA who were suddenly targeting him, Sayama came to realize that although the desire to have a girlfriend and the desire to be popular with the fairer sex are similar concepts, they are far from identical in reality. The author would also love to experience this realization at least once in his life...though he hopes and prays no black roses end up crossing his path.

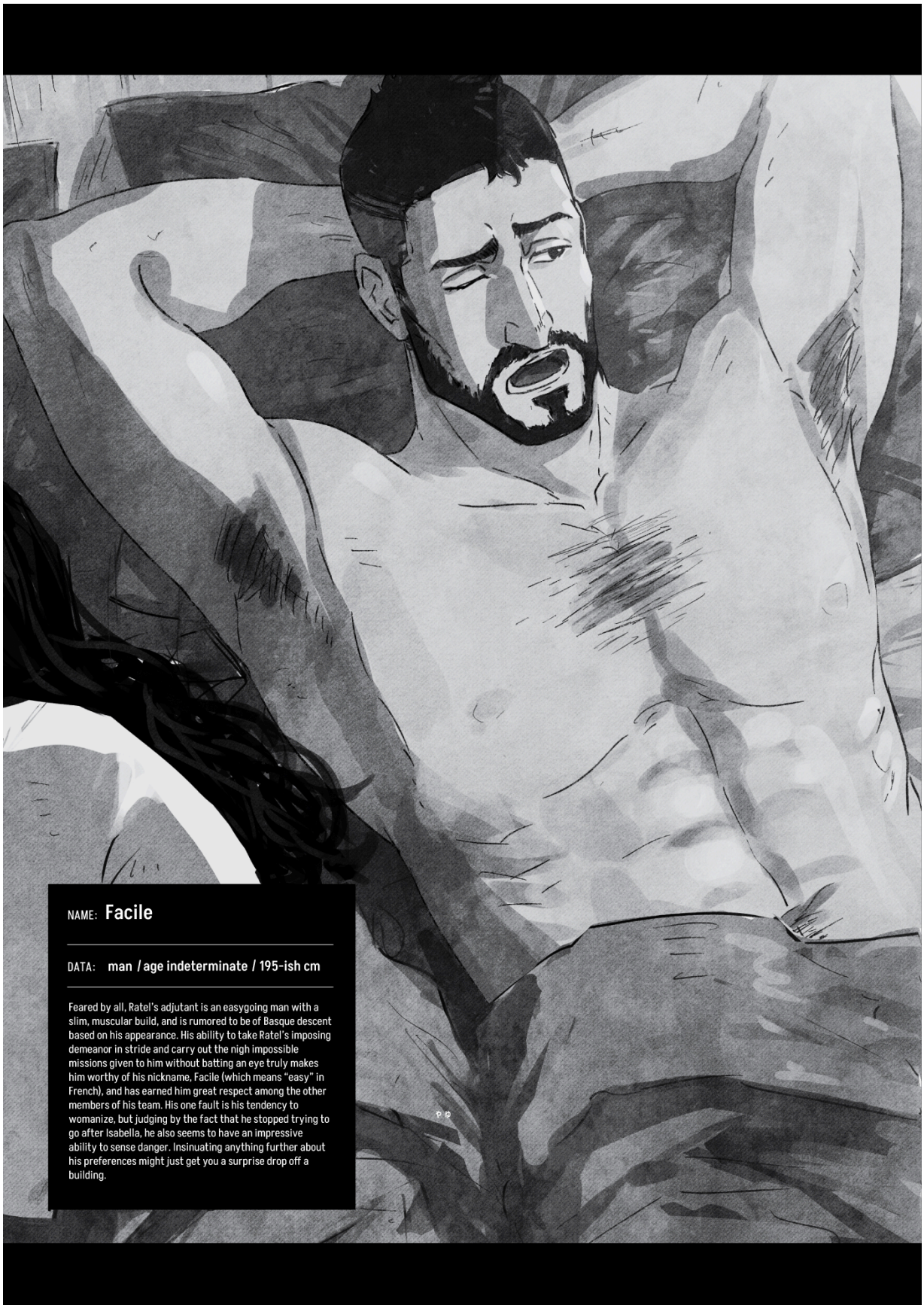

NAME: Kiyomaro Urushibara
DATA: man / age 34 / 168cm
A research nut who is a member of the Dungeon Capabilities Research Division (D-Cap), which is part of the ATLA's (the Acquisition, Technology & Logistics Agency) Future Capabilities Development Center. It's a common misunderstanding that his nickname is "the Sixth O" which refers to him being the sixth officer of his research organization, but in actuality it's "the Sicko," originating from how sickeningly obsessive he gets over every little detail of his work. No doubt Miyoshi will press him into service at Shinshinan in due time. By the way, though most of D-Genesis is based on reality, the Ministry of Defense is an exception. The number of Secretariats for Systems Development was actually increased to five people in April 2020, and the Future Capabilities Development Center in Mishuku wasn't established until April 2021. In the D-Genesis world, a large-scale organizational change took place ahead of schedule alongside the establishment of the Japanese Dungeon Attack Group, and a number of other various changes were accelerated. All this had to happen due to the sudden appearance of the dungeons.



NAME: **Ratel**

DATA: **man / age indeterminate / 180cm**

A famed captain of a mercenary team, the man only known by the name "Ratel" took part in the Iraqi Civil War, and was also feared as the "Basilisk of Cyrenaica," a nickname deriving from the region taken over by anti-Gaddafi forces during the First Libyan Civil War. His name is taken from the honey badger, which is also known as the ratel. These powerful creatures are listed in the Guinness Book of World Records as the world's most fearless animals. The Kikuyu people, who were mentioned in the section about Ngai, have a saying that two honey badgers working together can easily take down a beehive. The idea is that something too difficult to accomplish on one's own can be made quite easy by working together with someone else—and that description comes pretty close to describing the relationship between Ratel and Facile, as well. Insinuating anything further might just get you a surprise bullet to the head.



NAME: **Facile**

DATA: **man / age indeterminate / 195-ish cm**

Feared by all, Ratel's adjutant is an easygoing man with a slim, muscular build, and is rumored to be of Basque descent based on his appearance. His ability to take Ratel's imposing demeanor in stride and carry out the nigh impossible missions given to him without batting an eye truly makes him worthy of his nickname, Facile (which means "easy" in French), and has earned him great respect among the other members of his team. His one fault is his tendency to womanize, but judging by the fact that he stopped trying to go after Isabella, he also seems to have an impressive ability to sense danger. Insinuating anything further about his preferences might just get you a surprise drop off a building.

