



It has been three years since the dungeon had been made.
I've decided to quit job and enjoy laid-back lifestyle
since I've ranked at number one in the world all of a sudden.







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“Omnia mala exempla ex rebus bonis orta sunt;”

——— *Julius Caesar, Bellum Catilinae LI, 27 / Sallustius Crispus*

**“Technological progress is like an axe
in the hands of a pathological criminal.”**

——— *Albert Einstein*

§063 What if You Searched Unknown Genomes in Dreams 12/10 (Mon)

David Jean-Pierre Garcia was in a foul mood. Even though he had expressly come to this Far Eastern island country, going as far as forcibly changing his sect's schedule, he hadn't grasped a single clue.

"D-Powers is the fucked up party name of the auction's organizer, which caused such a huge racket, and otherwise, nothing else is known?" He was very angry as he folded his arms while looking down at the city from his hotel room, pretty much fed up with the low interest in dungeons by the upper circles of this country.

He had sounded out various members of the economical and political circles in Japan he got to know through the fairly strong connections to politics and industry he had built up in Europe while bringing them over to his side with the powers of Marianne. However, not only did not one of them know anything in detail, but instead they were actually surprised about the orb auction itself, only having perceived it as something like an auction for paintings or similar.

"The ones I have to win over are the JDA's upper ranks and JSDF personnel...and also those related to the mass-media, I guess."

'If it's the organization managing the dungeons, and the military which is conquering those dungeons, they should know more about this. Also, the mass-media is like a dumb mutt sticking its nose into every pile of shit. Sometimes they're lucky, making a big find. So there's no loss in winning them over in advance. First...I wonder from where I should start...if only I could precisely narrow down the target group, the rest afterwards would fall into the sphere of 『Nightmare』. Though, that's only if the other party is male.

The Hibiya Park expanding beneath his eyes was filled with the lush greenery of trees despite midwinter. Lodge-like buildings with red and green roofs crowded around a big fountain. Just like ants, black heads with black clothes busily walked past those buildings. David extended a hand towards the window, and squished his index finger against the glass, as if to crush those ants, curling his lips into a sinister smile.



『Tokyo sure is cold around this time of the year, isn't it?』

"Eh?"

As she turned around, surprised by the sudden French thrown at her, she was greeted by the smile of a woman giving her an oddly lascivious impression despite the chic, claret dress cladding her body.

『Oh, you're the young lady of Jain's, aren't you?』

『Yes, indeed』

She had answered in French on reflex, but Ayesha's French was quite questionable in comparison to her English.

'Just who's this woman? She has a rather conspicuous appearance, so I should recall a prior meeting with her, but somehow it doesn't click,' Ayesha doubted her own memory.

『It's wonderful to see you healthy. Thanks to that, my plans for a vacancy in Miami have transformed into visiting a dull and boring place like Tokyo. I sure would like for David to finally give it a rest with all of his whims. If it had at least been Okinawa, I could have come to terms with it』

『Excuse me, but what could you be talking about?』

『Ah, don't mind me. Well then, please give your best regards to your Tokyo magician, okay?』

Ayesha didn't really get what was going on, but the other woman found some sort of conclusion on her own, and walked away from Ayesha. As Ayesha absentmindedly watched her leave, a trained man, who was past his thirties and whom she occasionally saw among Europe's high society, called out to her.

"How are you?"

"Oh, Sir Michel. Thanks, I am doing fine, how about you?"

"I can't complain. So, did something happen?"

"No, I was just wondering who this lady is."

Michel followed Ayesha's line of sight.

"Oh, I recall her being a close associate of Mr. Garcia."

"Garcia? The one from Altum Foraminis?"

"So you know of him? Oh, come to think of it..."

Ayesha's terrible injuries were a well-known fact. It wouldn't have been strange for her to have even approached that Deep Hole Sect which was called a Sect of Healing around some parts. But then again, her miracle took place in Japan.

"If I remember correctly, she's called Sarah Magdalena."

"That's yet another peculiar name..."

Sarah was said to be the name of one of the attendants serving the three women who watched over Christ's burial after his crucification. However, in later years, the theory of her being a child born between Magdala's Maria and Jesus widely spread through various fictional stories.

"Well, the saint of their sect is called Marianne Thérèse Martine, so it fits to a tee in a certain way." Michel shrugged his shoulders, obviously joking around.

In France, Thérèse Martine was a popular patron saint holding roses and a cross.

"Though I'd doubt that to be her real name."

"Because names and characters often suit each other? But—" The man said while casting another glance at Sarah as she happily chatted with a man slightly ahead of them.

"She's a glamorous, sociable woman, so beautiful that you could actually call her lascivious, even though she's a core member of a religious sect preaching purity and unselfishness. I've also heard some bad rumors about her. Please be careful."

"Bad rumors?"

"Oops, I think I went too far here. Well then, please excuse me."

As the rumor about a magician spread by Ayesha's father apparently took on more of a life of its own than he had expected, Ayesha was constantly swamped with questions about it by various people. Among them, those appearing to be connected with Altum Foraminis had pressed her persistently for answers about the events in Tokyo with such a drive that she occasionally considered it borderline rude.

"They have approached me in various ways, but basically, all of them are asking about the identity of the one casting magic on me. That sect seems to be very interested in Kaygo. It might have been somewhat okay if the ones asking for the information were people in a similar situation as I had been, but those sect members are way too creepy and crazy.

"I wonder if they got some clue..."

'Sarah said she had plans to go to Miami, but those went up in smoke since she had to come to Tokyo. What could be the reason for a sect selling miracles to come to Tokyo at this point in time?

Ayesha made a mental note to discuss this with Kaygo later on.



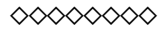
The next day after we learned of the epitaphs' sensational contents, Miyoshi and I started getting ready to confirm some of the functions described in the epitaphs, such as <Mining>.

Of course, it's not like we can achieve the mark of 500 million explorers by ourselves. That's why we've made up our minds to check all the information except for that one before getting too busy with the approaching publication of Heaven's Leaks.

Then again, although I call it getting ready, it's mostly just waiting for the delivery of all the items

we ordered. Because it means that I'm going to have some free time, I plan to keep Ms. Mitsurugi company during her training on the weekend.

That damn Miyoshi keeps teasing me, saying it really sucks as a dungeon date, but since it's more of a training session than a date, it's fine like that. She sees me off, reminding me one more time that it'd be too early to use the party function as its information hasn't been disclosed anywhere as of yet. I don't think that it'd be such a big deal, but I suppose it's better to not increase the chances for something unnecessary to happen.



"Yo, yo, YoshiP. Long time no see." Ms. Saito is sitting together with Ms. Mitsurugi at the usual, inconspicuous corner table of the YD Cafe while acting all big.

"What's up with that weird greeting? In the first place, only two weeks have passed since our last meeting, no?"

"Bein' able to enjoy my company twice in a month, you're one lucky fellow, Mr. Yoshimura, y'know!?"

"Yeah, yeah. So, what's the plan today?"

Ever since the last time, she's apparently gotten addicted to her compound bow, and wanted to try hunting wolves, who appear in large numbers on the third floor.

"Since they're quick-witted and agile, unlike goblins, they feel more worthy to be hunted, don't you think?"

"Hmm, I don't think they'll be much of a danger for you two, so sure, why not."

Different from hunting a real animal, a dungeon hunt, where no corpses remain, is more like playing a VR (Virtual Reality) game. There's almost none of the unpleasant feelings towards killing living beings, and so far no animal welfare organization has latched onto this either.

When it comes to training for increasing stats, the slimes on the first floor are far more efficient, but because that has something of a 『Zen』 feel, it's almost as if you're going to reach enlightenment, if you keep beating on slimes single-mindedly, free of obstructive thoughts. If you go at it with the intent of a simple stress relief and amusement, the wolves will definitely be more fun, I think.

Actually, it's no wonder that the floors down to Yoyogi's fourth floor, commonly known as beginner floors, also have 'amusement floors' as pen name. Of course, the first floor is excluded from that. Even if it's retarded to see it like that, it's still a dungeon. It's quite likely for one to lose their life if you get careless, but the same can probably be said about hunting or fishing outside dungeons.

It was kinda very typical for Ms. Saito, but although she said some stuff like, "Y'see, they're fun as they're nimble, unlike goblins," while being merry because it was a fresh experience, it soon ended

with her starting to bicker around, saying, "They don't have anythin' like GTBs, and since they don't drop anythin', it sure gets borin' fast."

Once the number of explorers goes beyond 500 million, they might start to drop food, but it's inevitable that the adventurous spirit of somewhat higher leveled explorers quickly fades away when killing monsters on the first four floors as they don't leave any trophies behind, whatsoever. I think it'd be different if they'd be shown scores like in games, but something like that is— no, wait a sec. Wouldn't it be possible to turn this into a bit of an amusement facility, if you made goggles similar to military eye shields capable of counting the kills through cameras and turning the number into scores?

The explorer registration for the sake of food dropping will likely be slow in dungeons close to cities of advanced countries such as Tokyo or New York. But what if people regarded it as an amusement facility? Well, if you actually try to implement something like this in reality, it might run into many issues that have to be solved first, but isn't it worth at least considering it?

The reason why no one has introduced such a service so far is probably the low return for the initial investment, on top of the matter of it being life-threatening. If casualties appeared right off the bat, that alone would be enough to have it closed down after a few months of continuous bashing by the mass media. But, you can clearly fend this off as the risk of the customers' lives would be the same with bungee-jumping. Well, if you add a bodyguard service run by explorers, it might become somewhat helpful for the increase of explorers in advanced countries.

While thinking about all that, the last monster for hitting the 00 digit I killed secretly to keep the two girls safe is a wolf.

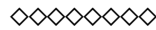
Skill Orb – AGIxHP+1 – 1/7,000,000
Skill Orb – Hypersensitivity – 1/500,000,000
Skill Orb – Sense Danger – 1/2,000,000,000
Skill Orb – Detect Life – 1/24,200,000,000

As expected, the wolf drops <Detect Life>. However, it's an extremely rare drop. If people were to hunt kobolds, it might actually be possible for two or three orbs to drop per month. Let's go with <Sense Danger> here.



The following Sunday, Ms. Mitsurugi and I walk around, beating the crap out of slimes like ascetic monks. I'm pretty sure she'll play in the major league of explorers by next year. While wondering whether this might have been this year's last time for me to accompany her, we eat lunch, promise to do this again, and split. She's told me to contact her whenever I feel like it as she'll have plenty of

free time towards the end of the year.



"Oh, senpai, welcome back. How did your date go?"

"Do you think there exist any dates where you'd keep slaughtering slimes like an ascetic monk?"

"Well, it'd definitely mean that the couple is rather very peculiar."

After draping my coat over the hanger in the office and sitting down on the sofa, Miyoshi brings me some tea.

"Which reminds me, Ayesha called."

"Ayesha?"