Afterword

Greetings, dear readers, how have you been? It's me, KONO.

The day has finally arrived when all nuclear weapons have been eradicated from the world... What have I gotten myself into, though?! I've got no idea where to go from here! You reap what you sow, me! Somebody, help!!! Doraemon, where are you?!

Phew... Okay, the quote at the start of volume 9 is by Thomas Carlyle. Many people rightly criticize him for his anti-Semitic views, a product in part of the social climate of his day. A lot of his literary writings make him come off as, well, a bit of a sourpuss or a cynic, and your mileage may vary when it comes to whether they contain any particular nuggets of wisdom, but I personally manage to enjoy going through his stuff as casual reading.

Anyway, back to the reason I brought up Carlyle: Supposedly the title of the Gauguin painting in this volume was inspired by one of Carlyle's works. Meijer de Haan (also a painter, and a friend of Gauguin and also of Vincent van Gogh's brother Theo) had his portrait painted by Gauguin (in which de Haan's face looks like it came right out of Goya's *Saturn Devouring His Son*—cruel! LOL), and one of Carlyle's books was depicted in that portrait. Apparently there's even a surviving record of Gauguin purchasing that very book, so it's often assumed he came up with the title from somewhere among its pages.

There is another problem, though: The Carlyle quote at the beginning of the volume wasn't in any of his books I've read. I went through pretty much everything I could get my hands on through Project Gutenberg, Aozora Bunko, and various other public domain sites, but it never came up anywhere. There was something vaguely similar in *Sartor Resartus*, but not even an extremely liberal translation would've switched it up quite that much.

The quote shows up on many quote sites and in quite a few

quote collection books, but it never lists the source. It's so widespread that I couldn't even verify whether it's actually something he ever said. If any of you dear readers happen to know more, please enlighten me!

Either way, this particular series is flavored with a few dashes of idealism, and there are portions of it that were influenced by Carlyle to some extent. For example, in an early draft of volume 6, while they were in the spiritual realm inspired by *The Secret Garden*, when Yoshimura questions, *Where the heck are we?* Dr. Tylor responds with something along the lines of "a place we know not where." (In *Sartor Resartus*, "Weissnichtwo," which means "know not where" in German, was the name of an imaginary European city that was the focus of all the influences affecting the world.)