Ayesha Ahmed Jain is the Indian billionaire's daughter who we got to know through last month's <High Recovery> incident. I've heard that she made her comeback in high society after getting completely healed, but just what could be wrong for her to contact us within less than a month?

"She got angry, saying that she couldn't reach your cell phone."

"Oh, yeah I've been inside a dungeon, so that's why. Don't tell me, there's been some kind of side effect or something?"

"In such a case her papa would have contacted us first."

Ayesha's father, Ahmed Rahul Jain, is very rich and an extremely successful business man, but when it comes to her, he's a totally lost case, doting on his daughter who closely resembles his wife.

"I guess that makes sense."

"As far as I understand, she's got business over here on New Year's Eve, and is going to visit us on that occasion."

"New Year's Eve?"

"It sounds like she's come here together with her papa to attend some business party or something like that."

"Hee, nothing less of a celebrity."

"It looked like she had something she wanted to talk about in person."

"Something she wants to talk about, eh...? That's cool as long as it's nothing bothersome."

"Senpai, she's expressly come all the way to Japan from India or Europe, you know? It's unimaginable that it's some trivial chit-chat...maybe she wants to propose to you?"

"Stop it, I'd get killed by her papa. However, even if she says that she's going to drop in at the end of the year...it's not like we can stay all the time at the office with her, right? Just where should we take her? If it's some Japanese place, I'd say the Meiji Shrine or Daishoji Temple?"

"You mean for a shrine visit on New Year's Eve? Both will be crowded by bazillions of people, all pushing and shoving around."

She's right. Every year, the compounds of the Meiji Shrine are blanketed by a carpet of nothing but heads.

"Maybe the Asukusa Shrine would be better for a foreigner?"

"Whichever you choose, all of them will be jammed with people."

"Yeah...I suppose Disneyland is a no go as well?"

"Well, I've only talked about Eve with her and I don't know how long she's going to stay, so let's talk about the details once we know how much time she has."

"Makes sense, but reservations will be a bit difficult in that case..."

"By now we won't be able to get a booking for the popular spots anyway. When push comes to shove, you could take her out to beat the crap out of slimes like an ascetic monk?"

"Shut it..."

Continuously beating up slimes after expressly coming to Japan, what kind of penalty game is this supposed to be?

"Food will be another issue, don't you think?"

The taboos in regards to foodstuff in Hinduism are more annoying than those in the Islam. Moreover, depending on the individual and caste, even an expert could only handle it by uniformly matching the strict criteria of the various practices. Beyond that, you've got no choice but to directly ask the person in question.

Among those of the upper castes, who are strict in this regard, are some who won't even eat together with people eating meat, not to mention with people of different castes, I hear. It's apparently owed to their saliva being impure, but I think that makes deepening friendships with Western business men at eateries rather difficult.

"You sure? I don't know how Ayesha's family handles it back home, but it seems like they take a rather flexible approach when abroad, depending on the respective country they're visiting."

"Oh, really?"

"I mean, last time they invited us over to a sushi restaurant, no?"

"They said fish meat was fine, didn't they?"

"Senpai, usually Hindu believers don't eat any raw food."

But then again, it's just that they don't eat it. It's apparently not like they label raw food as pure or impure.

"I got the impression that her papa is cleverly using the 『Manusmriti』 as suits his own means."
[efn_note]The Manusmriti is an old book describing the behavioral codices of Hindu. You can google it if you want more details.[/efn_note]

It's only after the 『Manusmriti』 was written that Hinduism became forbidding about eating meat. The fifth edition of this code of law puts together 56 clauses in regards to allowed and forbidden foodstuff, which has led to it having a big influence on the eating habits of Hindu believers. If you summarize its content, it's quite vague, preaching stuff like 『You mustn't destroy life. But, killing for the sake of offerings during rituals and feeding your family isn't counted as destroying life』. In other words, it's something that's apt to be taken one way or another, depending on the interpretation.

What Miyoshi says about Ayesha's father is that he's conducting himself in a way that doesn't violate the doctrine by cleverly interpreting the 56 clauses. Of course, as Indian celebrity, it's not like can fully ignore the influence of the purity and impurity issue in Indian culture and castes on his eating habits.

"That's blasphemy!"

"Haha~"

In the end, the cultural exchange between different religious faiths only requires a mutual understanding and explanation with both sides being open-minded, and if that's not possible, the only choice left is to either ignore or destroy the other side. Suddenly the idea that it's similar to a meeting with whatever is on the other side of the dungeons crosses my mind.

"So, senpai, are we also going to dive into Yoyogi, starting tomorrow?"

"Yep. Since we've got lots to do this time, our stay will be longer. I think we'll first start by testing out the party function."

"Okay, I've also got plenty of things I want to try out."

"Like what?"

"While we're getting the rewards for Arthur's, I want to check the influence of LUC on the drop rate, and there's several other minor things."

"The tenth floor then?"

"It'd be wonderful to focus on that place in the beginning."

"Please tell Ms. Naruse that we'd like her to come early tomorrow then."

"Eh? Ms Naruse has a key to our office, remember?"

"I think it's necessary for her to meet with Cavall and the gang before we head out."

"Ah, if they suddenly run into each other while we're not here——"

"It'd be great if it only ends as a funny story, but well..."

"It's unlikely for it to end like that, isn't it?"

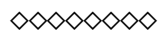
In the first place, I don't even know how she's going to react if they meet each other under our supervision.

"To begin with, can you actually keep hellhounds? What are we going to do if we're told to get rid of them?"

"Then we won't have much of a choice but to live on while concealing ourselves in darkness."

"What kind of apparition human is that supposed to be?"

"Anyway, I'll do my very best!" Miyoshi psyches herself up with an unusually serious look.



Dull clouds lightly painted the sky over Tokyo on that windless, chilly day.

"Good morning."

Ms. Naruse visited our office earlier than usual, breathing out white steam at the entrance, just to sit down at our dining table a little while later with a face full of worry.

"You two are going down all the way to the 18th floor this time, right?"

"That's the plan, but is something wrong with that?"

"About that..." Ms. Naruse begins to explain while carefully choosing her words, not knowing how she should break the topic with us. "Once I tried looking it up, I discovered that the 18th floor has a rather problematic past..."

"Problematic past?"

She retrieves several documents from her bag. Even nowadays with tablets allowing one to browse various kinds of information without the need for an extensive search, paper is still much better

when it comes to making things comprehensive. There's the sense of touch, and the arrangement of the papers. In short, it's full of information besides the pure meaning of the words, which also acts as a trigger for one's memory.

We look down at the papers depicting the information of the 18th floor as lined up by Ms. Naruse. In the middle is a floor map.

"Huh? The 18th floor hasn't been...completely mapped as of yet?"

The map shows quite a few blank spaces. Especially the right side of the stairs leading onto the 18th floor is a wide patch of unexplored area.

"It appears you'll find a cliff with a sea of clouds expanding over there——"

According to Ms. Naruse's explanation, the JSDF unit, which saw it, circumvented that place, leaving the investigation of the cliff for a later time, as it seemed too dangerous at that time or some such. And as a result of them investigating the area radially around the stairs leading back up to the 17th floor, the scouting party luckily spotted stairs descending from the top of the cliff, allowing them to continue onto the next floor.

"There were no further investigations besides that one?" I ask curiously while tracing the investigated areas on the map, extending all the way to mountains that conspicuously deviate from the circular area, with a finger.

"Yes. The reason can be found in the route." With those words, she points at the top of a mountain, recorded here as Batian, located at the edge of the area I've traced.

That place isn't unexplored land, but instead off-limits.

"Off-limit?"

It's a notification I'm witnessing for the first time being used when it comes to the interior of dungeons.

"What's the deal here?"

After taking a short breath, Ms. Naruse lowers her voice, and begins to talk about an incident as if recounting a ghost story.

"There were climbers among the JSDF unit that surveyed the 18th floor first."

Seeing that mountain, they apparently called it Batian Peak [efn_note]A/N: A height of 5199 meter. The second tallest mountain on the African Continent, one of the many high peaks in the Kenya Mountains. By the way, as a side note, It's not Kenya Mountains because they're in Kenya, but Kenya got its name as a country because of the Kenya Mountains.[/efn_note] Those troop members apparently played a key role in the following investigation of the area around the summit.

"Is that the reason why they scrupulously surveyed the mountain region that looks like a major pain, despite haven't investigated much else outside their circular survey range?"

Seemingly finding it quite ridiculous, Miyoshi butts in.

"It'd have become a legend if they slipped away during the investigation, climbed to the summit, and got locked away for 28 days as a punishment!"

"Why?"

The first climb of Point Lenana, one of Kenya Mountain's peaks, was achieved by three Italian during the Second World War with them apparently being war prisoners of the British Army. Of all things, they climbed the mountain during their escape, and then returned to their POW camp after descending again. As punishment, they were put into isolation cells for 28 days.

"『We're No Angels』, was it?"

"The part about them coming back despite having fled before has been adapted just like that. But you see, I can't really approve of that movie."

"Why? The 1955 version is a nice Christmas movie, isn't it? I like it more than 『It's a Wonderful Life』 and 『Miracle on 34th Street』, you know?"

"Now listen, senpai, I'm talking here about after the Christmas dinner — afterwards, got it? Almost all of the 1888 d'Yquem, more than 3/4th, was left behind, okay!? Back then it was a friggin' 30 years old wine! Almost as old as the protagonist! That Ducotel family is absolutely unforgivable!"
[efn_note]The wine in question: Château d'Yquem. Miyoshi is raging about stuff happening in We're No Angels.[/efn_note]

Rolling my eyes at Miyoshi who's totally wound up with her fists clenched, I retort, "I think it'd be really better if you were to revise how you watch movies."

Even when some would care about Christopher Walken heartily draining down a Glenfiddich while watching 『The Dogs of War』, all this girl would worry about is the brand of the champagne drunken by the last soldiers. When I watched the movie together with her over satellite broadcasting by chance, I almost barked at her to pay attention to other stuff in the movie when she commented, "Unexpectedly they are ordinarily drinking it out of glasses. Though I kinda feel like it's a scene where they usually go with bugles or something like that."

Either way, it sure is a weird idea to go mountain climbing when escaping. Of course, if you were to do something like that inside a dungeon, you'd immediately get surrounded by monsters, and die.

"Those troop members apparently lost sight of everything else, single-mindedly aiming for the peak of the mountain." Ms. Naruse, who's listened to our chit-chat with a smile, continues with her story while putting on a dark expression.

Well, I'd say it's the nature of climbers to aim for the peak when they've come this far, right?

Ms. Naruse thrusts a copy of a report in front of my eyes as I'm pondering like that.

"This is?"

That report states how two of the three troop members, who went to climb the peak, were promoted by two ranks immediately after having entered the mountain area.

"Huh?"

"Because of this accident, any further investigation of the remaining areas was suspended, I hear."

"Accident, you say..."

I've fully read the report, but nowhere does it mention the cause of their deaths.

"Is the cause unknown?"