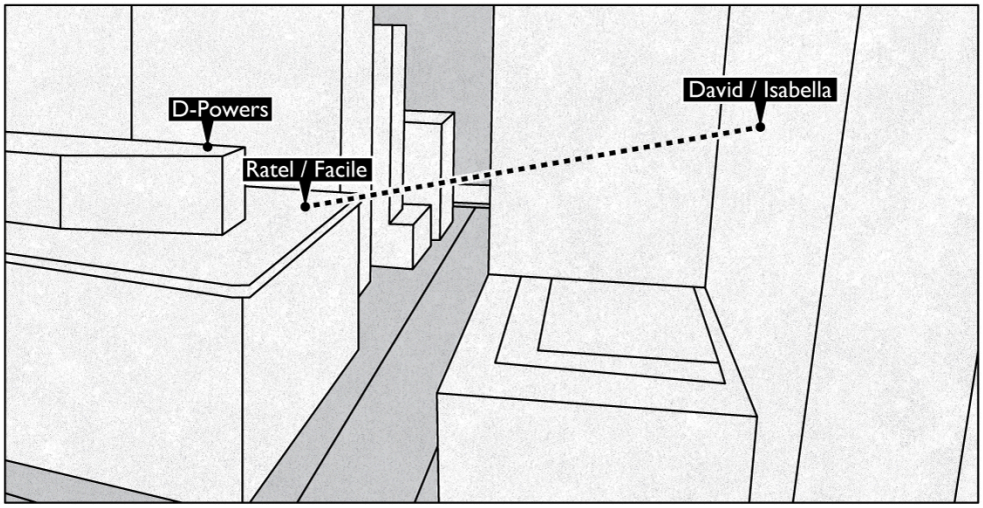
Oh yeah! While your friendly neighborhood author has been agonizing over the future of the world, he's been getting frequent requests from all kinds of people asking where they can read the old short stories. So, thanks to continued popular demand, reader enthusiasm, and the great efforts of everyone involved, a short story collection is set to be released! It will include the short stories from each volume, along with various additions.

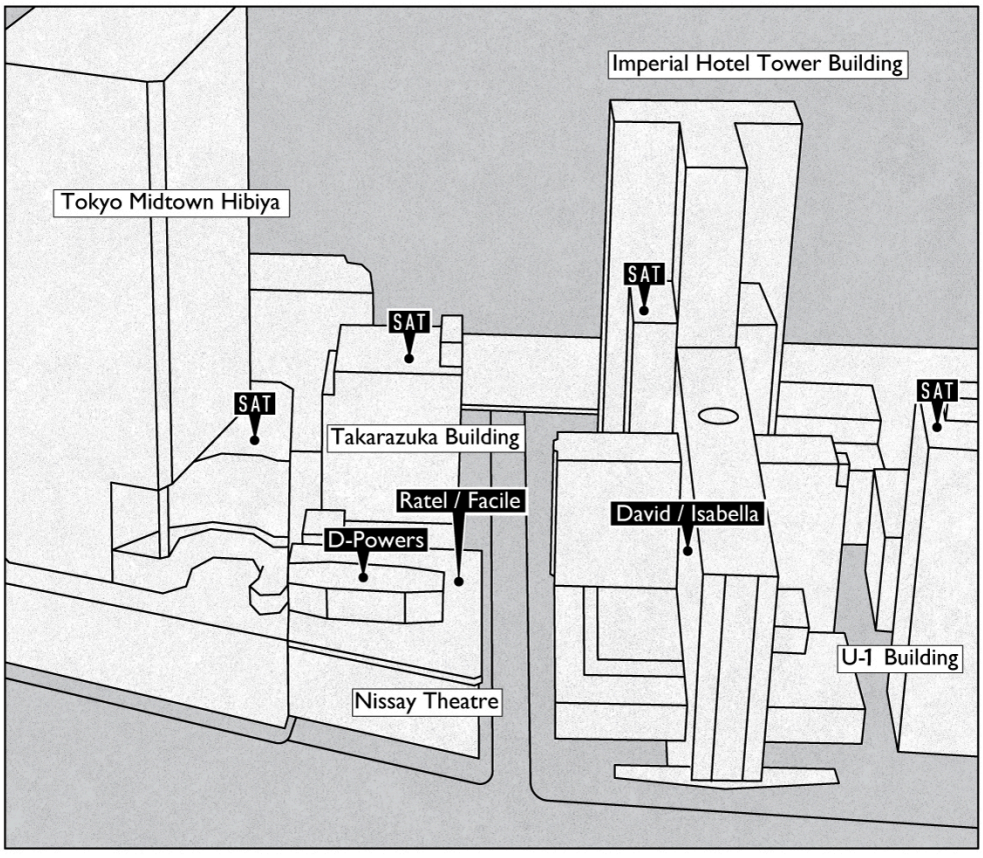
After releasing "The Black Cat" in volume 8, I came to the sudden realization that "Oops, nobody's gonna understand this unless they read the short story in volume 7!," so as the author, I'm a bit relieved that this collection is happening. It's got roughly as much content as a regular volume, so I hope it's something everyone can look forward to, whether they've already read them or not!