Ms. Naruse bobs her head up and down, muttering, "It looks like something is there."

"Something?"

It appears no further details are known. The report of the investigation doesn't mention the cause of their deaths, nor any examination by a doctor. All it does is to coldly announce their deaths and declare a prohibition to trespass into that area.

"Now, now, senpai. Isn't it our motto to ignore troublesome stuff?"

While Miyoshi carefreely says that we just have to avoid getting close to a place like that, I ask Ms. Naruse, "Even if something is up there, it hasn't left the mountain, right?"

"So far, yes."

Hearing that, I secretly wonder whether that's the reason for the 18th floor to be avoided by explorers.

"Okay, I got it. We'll make sure to not approach——"

"Umm...the genômos dwell in the underground caves spread out in the vicinity of this mountain."

"——that area as much as possible."

"Please be careful, okay?"

With this the explanation about the 18th floor has reached its stopping point. While casting a sidelong glance at Miyoshi receiving various pieces of information as data from Ms. Naruse, I nonchalantly broach a new topic.

"You see...how should I say it...before leaving, we'd like to introduce something to you, Ms. Naruse."

"Introduce...something?"

Since I've got trouble explaining it, I nudge the flank of their owner (?) with my elbow. After all, this is about introducing Arthur's. We plan to leave one of them here as guard, and if he runs into Ms. Naruse without her having a clue — it's pretty much damn obvious that it'll turn into a huge mess, if a hellhound walks around our home and its garden.

"Come on, Miyoshi."

"Ummm, Ms. Naruse, please calm down and listen."

"Ehh? That sounds really scary? Just what's going on?"

With a slightly stiff smile, Ms. Naruse recrosses her hands on her knees, trying to act composed. While pointing her palm to the side like a bus tour guide, Miyoshi asks Ms. Naruse to look in that direction.

"Pardon?" Turning to the right side while seated on the sofa, Ms. Naruse spots Cavall curled up over there, and instantly screams—

"Heeeey! Wait!" I swiftly block her mouth.

We're in a residential area. No matter how soundproof our office might be, something like a scream capable of bursting windows leaking out of our house during broad daylight would be quite bad for our reputation.

"Nghffu!!"

With her eyes wide in shock, Ms. Naruse tries to get away from Cavall, trashing with her hands and feet while pushing her body against me.

"I-It's alright! Calm down!"

I somehow manage to soothe Ms. Naruse even while kinda feeling like a kidnapper here. Once she stops kicking up a fuss, I remove my hands from her.

Even after being released, she keeps flapping her mouth open and closed like a well-bred goldfish for some time. Eventually she stammers, "T-This, w-what's that?", with her eyes fixed on Cavall, not sparing a single glance at Miyoshi.

"Umm...our pet?"

"Pettt!?" Ms. Naruse yells out full of disbelief while looking at Miyoshi reproachfully.

"Well, she's right. Look." The instant Miyoshi says so, Cavall begins to lick Ms. Naruse's cheek.

"Hiii..."

Swallowing her breath and jumping to her feet, Ms. Naruse throws her head around, audibly twisting her neck, and makes eye contact with Cavall. For a while, woman and dog stare at each other just like that. Due to the strangely tense atmosphere dominating the room, even Miyoshi and I

hold our breaths, watching how the situation is going to pan out.

After some time, Ms. Naruse breathes out, and timidly strokes Cavall's nose tip while saying, "L-Looking closely at him, he might have some charm, making him somewhat cute."

Even Cavall apparently loses some of his bracing, seemingly released from nervousness. I feel like his head and the outer corner of his eyes have dropped somewhat.

"Besides, he feels nicer than expected."

The fur of Cavall and the other three is far softer than you'd imagine. Since it appears relatively hard when they're fighting, they might be adjusting its strength through mana. In any case, it's no exaggeration to describe their fur as fluffy.

Apparently getting gradually used to Cavall, Ms. Naruse is touching and caressing him all over. It looks like she's reached a point where she can calmly enjoy the fluffy feel.

According to her, after I asked her now that she's calmed down, no licenses and medical inspections are demanded in the regulations of the WDA. It's because no tamers or summoners have appeared so far. Also, in case you keep a pet, you have to report it to the administration, but it's very unlikely for hellhounds to have been added to the list of animals designated as dangerous by Japanese law or the register of introduced species, so neither of those is likely going to apply here, she says.

In other words, we don't have to do much more than report them as simple dogs, have a license issued for them, and vaccinate them against rabies, but the issue is that we have absolutely no idea how an immunization against rabies would affect them.

"Anyway, since a bit of a time extension should be okay, I'll look up the various details. Let's check the situation while keeping him hidden for a while."

"We're in your hands."

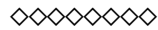
Nothing less of an exclusive deputy chief. How very reliable.

It was also possible that she'd tried to ship Cavall off to some research facility as an experimental animal, once she learned that we're keeping hellhounds, but willfully doing something like that with individual property is difficult in Japan. As long as the owner doesn't give their consent, it's virtually impossible. Viva, Japan!

There's also the possibility of abducting him — is a thought I try to follow, but seeing Cavall curled up over there, I reconsider it as impossible.

In the end, the rules in regards to dungeons are always trailing behind since three years ago. The true state of things is that people have no choice but to play it by the ear each time a problem crops up. This matter will likely become yet another example of that.

Either way, before leaving, we tell Ms. Naruse to work hard at the translation while having a peace of mind as we'll have one hound always guarding the office's grounds.



"Sheesh, I sure hadn't expected her to become so surprised."

"It's just normal to get surprised when you turn around, just to find a hellhound sitting around at the end of your line of sight, right? Rather, she did well to not faint then and there."

I'm pretty sure she must have simply believed that Cavall was sampling her taste when he licked her cheek.

"You got a point. And all that despite them being so cute."

"You only say that because you're looking at them in a positive light as their owner."

Describing them objectively, those guys are damn scary. Though you'll start regarding them as cute after some time since they completely act like doggies.

When we had descended from Yoyogi's entrance to the first floor, we moved to a corner of a room with no people in it.

"Okay then, let's start with testing the party function."

"Sure thing."

We still haven't announced the dungeon's party system to the public. It's because we're going to use it as material to prove the credibility of Heaven's Leak during its launch at Christmas. After we tested it initially, we haven't formed a party with anyone. This time we're going to party up while also testing its functions at the same time.

I touch my D-Card with Miyoshi's, and chant in my mind, 『Admit』. It doesn't generate any special effect affecting my sense of sight or hearing in particular, but just like last time, it feels like I've formed a mysterious link with Miyoshi.

"Is this 『Sensation of being connected』 something like an UI informing you of the party's establishment?" Miyoshi asks while looking at the backside of her D-Card.

"Maybe. It'd be somewhat intuitive as a function, though."

In the first place, a list of the party members is shown on the backside of the D-Card. Thus it's actually possible to visually confirm whether the party formation succeeded by looking there.

We continue descending to the tenth floor while carefully testing the telepathy function, the experience point allotment, and the function to locate party members.



It might cause any explorer to topple over if they hear it, but we plan to spend the night on the tenth floor, which is relatively safe for us. After all, that floor has no monsters capable of turning over Dolly (our camping van), and there won't be any explorers asking any unnecessary questions either. For Miyoshi, who can attack monsters from within Dolly, this floor is truly like heaven.

"Are we going to aim for 373 monster kills once more?"

"About that...if there was a rule stating that they wouldn't vanish until midnight of the next day, it'd result in us being always chased around by monsters after leaving through the gate, you know?"

If any other explorers are around, it might very well develop into training and PKing in the worst case. Moreover, unlike in games, the people who got dragged into it and died wouldn't revive afterwards.

"Even if we're going to make it spawn, let's wrap up the killing around 11 p.m...."

It's around six hours of leisurely walking and chatting while taking the shortest distance that we arrive at the stairs to the tenth floor. Normal explorers hate the tenth floor, but in reality it's very suited for running tests. A reasonable number of monsters, which drop normal loot, keep spawning, and they will expressly approach you on their own device. Because the types of monsters on that floor are very one-sided as well, it's simple to kill droves of the same type. It's a floor just perfect for checking out the influence of LUC on the drop rate of normal loot, and the drop rate of magic crystals.

While suitably killing flocks of undead, we head in the opposite direction of the stairs to the 11th floor. After making some good distance, we move to a deserted place, take out Dolly, and go inside.

"Pheeew." I flop down on the dinet's sofa with my eyes shut.

Miyoshi boots up all her monitors, effectively activating the surveillance of our surroundings.

"Just counting the number of monsters to keep the last two digits of the kill count in check is a major pain. I wonder, can't you count the kills through the camera's video or something like that?"

"Since all such convenient recognition APIs are stored on clouds, you can't access them inside a dungeon. And even if it was possible for argument's sake, transmitting the video would take quite some time, so it wouldn't actually be feasible. If you had an AI learn to recognize monsters, it might be somehow possible to use it as a standalone, but to judge from a video whether a monster has been really killed is unreasonable if you take the changes in the angle of view into account, isn't it?"

Even if an AI could distinguish the monster that was hit, it won't really know whether it really has died until the body vanishes. If it vanishes just when the camera isn't pointing at it, the AI won't be able to tell whether it moved away while still alive, or vanished after being killed.

"Then, would it be possible if you go with having it make a suitable decision?"

"You mean as in simply judging whether an attack landed or something like that?"

"Yeah. Afterwards it'll assume that the monster died once it vanished from within the camera's sight. There's no need to be overly strict there."

"It might be possible if a strict distinction isn't necessary..."

Having a good, general sensor while chatting, she sits down on the sofa, broad enough for three people, to my left side, leans her body forward, and smiles as if telling me to cough up what's bugging me.

"So, senpai, what are you going to use that for?"

"W-Well, look, the other day I dived into the dungeon with Ms. Saito and Ms. Mitsurugi, right?"

I tell Miyoshi how Ms. Saito was at first hyped about hunting wolves, but then got bored of it after a short time.

"In the end, Yoyogi's beginner floors are nice for playing around a bit, but isn't it only a very small handful of trained folks who genuinely challenge the professional floors?"

"Well, you're not wrong about that."

Those aiming to become professionals from the start can do their best with that goal as motivation, but otherwise, the fun floors are exciting and thrilling at first, but once you get used to them, they quickly become a drag. They have no incentives, and those craving for the limelight won't be satisfied either. If you say that it's inevitable, that's certainly the case, but in such a case, the number of those aiming to capture dungeons won't grow no matter how much time passes.

"That's why I kinda thought more people would have fun while increasing their stats, if we create goggles that can display scores for the number of killed monsters..."

"While at it, it might also be possible to use it in urban dungeons for the sake of the necessary five hundred million explorers, huh?"

"Well, yeah."

If we release that information to the public, it won't be odd for the number of explorers to increase through national policies in areas which are expected to soon run into a food shortage, and areas already suffering from insufficient food. However, the registration as explorers of dungeons located in advanced countries might not change much compared to now. Moreover, there's less than a hundred dungeons all over the world.