See you all again in the next volume!

KONO Tsuranori

Spring 2024


D-Powers
Ratel / Facile
David / Isabella


Imperial Hotel Tower Building
Tokyo Midtown Hibiya
SAT
SAT
SAT
SAT
Takarazuka Building
Ratel / Facile
D-Powers
David / Isabella
U-1 Building
Nissay Theatre

Nissay Theatre

A building that skillfully combines two very different elements: a theater and a business office. It has eight aboveground floors and five basement floors.

As is evident from looking at all the buildings in the area near the Dai-ichi Life Building, the Imperial Theatre, and the Tokyo Kaikan, all structures in front of the Imperial Palace stand at thirty-one meters tall by the roadside to conform with historical law. Naturally, the Nissay Theatre and the Tokyo Midtown Hibiya match these same criteria, and their aligned heights make it possible to jump from the terrace of the Hibiya to the to the roof of the Nissay. Also, if you're ever in the mood to feel cursed, just sit down inside the theater and look up at the ceiling. I'd say you can get about four times the cursed feeling by looking at the sea of oyster shells up there compared to what you'd get from checking out the jewel beetle wing art in certain Buddhist shrines.

Tokyo Midtown Hibiya

Erected well after the era of aesthetic debate that was set off by the Tokio Marine Building, this elegant edifice takes into account the spirit of the uninterrupted thirty-one-meter height restriction, appearing perfectly aligned with the neighboring Nissay Theatre when viewed from Hibiya-dori Avenue. The gap between the Midtown Hibiya and the Nissay is only about one meter, so it may seem easy even for non-explorers to jump across—but life is full of good and bad choices, and that particular choice would be a bad one, if you value your safety.

Imperial Hotel

Once famous for being designed by renowned architect Frank Lloyd Wright, it has of course already been rebuilt since then (the original entrance was moved to the Meiji-mura Museum and can still be seen there). The current building was designed by Teitaro Takahashi, and is shaped like a cross when viewed from above.

The VIP suites are not available for use by the general public (though during the hotel's 130th anniversary, anyone could stay there for a night if they bought a Premium Passport 130), and supposedly they really are equipped with bulletproof glass—though the room David booked would' ve had regular glass windows.

U-1 Building

This building, with its beautiful aluminum curtain walls, stood on the site of the famed Rokumeikan. However, it was demolished during the redevelopment of its district of Uchisaiwaicho, and it is now a mere phantom relegated to the pages of history.

Takarazuka Building

When viewed from the Ginza Miyuki-dori side, this building cuts a majestic figure worthy of its "rising steps" theme, but when seen from above, it just looks like a regular building with a little tower poking out from the top. Behold the magic of perspective!

Yoshimura had originally planned to make his appearance here by striking a cool pose in front of the stepped tower, just like Miyoshi had suggested. Unfortunately, the level of the building that matched the height of the Nissay's roof was too narrow and too close to Ratel and Facile, and the next level up was too far away. On top of that, no matter how hard he thought, he couldn't figure out a way to actually get up onto the roof, which further thwarted that particular plan.

NEXT VOLUME



Wow, we really went and did it this time!



Nuh-uh, the Special Assault Teams went and did it! It wasn't us!



Oh, Kei... (offers a look of pity)
I wonder what's going to happen to the world now, though?



I doubt we'll see many huge changes on the surface, at least.
I mean, what country is going to openly admit they no longer have any nukes?



Maybe not, but with every strategic nuclear sub coming to the surface at once, and aircraft carriers all over the world drifting aimlessly, people will definitely know something happened.



Sure, the existing nuclear powers might know, but I'm betting all the other countries out there won't have a clue what's going on.



They probably can't even imagine... Though you know, highly enriched uranium has some non-military applications as well, apparently.