"Even if the number of explorers grows by a million per dungeon, it still won't amount to a hundred million in total..."

"Assuming ten or twenty thousand people would register every day, you still won't be able to reach ten million in a year."

"That's how it is. If we're talking about the number of registered explorers, I think the numbers will also shoot up in urban areas once we announce the party system."

After all, you'll be able to use telepathy, and that's something anyone would like to use, right? However, if it comes to capturing dungeons and so on, the overall number proceeding beyond the fifth floor will become an issue.

"It might be tough to have small goggles handle all of the necessary functions, but—" Miyoshi begins by recounting the current situation, "Since you can apparently lay out a power cable from the surface to the second floor, it might be possible to create such a system as long as you carry in some servers, and connect the devices through WiFi."

The distance between entrance and exit on the first floor is very short at Yoyogi. Hence, even if you pull a cable all the way to the second floor, the danger of it getting melted by slimes might be low if you employ some guards.

"It'll be somewhat too big a scale as a fun project by individuals, but if it's run by the JDA and private companies, it could potentially become popular as a survival game if you even set up a matching system and take some money for one game of 30 minutes. For example, 『Annihilate wolves as a team!』 or similar."

"I'm sure some people would get excited about that if there's a site where the points and rankings are listed, too."

"However, it's still a dungeon, so yeah..."

"But, it sounds interesting, no? A real VRMMO, right? Though it'd make the meaning behind the letters kinda pointless."

"However, it'd also be a real death game, wouldn't it?"

"—Yeah, okay, I can't deny that."

"Unless you have people properly sign declarations of consent, you won't be able to clear all responsibility if casualties appear."

"Makes sense."

And even if you got a signed declaration of consent, it still won't be of much use against a declining feel of it being like a game, even if you can avoid being legally accountable.

"Bah, just who'd willingly play a game like that!? If they could have logged out from SAO, all players would have logged out of the game immediately when the incident took place, right?"

"Obviously."

"...Are we possibly...idiots?"

"Now, now, senpai. I think the idea is interesting. Look, of course you could describe it as a real death game, but wouldn't it immediately work out if you call it E-Sports? I mean, people die in accidents at Boxing or in the F1 as well."

"So you're saying it'll be OK as long as it's arranged as an amusement and sport event while paying as much consideration to safety as possible, huh?"

"Maybe there's someone out there who would want to promote this."

"Just why do your words sound like you want to outsource it?"

"I mean, senpai, do you want to run that kind of business?"

Now that she's asking...sure, I'd like to give playing it for a bit a try, but I haven't spent any thoughts on using that idea to make a business out of it. No matter how I look at it, it sounds like too much of a pain.

"No way..."

"See!? Development or playing around with grass-root movements seems fun, so that'd be fine, but doing business with a real death game? That's a no-go. Absolutely, no."

After deciding to mess around a bit by giving the basic goggle development a try, we take our meal, and then get going on what we came here for.

"No choice. I suppose I'll have to count the number of defeated monsters in the normal way." With those words, I move over to the bunk bed. "Okay, let's start with both of us killing 100 skeletons each to compare how many bones either of us acquires."

"Sure thing."

"Oh, before that, let me check how much LUC you've got right now, Miyoshi."

The checking of Miyoshi's stats is somewhat troublesome. In short, Miyoshi has to appraise me, and the smallest value of my stat that shows as zero can be set as her stat value. Since we know Miyoshi's stats from before, I just need to raise each stat starting from her previous stat values, which makes finding her current stat value relatively easy. In preparation for that, I activate <Making>.

Name: Yoshimura Keigo
Rank 1 / SP 673.86

HP 250.00
MP 190.00

STR (-) 100 (+)
VIT (-) 100 (+)
INT (-) 100 (+)
AGI (-) 100 (+)

DEX (-) 100 (+)
LUC (-) 100 (+)

> Miyoshi Azusa

"Hm? —Ehhh?!" I unintentionally raise my voice upon seeing a new option.

Beneath my stats, the name 『Miyoshi Azusa』 is displayed.

"Don't tell me..."

Once I timidly tap on her name, a screen appears, displaying what I had anticipated.

Name: Miyoshi Azusa
SP 2.863

HP 21.70
MP 32.50

STR (-) 8 (+)
VIT (-) 9 (+)
INT (-) 18 (+)
AGI (-) 11 (+)
DEX (-) 13 (+)
LUC (-) 10 (+)

"M-Miyoshi, take a look."

I lean my upper body forward from the bunk bed, pointing at the display. However, it's impossible for Miyoshi to see it.

"What's up? Did something happen?"

"Ah, no...tell me once more, how much SP (Experience Points) have you obtained so far?"

"Mmh? Please wait a moment."

Miyoshi opens the list on her PC, and checks the value.

"...Around 4.86."

According to the screen of <Making> it's 2.863. In other words, around 50% of the total SP have been allotted automatically.

"What is it, senpai? Now you've got me curious."

"Hmm, as a matter of fact..." I explain to Miyoshi about her name showing up in <Making> when it displayed my stats, and what happened when I tapped it.

To put it simply, it's a function allowing me to tamper with the stats of my party members.

"For real!?"

"It looks real enough to me."

Miyoshi's eyes sparkle for an instant, but seemingly regaining her sanity right away, she calmly starts with, "But, senpai...", but then tilts her head to the side and continues as it to confirm an unclarified issue, "...doesn't that mean that the SP you acquire is naturally allotted to the stats depending on your actions?"

"Probably."

Going by what has happened with Ms. Mitsurugi and Ms. Saito, that conclusion should be correct. I haven't experienced any natural SP allotment, but that might be somehow related to me having acquired <Making>. If I consider that it took some time until I obtained <Making>, my SP might have been automatically converted into stats for a little while longer after I got <Making>. Kinda like it takes time for nutrients to actually become part of a body.

"The stat editor you told me about before can't return stat points back to SP, right? Isn't it somewhat pointless to be able to edit the stats at this point?"

It might be possible to weaken the stats, but if you can't boost them, she's right by describing it as being meaningless.

"No, you see..." I tell her that she actually has 2.863 SP remaining as only around 2 SP have been allotted automatically.

"That means roughly 50% of the obtained SP are allotted naturally?"

"If we base that assumption on just your example, you're right. Though it's possible that the remaining half will also be allotted into stat points over a longer period."

"Wait, could that possibly mean..." Miyoshi gets excited again, braces herself, and asks, "...that one can allot half of the acquired SP to any stat they like, as long as they party with you, senpai?"

"W-Well, that sounds about right."

"Senpai!"

"No, wait, Miyoshi. Using that for explorers I don't really know or turning it into money is unreasonable, isn't it?"

After all, it'd be necessary for them to party with me. Just that alone is already quite a tough hurdle for me. Naturally, I can only do that for maybe Ms. Mitsurugi, Ms. Saito, and Ms. Naruse, besides Miyoshi. It's way too unrealistic for me to be able to say, "Yo, wanna join a party with me?", to some random stranger. Even if this were to be a game world, that'd be asking too much of me.

And even if we assume that such a stranger would show interest in it, it'd likely result in them asking me to show them my D-Card to confirm the existence of such an ability first, which would be impossible since it's nothing I can show to others.

After pondering about it for a while, Miyoshi asks, "Doesn't that part depend on how you go about it?"

"Meaning?"

"Let's see...for example, if you were to label it as a dungeon bootcamp or something like that, and have them do some mysterious activity for several days after forming a party with you.

"Mysterious activity?"

"It doesn't really matter what it is, as long as it causes them to have dead eyes. And then, if you were to add just a bit of SP to their desired stat once the camp ends, they'd go like "Oh, what a surprise! If you join the bootcamp, your stats will grow just as you hoped for!" Of course it's important for you to not raise the stats all at once, but go at it little-by-little over several adjustments."

"Dead eyes...now listen..."

"It's easier for people to accept power they obtained as a result of repeated, strenuous efforts than obtaining it easily, isn't it?"

If you were to ask me which I'd prefer, it's definitely the latter, but I can refute the fact that the former alternative is easier to agree with.

"Well, you're probably right about that."

Having said that, it'd likely end in a flood of applications from all over the world if such a tremendous effects were to be confirmed from a bootcamp with me. I want to live my life while enjoying my freedom as much as possible. That alone is already reason enough to turn down being forced to take part in such a scheme.

"I've absolutely no interest in a life where I'm forced to run such bootcamps on a daily basis."

"Hmm, how about we narrow down the participants by adding some conditions?"

"Conditions?"

"For example, they must help with Yoyogi 『Explorations』 for one year, or similar?"

"Explorations?"

"If you were to call it capturing, it'd have a strong taste of having to join the front line, but only a handful of people are capable of that, right? Besides, unlike with Evans, I feel like many people would be quite troubled if Yoyogi were to disappear for real."

"That's...very likely, yeah."

Above all, urban dungeons are deeply connected with the city they're situated in. They've been embedded into the social and economical systems, so it'd likely cause quite a few problems if they were suddenly gone.

"Even if it's nominally a capture effort, I think it'll be fine to call it exploration as a condition."

"Setting up participation conditions, eh? If you do it skilfully, it might decrease the number of applications from other countries, but...in the end, the number of people capable of participating in one camp would be limited to seven. If 200 hundred people were to apply per month, it'd still take a full month to handle all of them, even if you cut down the camp's schedule to one day, you know?"

"You remember the fund we talked about before? If we make it large enough that we can commercialize it, we could just hire people to work on the actual training itself after the camp participants form a party with you, couldn't we? Of course it'd be a different matter if you want to become Gunnery Sergeant Hartman, though," Miyoshi laughs. [efn_note]A/N: Gunnery Sergeant Hartman is a character appearing in the movie "Full Metal Jacket." He's likely the world's most famous drill instructor.[/efn_note]

Those drills, eh...? Sure, I kinda feel like wanting to try those out a bit as well, but the mental state to play such a part...no way. In the first place, isn't that simply screaming to be shot to death just after completion of the bootcamp. [efn_note]All references to the movie, so you need to wiki or watch it to understand.[/efn_note]

"Besides, if they kill monsters during the training, and you get all the experience points, it'd be a clear gain."

"Eh? Isn't that kinda cruel?"

"Reward, it's your reward. It wouldn't amount to much experience per person anyway."

I suppose it's kinda like making a big buck by embezzling all the fractions of a yen from each money transfer in a bank, as it pops up as a topic every once in a while.

"Besides, if we're going to do it anyway, it'd be easier if we could screen the participants by assertively using an open selection process."

Oh, I see. I guess it means we would draw the participants as it suits our tastes.

"If it goes under the pretext of capturing Yoyogi, it wouldn't be strange for us to prioritize veterans

who have been actively entering dungeons. I mean, even if we allow beginners to participate, the bootcamp's effect would be close to zero."

The main objective would be to allot all excess SP. Hence it'd make no sense to have explorers, who don't have any excess SP, join the camp in the first place.

"Still what are you going to do if some bigwigs push explorers with zero potential for growth on us? It's not like the camp would show any effect for them."

"When push comes to shove, I'll just handle it by publicizing <Appraisal>."

"Huh?"

Wait, she could be right. It might add persuasiveness if you can say that you have <Appraisal> when you tell an applicant that you won't accept them because they show no potential for growth. Above all, they wouldn't have any means to deny it.

"So far as it goes, I'm receiving quite a bit of compensation as front lady of D-Powers, and it's not like my name isn't quite known by now anyway."

Well, she's already being called a legend as the sole orb hunter in the world... It's a big help that Miyoshi's ID is a bit older. If it had been a new ID, her sudden appearance might have caused a lot more of a ruckus. Although it's a development that follows along the course of what we talked about at the Italian restaurant in the beginning, I've still got mixed feelings as it might increase the danger to her life, but nowadays she's being protected by her doggies, who're even capable of preventing her getting sniped. Also, overlooking the threat if the usefulness exceeds the danger is a principle that proved to be effective for Duke Tougou. Though, that's a fictional story.

"In such a case, I'm pretty sure that I'd be swamped by plenty of appraisal commissions from all over the world! Besides, it'll also explain why we were able to develop a Scouter. So it'd be killing two birds with one stone!"

She's saying it like a joke, but I'm well aware that it's this girl's peculiar way of acting tough.

"Okay, okay, I got it." I flash a wry smile at her.

There's various things I want to say about this like what she's going to do if another appraisal holder shows up, but if it's a private camp run by a private organization, I doubt that anyone would have a reason to complain if we were to draft applicants in our own way.

"Anyway, whether we can really get such a camp going comes after making sure whether <Making> can really be used to manipulate the stats of child party members."

"Yeah, it'd make it much easier if that's possible. At the same time it'd allow us to increase the number of applicants."

"If it's not possible, the maximum will be six people."

"Not seven?"

"It'll be inconvenient if the instructor doesn't join the party, right?"

"Ah."

There's a shitload of things we must find out in advance, like, for example, whether the party stays even if I'm on the surface while the other party members are doing their camp inside the dungeon, but we can leave those tests for later.

"Either way, this matter has to wait until we get back to the surface and run various tests with our acquaintances. The objective of our current dive is to check the effect of LUC on the drop rate, and <Mining>, okay?"

"Sure."

Thus we start our tests about the relation between LUC and the drop rate.

Since I've got just about ten times as much LUC as Miyoshi, it's quite convenient for our testing. As a result, we could see that the drop rate for the standard drop items — though it's the bones of skeletons this time — isn't affected by LUC much with Miyoshi and I only having a difference of roughly 20%.

"It doesn't feel like there's much of a difference between me and you in regards to the bones, senpai, but the impact on the drop rate of magic crystals is quite amazing."

Magic crystals have a drop rate of approximately the drop rate of normal items multiplied by $LUC / 100$. In short, the number of crystals dropping for Miyoshi was a tenth of my crystal drop rate.

"Only three potions after killing 125 skeletons feels a bit depressing."

The special drops — in this case Healing Potion (1) — can't be estimated at all. After all, Miyoshi wasn't able to obtain a single one.

"Senpai, you've got three Healing Potions (1), and I didn't get a single one, so it's very likely that LUC plays some kind of role in this, however..."

Both of us stopped killing monsters once we reached a count of 125. Us not ending at 100 simply stems from us having been unable to quit. Given that we've killed quite a lot of skeletons in the past as well, it has allowed us to build the next hypothesis when including the past results as well:

- A BDR (BaseDropRate) exists for monsters. At present it's around 0.25.
- A RDR (RareDropRate) exists for monsters. At present it's around 0.02.
- Standard Drop Items follow the BDR without really getting affected by LUC.
- Special Drop Items have a drop rate of approx. $RDR \times (LUC / 100)$. (Temporary)
- Magic crystals have a drop rate of approx. $BDR \times (LUC / 100)$.

"That should be all?"

"Yeah. It'll be fine if we gather the data of various people for the rest, but...finding people who

would seriously record all the different types and numbers of monsters they defeated sounds like a chore."

"No kidding. I mean, I've been doing it because I have my quantification of the various values as a driving force, but with just two different types of monsters it's already quite troublesome."

Since the first floor is only inhabited by slimes, it wasn't such an issue, but the tenth floor has a mix of skeletons and zombies. Counting them separately was a lot harder than expected. It'd be easier if I could have <Making> display a log of the monsters I killed, but unfortunately it doesn't have such a function.

"The reason why the WDA doesn't publish the basic drop rate of monsters must be grounded in their inability to even ask the explorers how many monsters they killed."

That makes sense. Even if they were to ask, I doubt they'd get any decent statistics as the answers would be full of errors. The JSDF, who entered the dungeons first, might have its own statistics, but they're probably treating them like military secrets. It's hard for me to imagine that they'd publicize their results.

Tomorrow we're going to aim for the 18th floor. Having given up on further continuing with this troublesome task, we take a shower, and quickly go to sleep.

§064 First Queen 12/11 (Tue)

"Miyoshi Azusa is keeping hellhounds as pets?"

In light of yesterday's statement that she would look up the details, Miharu immediately consulted Saiga, using their regular briefing as an opportunity. Hearing the story from her, Saiga first looked completely dumbstruck, and soon after, covered his face with a hand.

Watching him shaking his head in resignation, Miharu compassionately consoled him, "Yes, I totally get your feeling. Still, the JDA has no regulations in regards to Summoners or Tamers."

"Well, obviously not."

Up until now, no explorer had found such skills. And, something like preparing a regulative frame in advance while speculating on the potential existence of certain skills was impossible for a Dungeon Organization which couldn't avoid always falling several steps behind.

"Since I didn't find them in the list of animals designated as dangerous by Japanese law or the register of introduced species either, there's no choice but to treat them like simple dogs."

What she was saying was in accordance with the laws. However, that's merely because the law hadn't caught up with the current situation. In Japan's constitution, §39 guaranteed legal non-retroactivity. As long as the pets didn't cause any problems, it'd be next to impossible to forbid hellhounds as pets with the current legislative state.

"Y-Yeah. So, those dogs...are they okay?"

"What do you mean by 'okay'?"

"In short, they're monsters, right? They don't attack people or stuff like that?"

"They're cute."

"Cute!?"

Miharu had completely mellowed down towards the hellhounds who had always stayed with her while she was translating. In the end, you could say, fluffiness was justice.

"I-I see. Well, I suppose it could be fine if you think of them as somewhat big retrievers."

'Although ones who have possibly spawned from hell.

"You're right. Then again, their withers are three times that of a retriever."

"Three times!?"

"If you take the withers of a Labrador or Retriever as an example, their withers are around 50-60 cm. In other words..."

"You're telling me hellhounds with withers of 150 cm exist!?"

"Yeah well, the measurement sounds about right."

"The standard withers of hellhounds is somewhere around 100 cm at the most. So, they'd be quite the big specimen. With a withers of one meter, the largest Bengal tiger weighs roughly 300 kg. A Siberian tiger is said to pack around 350 kg. Some horses, like Shires, can exceed a ton in weight, but something like that as a dog?"

"Can you even describe them as dogs in the first place?"

"Leaving aside their appearance, they've been clearly acting like dogs."

'Hey, what's the deal with 'leaving aside their appearance,' Saiga was assailed by anxiety, but since he clearly perceived that nothing good would come out of retorting here, he strained himself to ignore it.

"So, what are you going to do?"

"For the time being I've been checking the legal procedures. Next I'll investigate whether the JDA or the WDA actually has some official procedures for this, and if they do, there's no choice but to abide by them."

"Makes sense, I guess. But then again, such formalities shouldn't actually be handled by the DAs. Ultimately, handling such matters ought to fall under the jurisdiction of Japan."

'If the Dungeon Management Department doesn't have any such procedures, they won't exist for Japan either, though.

"Understood. Also, since I'd be troubled if I run into any problems while we're still not finished with all the different formalities, I'd like you to remain quiet about this matter for the time being."

"Remain quiet?"

"If their existence becomes known before they've been officially approved as pets with Miyoshi Azusa as their owner, we'd be forced to constantly pay attention that none of the various research institutes butts in and takes them away."

"Oh, I get it. Sure, no problem. Since it doesn't look like we'll run into similar issues with other explorers besides D-Powers for a good while, I'll entrust this matter to you, as their exclusive deputy chief. Please keep me up to date with the progress."

"Yes, sir."



""Uwaaah!""

Having descended all the way to the 18th floor, we're overwhelmed by the scenery spreading out in front of us all of a sudden. A bleak area with huge rocks scattered across a black ground. Beneath the steep, high cliff at our feet extend clouds as far as we can see.

"You're not going to tell me that the dungeon is going to continue all the way below all those clouds, right?"

"By the look of it, it could very well continue for dozens of kilometers."

"I can fully understand why they haven't finished the mapping of this floor."

"I have copied the data over, just in case." With those words, Miyoshi takes out the tablet with the map of this floor.

Going by the information of the documents we checked in advance, the mapped area spreads radially from the stairs to the 17th floor, but stops at the stairs to the next floor as if the survey was abruptly aborted. The only conspicuous exception of that rule is the path towards the summit.

I sigh while looking down at the sea of clouds expanding beneath us, and a broken slope still looking good enough for a descent.

"Yep, I do get how the exploration team must have felt back then."

I mean, there's no end in sight. Precisely because you have such a great outlook from here, they must have felt quite disheartened by the prospect of having to map this huge area. Moreover, if you look upward, you'll spot an array of sharp, pointed pyramidal peaks blanketed by snow. Among them, the biggest and most remarkable peak gradually rises like amalgam after it had mercury inserted into an aluminum hole.

With my toes, I kick away a black stone lying at my feet.

"Basalt, eh?"

Miyoshi bobs her head in confirmation, and says, "No doubt, it's the Kenya Mountain," while gazing up.

I follow her eyes, squinting my eyes as I look at the mountain.

"Either way, our destination is the cave system. It looks like the entrance can be found at the foot of that peak, nicknamed Batian."

"Over there is the off-limits area, right? That means, you'll find something there."

"Bingo!"

The JSDF members, who lived out their climbers' spirit after seeing that mountain, lost their lives on the summit. Moreover, as of yet the reason remains shrouded in mystery.

"Something, huh? Putting it like that, doesn't it actually pique your curiosity instead? I feel like the mass media and brainless amateurs would immediately flood the area."

"Senpai, even if they're rotten to the core, this is still the 18th floor of a dungeon, you know? TV station staff that could reach a place like this with ease doesn't exist, and even if brainless amateurs were to try forcing their way down here, they'd croak around the tenth floor."

"How about someone like Yoshida Teruo?"

If times had not changed, it wouldn't have been strange for Yoshida Teruo to launch exploration projects as commanding officer to get behind the secrets of dungeons and track the mysterious creatures in dungeons all over the world.