Really?!



We'll spell that out plainly in the next volume's prologue!



I doubt much good can come of all this...



Now, now, Kei. At least some good things have been happening!



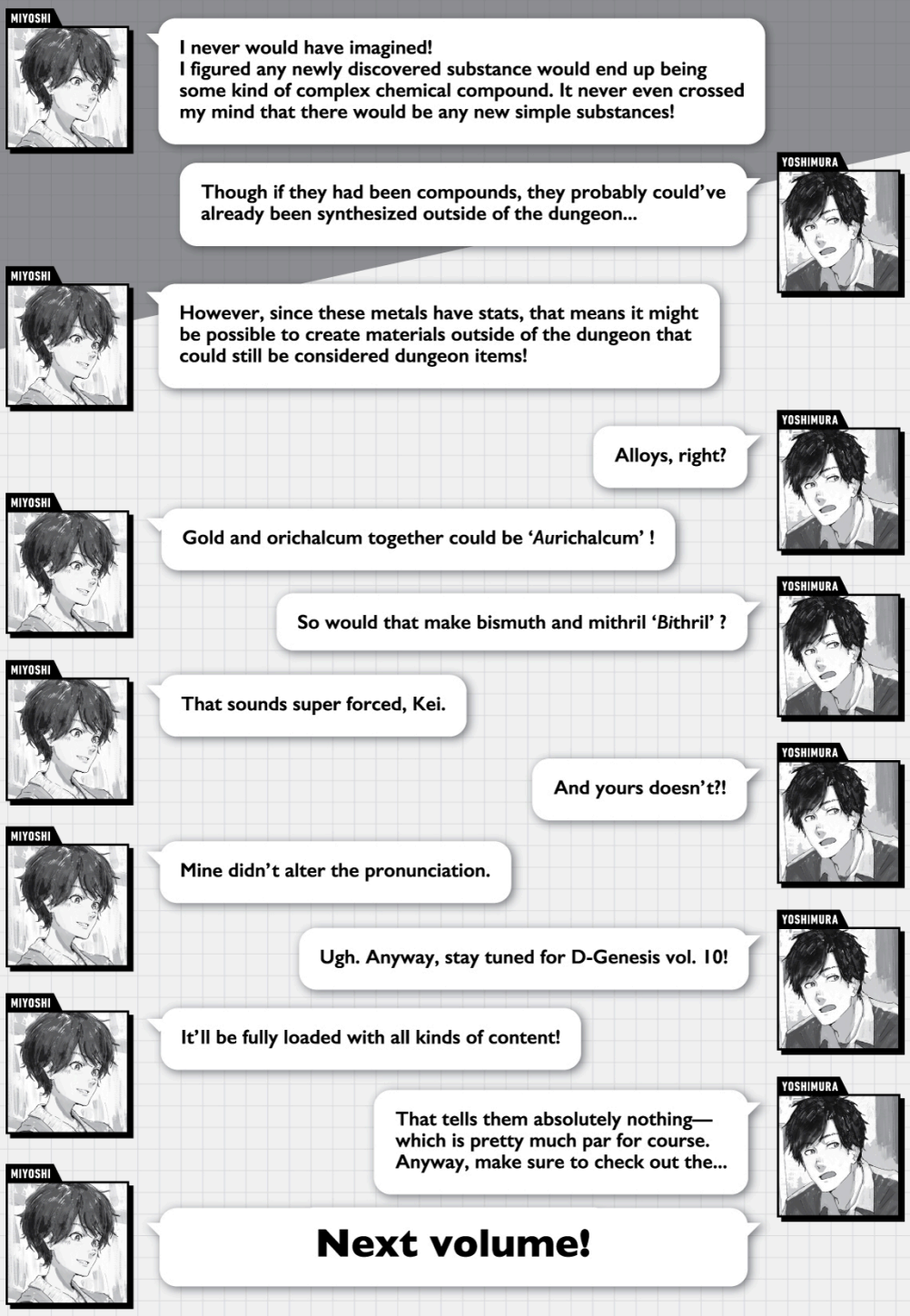
Such as?



Well, we did discover those fantasy metals!
Also, a short story collection is coming out (see the Afterword for details)!



Taking advantage of the chaos to throw in a quick plug, are we...?
With all the commotion about the nuclear weapons, I had forgotten about the fantasy metals. Who would've thought the metals themselves would have actual stats?