"I've heard rumors that he's an unexpectedly serious man. He might have been against doing mockumentaries. Besides, even if he wanted to come here, it'd probably be impossible since dungeon shows don't draw many viewers nowadays."

It'd require a big number of explorers as guards to come all the way here while carrying the necessary equipment, likely making the costs for the production exorbitant. It's the same reason why there's almost no TV shows in space or at the depths of the oceans.

"Still I think it's somewhat intriguing, don't you think so too? I wonder whether we'll run into a unique monster like the Hecate from the other day."

"Maybe. However, if it follows folklore — it's going to be a god, isn't it?"

"A god?"

"Look, this mountain would be the Kirinyaga, no?" Miyoshi comments while looking up the mountain once more.

The aboriginal Agĩkũyũ refer to the Kenya Mountain as Kirinyaga. In their language it means "God's Mountain." Come to think of it, I did read Mike Resnick's novels, didn't I? But, the name of the god in the Tales of Kirinyaga should have been Ngai.

"It kinda feels like the Sun God Enkai is going to sit on a golden throne at the summit."

"A god, right..."

"Moreover, Enkai is called 『Ngai』 in the language of the Agĩkũyũ. Senpai, His Grace Nyarl, is going to make his appearance!" [efn_note]Nyarlathotep - a Cthulhu Mythos character.[/efn_note]

"Yea, but only if this were the northern forests of Wisconsin County, right?"

Ngai is the name of the forest used as base by Nyarlathotep, said to be located in the northern woodlands of Wisconsin County. Of course that's completely unrelated to Enkai.

"But, word games are definitely no joke with this dungeon."

She's probably right about that one. Ever since the old Wizardry game, Western RPGs are full of wordplays. There might be differences in opinion whether you can regard the dungeons as Western video games, but they definitely have such a flavor to me.

"I swear, if Nyarlathotep should really come out on the 18th floor, I'll grab my things, scurry back home, hide under my bed's blanket, and never get close to a dungeon ever again."

I stretch myself while taking a deep breath, and look up to the Batian after clearing my head.

"Alright, we're going to sneak around at the mountain's foot while leaving the expedition of the summit itself, where something so crazy might be lurking around, to someone else."

"Somehow, that line totally stinks like a flag."

"Don't jinx it." Being assailed by a bad hunch from Miyoshi's comment, I take out an orb from my <Safe>, and pass it to her.

"What should I do with this?"

"It's the <Sense Danger> that I got from a wolf the other day. Use it for caution's sake."

"Why don't you use it, senpai?"

"According to your appraisal, it's the kind of skill that'll warn its user of danger. If I take it, it's quite possible that it won't trigger on things that are dangerous to you, don't you think?"

Seemingly grasping the idea behind my words, Miyoshi holds the orb up in the air, and mutters, "It's kinda like I'm really going to stop being a human anytime soon!", resulting in the orb melting into her.

But I gotta say, she nailed it. The number of skills she possesses is soon going to exceed the level where you could still laugh it off as a joke.

"Hmm, I just wonder how useful it's going to be."

"In games and such, it's also a matter of in-game balance. Usually, the number of uses is limited, but..."

"What's up?"

"No, it's just, for the most part, real life is like a shitty game. I'd really hate it if each skill were to shorten my lifespan by a set amount of time or some other silly stuff like that."

"A drawback, huh...? I hadn't considered that possibility at all. But, shouldn't that be noted on the epitaphs or in your appraisal result then?"

"I mean, look, it could be that skills also have a leveling concept."

I guess that'd mean a low-level appraisal won't be able to show such information...

"What a nasty assumption."

"Ah well, so far nothing has happened, so it's probably going to be fine!"

Come on, wouldn't you only notice that it used your lifespan when you're on the verge of dying? Then again, appraisal would likely show it if such a big drawback actually existed. Well, whatever, I just wanted to point it out either way.

While chasing after Miyoshi who has started to climb the slope, I begin to walk towards the caves where the genômos are awaiting us.

"Still, I must say, this place is really completely deserted, isn't it? Just as Ms. Naruse said, it's very unpopular."

"Be it the first floor, or the tenth floor...recently we've only got to do with unpopular floors."

"Let's consider that to be a streak of luck."

Fortunately, our means of attack work on this floor normally as well. As we kill monsters similar to Alp Capricorns and walking mountain plants, we arrive at a place that looks pretty much like the entrance into a cave after an hour.

"This seems to be the cave closest to the Kenya Mountain..."

The density of genômos population appears to increase the closer you get to the Kenya Mountain. Above all, this time we need a fairly big number of genômos, so we opted for a place with as many of them as possible. The place looks just like the entrance to a somewhat larger Gama.
[efn_note]Look: <https://infinitenoveltranslations.net/d-genesis/volume-2-d-powers-launch/%c2%a7027-5-kimitsu-iori/#easy-footnote-bottom-5-16244> [/efn_note] Having expected the entrance to be a lot bigger, I'm surprised by its small size.

"Still, they've done really well to spot such a cave."

"You mean, they did well to have considered entering through such a small hole, right?" Miyoshi replies while carefully scanning the vicinity around the entrance to make sure that it's safe.

"Maybe they had some cave maniac, who loves to dive into caves, among them, kinda like the climber maniac."

"Well, we've actually got organizations like the Japanese Caving Union and the National Speleological Society, so why not."

"Seriously?"

"Back when the dungeons appeared, they drew quite some attention."

"Oh okay. Kinda makes sense as you could also describe dungeons as caves, I suppose."

Even before the appearance of the dungeons, circles interested in exploration, underground research, and cave research have existed at various universities. The most recent one was at Yamaguchi University, so they might have originally been a research society for the Akiyoshido Cave. Then, when the dungeons appeared, those experts, if you can describe them as such, were often dragged in front of cameras by the mass media.

After putting on helmets with headlights and passing through the entrance, we find it to be a fairly narrow, lava cave.

"I suppose this is a remnant of a huge tree being enveloped by lava."

Now that she mentions it, the walls definitely look basaltic. The viscosity of basaltic lava is low. If this is a hole created during the time when this mountain was still an active volcano, it's very possible that she's right on the money.

"It sure looks like tsuchigumo might lurk deeper inside, hiding among blossoming Japanese tachibana." [efn_note] Too much JP lore for a quick explanation, look it up here: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tsuchigumo> [/efn_note]

§065 The God Atop the Mountain 12/11 (Tue)

In the series of Reijirou Hieda, drawn by Daijiro Morohoshi, appears a story about the main character finding Japanese tachibana as he passes through Mt. Fuji's lava tree mould. [efn_note]The names appearing here can be found on Wiki, if you want to look them up. Reijirou is a character appearing in Yokai Hunter, a series that has been referenced in this novel before.[/efn_note] And the path here feels just the same. At least that's the case until the cave suddenly opens up further down the tunnel. As soon as my view broadens, I can only stare dumbfounded.

"Miyoshi...sorry. No matter how you look at this...it's a man-made cave, isn't it?"

"Right?"

We can only stare with our mouths wide open at the overwhelming solemnity, going far beyond our expectations, suddenly spreading out in the space in front of our eyes. It's obviously a plaza extending in front of an underground temple built by people. Thanks to shining plants similar to lichens and crystalline objects that are glowing weakly dotting the place here and there, the whole underground is illuminated by a dim light.

"Senpai...those stones aren't releasing any radiation, are they?"

She's right. It's clearly a scene reminiscent of the bluish gleam of refined radium as it's described in

the biography of Madame Curie. [efn_note]Marie Curie, one of the few famous female physics scientists. She defined the term "radioactive" and discovered polonium and radium with her husband. I've read her biography. A truly remarkable woman.[/efn_note]

"No, radium isn't as bright as this."

There's been no warning message, and although I try to touch one of the stones while believing in the power of <High Recovery>, I don't feel any warmth being emitted from it. It seems alright to consider it as a simple, faint light.

Looking up, I can spot fine carvings added to massive stone pillars, which make them look playful, pointed arcs, and flying buttresses. Considering the history of mankind, it seems to be a jumble of various epochs, but looking at the whole, it's close to the Gothic style.

"Senpai, genômos are monsters, right?" Miyoshi mutters while taking an extensive view of the architectural structures.

"Yes, they are."

"But, this makes it seem like they've got a culture."

She's right, taking the architectural structures for what they are, it's definitely correct to describe them as cultural legacy, but it's not said that those have been built by the genômos. Just like the dungeons use flavor text, it's very possible that they have created this impressive underground temple, with the genômos just inhabiting the area.

At that moment, several wriggling, child-like figures show up on the other side of the temple.

"Senpai, where's your count?"

"Seven left."

"Okay."

I start firing Water Lances at the small silhouettes rushing at us. Miyoshi shoots her iron balls while ordering Arthur's to come out and guard the vicinity. As one has stayed back at our office, it's only three hellhounds. Soon after the battle has begun, the first orb choice shows up.

Skill Orb - Mining 1/10,000

Skill Orb - Nimbleness 1/1,000,000

Skill Orb - Night Vision 1/8,000,000

Skill Orb - Earth Magic 1/90,000,000

The instant I see the display, I reflexively pump my fist, assuming a triumphant pose. Although it follows our hypothesis, the drop rate is remarkably high, considering that it's a skill orb. It wouldn't be odd if someone had gotten this skill a long time ago already.

"The number of explorers coming all the way to a cave like this would be fairly low, wouldn't it? Anyway, senpai, please do your job properly!"

The genômos seem to spawn infinitely.

"Hey, Miyoshi. Won't we reach 373 kills in like no time at this rate!?"

If it follows the pattern from before, the genômos should disappear the second the mansion appears. Moreover, there'd be plenty of time until midnight. Though, I wouldn't want to be chased around by the mansion's monsters until then.

"Probably, but I doubt that a mansion will appear."

"Why?" I ask while mowing down the army of genômos, which are steadily increasing their pressure, with water magic and the Sword of Deserts.

I'm not too keen on using the Ultimate Flame Magic's Inferno in a locked space.

"When I appraised them, there was an asterisk in front of their name!"

"Asterisk?"

At some point Miyoshi has apparently noticed that asterisks are added in front of the names of the monsters she appraised.

"The monsters with asterisks were zombies."

Because we have used the zombies to make a mansion spawn before, we won't be able to make the mansion appear again, no matter how many zombies we kill.

"So you're saying asterisks get added to monsters who have been already used for making a mansion appear?"

"If someone caused a mansion to appear through genômos, that might be the case, but...either way, I think it might be a monster that can't be used for spawning a mansion."

At that moment, my second orb choice appears. It took almost no time.

"Somehow, I've seen...this kind of game...in the past..."

Indeed, it's First Queen. The game has come out long before either of us was born, but the genômos have been spawning from further down the plaza with an intensity as if the Multiple Character System is actually in use here. Around the time when the second orb selection screen has popped up for me, the genômos suddenly stop running at us, and begin mumbling something amongst each other.