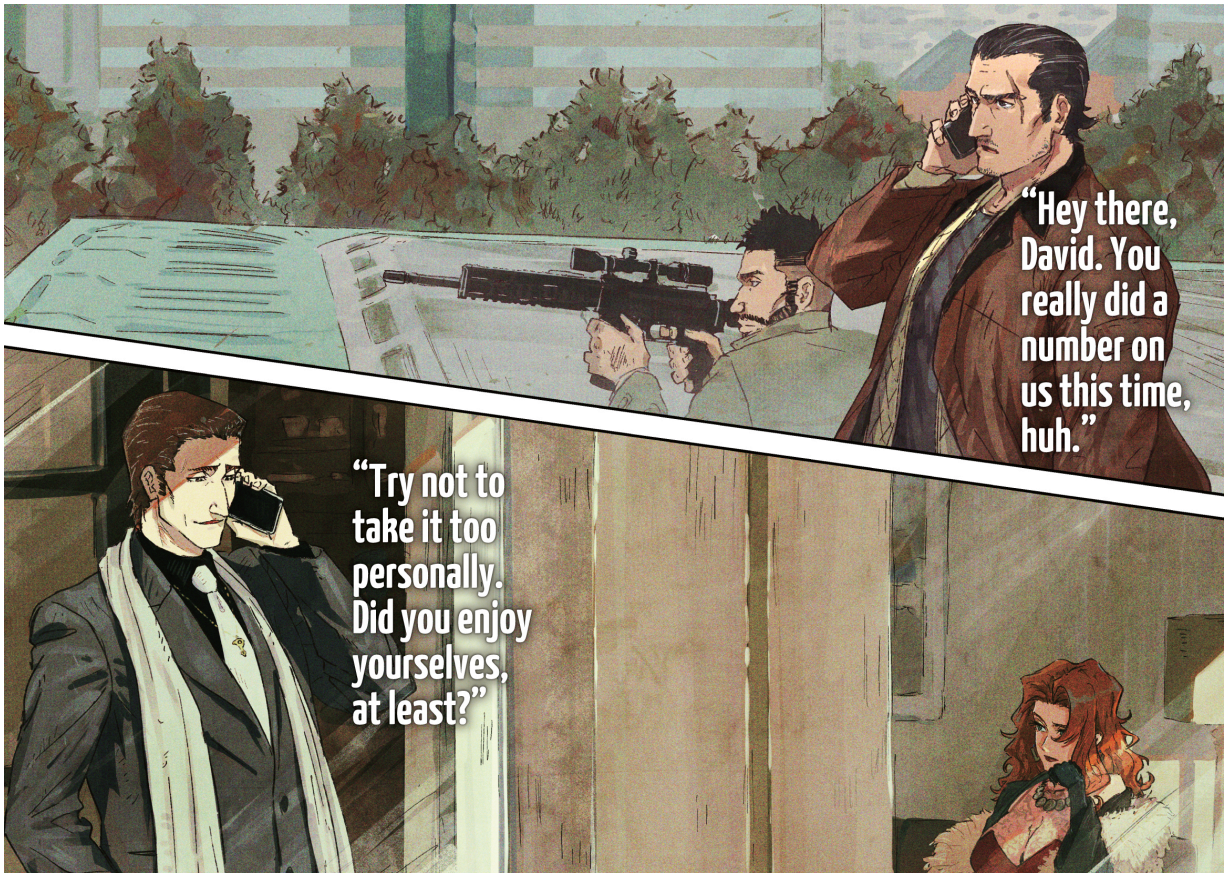
D-Genesis volume 10

TO BE CONTINUED...

GENESIS


There was never any chance of it winding up small-scale.”
“Keigo ‘No Sense of Money’ Yoshimura is footing the bill for the venue and the hotel fees for everyone participating in the stat-reading experiments.
“Whoa! It’s jumping.”




"Hey there, David. You really did a number on us this time, huh."
"Try not to take it too personally. Did you enjoy yourselves, at least?"

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.

D GENESIS

WRITTEN BY
KONO Tsuranori
ILLUSTRATED BY
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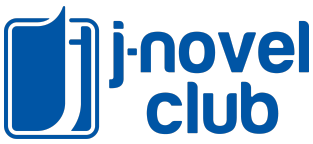
Three Years after the Dungeons Appeared




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D-Genesis: Three Years after the Dungeons Appeared Volume 9
by KONO Tsuranori
Illustrations by ttl

Translated by A. V. N. Wilson Edited by Jonathan Engel

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