"What's going on?"

No sooner than I finish my muttering, a stone flies our way from somewhere, bouncing at my feet. It was a simple stone with the size of a baby's fist, but if it had hit me, I'd have suffered quite an injury. Depending on where it hit me, it might have become really bad.

"Oh shit. Miyoshi, fall back a bit!"

"O-Okay!"

I have Miyoshi step behind me, take out the shield with both hands, and survey the area guarding against the throwing stones.

"No choice but to withdraw at this point, but..."

The tunnel we used to enter the plaza is already filled with a swarm of genômos who went around us.

"The only place that looks like it'd allow us to escape is over there!" Miyoshi yells while pointing at the temple.

I hesitate for a moment, seeing as it's a temple, but if we keep dilly-dallying around here, we'll only get separated within a huge swarm of genômos. That's something I must avoid at all costs.

"No helping it. We'll evacuate into the temple!"

Storing away my shield, I start sprinting at full speed towards the temple while carrying Miyoshi under my arm.

Miyoshi shouts, "Withdraw before getting surrounded!", to the three hellhounds rampaging behind us.

No matter how powerful they might be, even hellhounds will get crushed once they're completely surrounded by such a force. Make sure to run away quickly whenever you get the chance for it, you guys.

The genômos' encirclement shrinks down so as to completely lock us in, but fortunately I'm faster at running up the temple's stairs. The temple's exterior ornaments look Gothic, but behind the door we find a layout using lots of Greek and Egyptian pillars. With a backward glance at the flock of genômos closing in from behind, I leap into the room right ahead of us, and slam its door shut.

At the same time as the massive door closes with a bam, the room is wrapped up in darkness. It looks like our headlights have been destroyed by stones earlier. I can hear how something is banging against the door from outside, but after a short time that stops as well.



Three pairs of golden eyes gleam within the darkness. It looks like all of us got away in time.

"Senpai, it seems to have become quiet outside."

Now that she mentions it. No sounds can be heard from the other side of the door. But, unfortunately my Detect Life tells me otherwise, betraying the countless creatures waiting outside.

"Nope. A big number of them appear to camp outside."

"If you say it's a big number, I could randomly shoot my iron balls at them from here?"

"No, we'd be in a pinch if you were to trigger them to break down the door for some weird reason. Let's reserve this as our last resort." With those words, I take a LED lamp out of my <Safe>, and turn it on.

As the LED only has around 1000 lumen, it's too weak to fully illuminate the entire room, but it manages to create a small space of light around us. I pass a spare headlight to Miyoshi, and replace my own, too.

A narrow corridor seems to continue all the way deep down the room.

"Aethelm, could you check out the area ahead for us?"

Being asked by Miyoshi, Aethelm nods his head lightly and scuttles along the corridor. That's a hellhound for you. I'm pretty sure they can see in the dark without any issues.

"Now then. If we can't go back through the door, we've got no choice but to head deeper in——"

I affix the small LED lamp to a string, hang it over Drudwyn's neck, and have him walk slightly ahead of us. As he's been staying in my shadow as a guard for a while now, he's the one closest to me among the three hounds.

It looks like there's still some time left until sunset, but by now it's already late afternoon. As soon as we get ready, we begin to walk further down the room, following Aethelm. After advancing along the corridor for a while, we run into a fairly big room with big pillars orderly lined up.

"It's a pillared room, as you'd find in the Great Temple of Amon."

The Great Temple of Amon was expanded in proportion to the gain in power of the Egyptian kings. It's a culmination of pillared rooms. With our every move, the pillars' shadows sway, dancing like strange creatures. However, Detect Life shows no response. Arthur's noses don't pick up anything either.

"If this temple follows the same layout as Egyptian temples——"

"Then?"

"We'll reach the inner sanctum sooner or later."

"What's an inner sanctum?"

"No clue. I think it's what they call a sacred site, but...it'd be a sacred place in a temple hidden beneath a god's mountain right? I'm totally hyped about what we'll find in there." Miyoshi deliberately phrases it in a joking manner.

"I'm going to piss myself any time now," I answer with a wry smile.

We try to go around the room once, but this room has no side corridors either. There's just one way, continuing further inside the temple. I glance at my watch. Strangely the time on the floors is aligned with the surface.

"We have around one hour until sunset. Well, I suppose we'll go as far as we can."

Afterwards we continue to trudge on for a while, but we encounter no monsters on our way. Well, you could say that it'd be expected of a sacred place. We pass through several pillared corridors and courtyards, and at the end, we crawl several meters through a tunnel as narrow as a birth canal, just to come out in yet another room.

"This is the inner sanctum?"

The room is slightly bigger than eight tatami - an octagon room that seems to have a width of around four meters in all directions.

"It should bear the meaning of this part being similar to a womb."

Miyoshi examines the vicinity with keen interest, but there's nothing notable in here. Except for a weird magic square that had been hidden.

"Uooh!?"

Maybe because we've touched some switch, or maybe because it starts up automatically as soon as someone enters the room, the hidden magic square activates a little while after we enter the room. As soon as it finishes drawing a pretty pattern on the floor, I'm suddenly assailed by a nasty floating sensation. It's truly—

"Kinda like the elevator of a skyscraper, isn't it?"

We're being moved upwards while floating above the glowing magic square.

"That means, the destination is..." I reflexively look upwards.

"You should never underestimate the power of flags..." Miyoshi mutters in admiration, and likewise, resignation. Then continues louder, "Assuming the one waiting for us above is Enkai—"

"?"

"A compilation of Maasai folklore has been published as a book in 1983 by a cultural

anthropologist called Ms. Naomi - a Maasai herself. That book also mentions Enkai."

[efn_note]A/N: Naomi Kipury 『Oral Literature of the Maasai』.[/efn_note]

Oh, I see. So basically, if you know the enemy and know yourself, you need not fear the result of a hundred battles. But then again, just one battle would be plenty already.

"Enkai had a wife called Olapa. At first they had a very intimate relationship, but when she made a little mistake, Enkai immediately resorted to violence. When I read the passage, stating, "in just the same way women are beaten by their husbands," it confirmed for me that the Maasai are also a society where men beat women." Miyoshi carefreely blurted out.

Hmm, so what's the point in her telling me all this anyway?

"However, because Olapa was also a super short tempered person, she fought back against Enkai, injuring him terribly on his forehead."

Did she throw an ashtray at him, or what?

Next Miyoshi says something scary: "Moreover, Enkai tore out one of Olapa's eyes in retaliation for her counterattack. That seems to be the reason why the moon has a crater. After all, Olapa stands for the moon." And further continues after a short pause, "It's said that Enkai has been shining strongly ever since then so that the people wouldn't be able to see his injury as he felt ashamed of it. And that's why he's referred to as the sun."

"I see. So the sun still shining to this day means his wound hasn't healed yet. In short, you're saying his forehead is like his own Achilles heel, correct?"

"No, the Ol in Olapa appears to actually be——"

"Actually?"

So it's not a talk about Enkai's weaknesses? Just where is she going with this then?

"——a prefix for men. In other words, it was BL!! No, wait, do the Maasai have BL in the first place?"

"As if I'd know!!!"

Damn it. Don't I look like a total idiot for having taken her seriously? Still, tearing out an eye after cutting a forehead apart, and all that during an argument between husband and wife...that makes for a really terrible impression — hmm? Wait a sec. Maasai?

"Just a sec, Miyoshi. Isn't the Kilimanjaro the Maasai's mountain?"

Their habitat is situated at the border between Kenya and Tanzania. If we talk about mountains big enough to house gods, only the Kilimanjaro would come to mind.

"Ah, Enkai is the Maasai term for the Agĩkũyũ's Ngai. And it seems it's the same god who dwells on top of the Kilimanjaro and the Kenya Mountain, but Ngai doesn't have such a backstory like

Enkai."

I see. Well, it's not unusual for legends being passed down in areas relatively close to each other to have similarities.

"Either way, we just have to aim for his forehead, right?"

"If the legend influences his appearance in the dungeon, that is."

The other phenomenons inside dungeons tell us that it's highly likely to be just like that.

Thereupon, Miyoshi clearly drops the silly attitude, and says with a serious look, "The JSDF member who got promoted by two ranks was apparently killed the second he entered the area. The others, who narrowly escaped death as they were just outside the area, all reported that they couldn't understand what had happened in front of their eyes. No matter what might be up there, I think it'd be best for us to take the initiative."

"Roger. Oh, the count is at..."

"Senpai, it's a bad idea to get greedy just because you've got a certain level of power."

It looks like Miyoshi has been receiving flashy warnings from <Sense Danger> for a while now. If we continue heading upwards like this, her life will apparently be in peril.

"For me to be told something like this by an Oumi trader...don't worry. I value my life above all else."

After a few dozen seconds, which felt like eternity, I sense how the elevator's speed slows down. A chilly wind immediately blows into the mountain from above. As I look up, I can see the crimson sky peeking in through a small hole at the end of the shaft. It seems sunset is around the corner.

My <Detect Life> clearly tells me that something is up there.

"Currently it doesn't look like he's got any attendants with him."

Miyoshi summons only the heads of her three hounds, and removes the lamps, completely wrapping up our preparations. Or rather, I had no clue that they could pass through shadows while wearing something man-made.

And then, at long last, the elevator reaches its stopping point.

§066 Possibilities of Dungeons 12/11 (Tue)

With the sun about to sink beyond the horizon, and its crimson gleam as backlighting, a silhouette comfortably sits on a golden-shining chair while resting its chin in one hand. Upon our entry, that silhouette shows a faint sign of lifting its face.

That's Enkai?

Immediately as we arrive at the summit with the elevator, Miyoshi fires an iron ball at the silhouette. What then happened is something I, who has an AGI of 100, could barely catch with my eyes.

The silhouette repels Miyoshi's iron ball with a light wave of its left hand, as if swatting a fly away, moves right in front of Miyoshi in the next instant, and swings down its fist.

"Miyoshi!"

It's a black mass that wedges itself between her and the fist which saves Miyoshi's life at the last moment. Being pushed by that mass, she's thrust away to the back.

The black mass narrowly escapes Enkai's fist by twisting its body, however, just being grazed causes the mass to be blown away. After tumbling across the ground in a flashy way, the mass completely falls silent. On the other hand, the fist loudly slams against the ground after missing its target, creating a crater with a diameter of around one meter.

Seeing that, I quickly activate <Making>, and add 100 points to my AGI. Otherwise I'd very likely get killed in an instant.

"Aethelm!"

Enkai tries to finish off Miyoshi who shouts the hound's name while attempting to run over to him. Two black masses manifest between Miyoshi and Enkai. One tries to pin down Enkai's arm by biting, the other tries to become Miyoshi's shield.

As I shoot several Water Lances towards Enkai, I close the distance between us with a speed surpassing the lances, and put all my strength into delivering a kick against Enkai's flank.

With nothing more than a swing of his bitten arm, Enkai frees himself from Cavall's hold, causing several of Cavall's fangs to snap off in the process. Then my Water Lances hit Enkai, just to disperse in the next moment.

I don't really know whether they had some effect on him or not, but as my kick against his flank has apparently worked, I've succeeded in drawing his aggro. He turns around to me, and lifts his fist, ready to punch at any moment.

Is this guy a muscle-brain, or what?

However, judging by Aethelm's state and the crater, it's not a fist that I could ward off with my Aramid shield. However, the punch, which took all my effort to follow with my eyes at AGI 100, feels like a quickened slow motion with my current AGI of 200. All hail the stats!

I smoothly dodge Enkai's jab, move behind him, and throw an iron ball with all my power at the back of his head from close-by. Compared to the loud gong from the impact, Enkai only staggers a bit, before immediately fixing his posture and checking the condition of his neck by cracking it.

Using that opportunity, I shoot a Flame Lance of the Ultimate Flame Magic at Enkai, but just like the Water Lances, it disperses after hitting. Despite being a copy created by the dungeon, you gotta say, that's a god for you. His resistance against magic seems to be absurdly high.

I use the short break to quickly add 100 points to STR, tightly grasp an 8 cm iron ball, and thrust it at Enkai from right in front of him. Even if a fake, my opponent is still a god. I'd have no way to deal with him if the battle drags on or in case he starts using offensive, ranged magic. Anyway, the forehead. I'll bet everything on hitting his forehead!

"Uuooooohhh!!"

I always thought that only idiots would loudly roar in the middle of combat, but right now my own shout naturally escapes my lips. Battle cries or roars have something to them that touches the primitive part of the soul.

Enkai thrusts out his right fist, making sure to carefully aim at me as I'm charging at him. I ward his fist off to my right side with my left hand, and use my full strength to drive my right palm with the iron ball against Enkai's jaw as a counter. Enkai's head is thrown backwards from the impact, and his feet leave the ground for a moment.

Within the slow flow of time, I use the momentum, jump upwards, and throw the iron ball down at Enkai's forehead with all my power.



And yet, Enkai tries to block the ball by crossing his arms in front of his face. But, having a lot more force than the iron ball thrown by Miyoshi, my iron ball smashes his guard apart, and sinks deeply into his forehead. Capitalizing on the instant of his guard being slightly down, dozens of iron balls are driven into him. Probably Miyoshi's deed after having waited for a good chance.

Enkai, whose arms have been flicked upwards while still being airborne, decides in his desperation to receive everything with his forehead.

As both of us fall to the ground in accordance with gravity, my eyes meet with Enkai's as his head is still bent backwards. In that instant I recall the story that the Kirinyaga's summit, where he lives, is the peak of the world, and that no one is allowed to fly above Enkai.

While twisting my lips due to a strange elation over being above a god, I tightly grasp a new iron ball, and throw this one at full power towards his forehead as well. Flying as if pulled by a string with such a high speed that it seems to actually deform on the way, the iron ball dives into Enkai's forehead without any resistance at the moment the back of his head hits the ground.

With a slight delay, the sound of something being crushed reaches my ears, and after hitting the ground with the back of his head first, Enkai bounces up and down several times, before finally stopping to move altogether.

At that moment, the final afterglow of the sun, which has sunken beneath the sea of clouds, quietly vanishes, and Enkai's body disintegrates into black particles of light.

"The arrival of night just as the sun god dies...that's quite poetic, isn't it?" Miyoshi approaches together with her three hounds as I'm panting heavily.

It looks like Aethelm survived. I guess it's fine to say that frantically sprinkling potions does have an effect.

"That'd mean that he'll simply revive tomorrow morning, wouldn't it?" I pull a grimace while staring at the spot where Enkai vanished.

"It's very normal for legends," Miyoshi shrugs her shoulders while laughing weakly.

Jeez, gimme a break, that's not funny.

This time we managed to pull through by accidentally attacking a spot that seems to be his weakness, but I can't believe that we've witnessed the full power of the god just now. Above all, he hasn't used anything like magic this time. Besides, I feel like he'd be capable of flying through the sky, too. One time is more than enough for me when it comes to taking on a god-class opponent without clearly knowing what vicious attack methods he might hide. He's someone I wouldn't have wanted to meet for my whole life, if possible.

We briefly investigate the summit while picking up what seems to be Enkai's drops, and quickly leave, following the map drawn up by the JSDF. Given that we've found a somewhat open space in a fold of the mountain after descending from the summit for a bit, we take out Dolly and set up camp.

Unlike the tenth floor, somewhat large monsters with four legs, similar to Capricorns, are prowling around here. It's very likely that we could find ourselves at the bottom of a cliff if we get rammed by such monsters after parking Dolly in an open space.

Climbing into Dolly, I immediately line up the items dropped by Enkai on the dinet's table, and ask Miyoshi to appraise them.

"Whoa! As might be expected of a god." [efn_note]Miyoshi make a stupid pun here of shortening sasugani kamisama (nothing less of a god / as expected of a god / that's a god for you) to sasu kami, but that doesn't work with English at all, so I removed it. It reappears further down.[/efn_note]

Bangle of Ngai

AGI +50%

MP +50%

Magic Damage Reduced by 80%

90% Damage Taken Goes to MP

Auto Adjust

A bracelet created by Ngai to protect himself.

Ring of Ngai

All Stats +20%

Auto Adjust

A ring created by Ngai to protect himself.

Once I look at the notes of Miyoshi, I can clearly see how broken the attributes of the items are. 80% of the damage by magic is cut? So this bangle was the reason for Enkai's ridiculous magic resistance, eh?

But then again, for 90% of the damage to be assigned to MP is a two-edged sword.

"The ring is perfect for you, senpai. I mean, I won't get happy over having my stats raised from 10 to 12 anyway."

"Use the bangle then, Miyoshi. It should make it a bit more difficult for you to die."

"Okay. However, both items have a design matching each other, which might invite some misunderstandings."

While cracking a joke, Miyoshi slips the bangle on her left arm. It instantly changes its size, fitting itself to her left wrist.

"Ooohh, wow! That's the Auto Adjust at work, huh?"

"If a technology like that spreads, sneakers and clothes might have the same function sooner or later."

"Well, sure, it'd be very convenient, but how much would it cost?"

"Originally it should have been implemented in the Year 2015, just so you know." [efn_note]Back to the Future 2 (1989 Movie)[/efn_note]

"Sorry to tell you, but this isn't the world of Doc Brown."

I pick up the ring, holding it between my fingers. It'll likely be automatically adjusted to fit on any

finger, but wearing it on my right hand would become a hindrance. Thus I select the pinky of the left hand where it'll disturb the least.

"Senpai, isn't it kinda playboyish for a man to wear a pinky ring?"

"Huh? Is it? Or rather, this ring isn't really pink, you know?"

It's a somewhat broad ring with delicate, aboriginal coloring.

"Pinky ring means a ring attached to the little finger. Well, there are some people saying that it's sexy or stylish, but..."

"Yeah, yeah, I got it. You're saying it's limited to handsome guys, right? But it's fine. I simply chose the finger where the ring wouldn't get in the way." I ignore Miyoshi's opinion, but I guess anyone would be able to guess that putting a ring on your left hand's pinky is like openly announcing that you're looking for girlfriends. The world of fashion has way too many cryptic rules.

I open <Making> to check the effect of the ring.

Name: Yoshimura Keigo

Rank 1 / SP 523.448

HP 432.00

MP 240.00

STR (-) 200 (+) (240)

VIT (-) 100 (+) (120)

INT (-) 100 (+) (120)

AGI (-) 200 (+) (240)

DEX (-) 100 (+) (120)

LUC (-) 100 (+) (120)

> Miyoshi Azusa

"Oohh, it looks like the 20% have been properly added."

"Senpai, what about me? Tell me! Tell me!"

Name: Miyoshi Azusa

SP 50.937

HP 22.25
MP 33.05 (49.575)

STR (-) 8 (+)
VIT (-) 9 (+)
INT (-) 18 (+)
AGI (-) 11 (+) (16.5)
DEX (-) 13 (+)
LUC (-) 10 (+)

"It's been applied properly...hmm?"

"What's wrong?"

"Your SP is at 50.937."

"No way...is that because he was a god?"

"Most likely."

The initial experience for genômos is 0.13. Miyoshi might have killed around a hundred of them, but still, the total would be no more than 1.551 SP. It's unclear how many genômos she killed, but we've precisely recorded the kill counts of other monsters. If you count backward from there, around 45 points would be Enkai's share.

"Haah, yep, as expected of a god. Since there's two of us, he gives 90 points in total. It'd mean you can count it as floor of appearance x 5. The 5 would be a god factor, I'd say."

"What an amazing factor. But leaving that aside, which stat do you want to raise?"

It's only now that she can allot all points as she likes. If a bit of time passes, half of it will likely get assigned to her stats automatically.

"Let's see~ I suppose INT?" Miyoshi says while tossing fried chicken into the muzzles of Arthur's who only pop out their heads from her shadow in turns.

"You're not thinking about summoning another 10 hellhounds by adding 40 points to INT or something like that, are you?"

"How did you..."

"Anyone woulda grasp a' much!" [efn_note]Osaka dialect for some reason[/efn_note]

I mean, what is she going to do with another ten hounds anyway? Alone the amount of magic crystals needed as rewards sounds to me like a future causing eyes to bleed.

"Take something more meaningful. Like, how about raising your LUC?"

"I'm going to leave that part to you, senpai. I feel like its current value is perfect for researching. We gotta find out the drop rates for normal people as well, don't we?"

"Yeah, okay, makes sense."

"Even if I raise STR or VIT, it wouldn't change me getting insta-killed if something like Enkai appears. I also have an issue with assigning the points evenly across all stats."

She's right, evenly distributing stat points is the path of doom for any character in games.

"Okay, but wouldn't it be fine to at least raise your AGI some to be able to avoid attacks?"

"An INT/AGI build, eh?" Miyoshi ponders for a bit, but suddenly brings up something that has apparently come to her mind just now, "By the way, do Arthur's become stronger as well?"

That's something I want to know as well. They were done in from just getting grazed by Enkai's attacks, but they normally bit genômos to death. Going by experience points, genômos give twice as much as hellhounds.

"You know, I kinda feel like those guys haven't been normal hellhounds to begin with, but...can't you appraise them?"

"I tried it before, but all I found out was their current state."

Something like their current HP / MP seems to be expressed in percent. Since it's no absolute values, you can't get a read on their power.

"Is it the same for monsters, too?"

"At present, yes. Though, in case of monsters, there's also their names and the previously mentioned surplus value."

"Then, Enkai was——"

"A complete failure."

Some skills evolve. We don't know how it'll turn out in the future, but currently Appraisal doesn't seem very useful in battle. But, leaving that aside, undoubtedly we will sooner or later reach a floor where Arthur's are completely useless if we assume that they can't be strengthened.

"In games, summons are boosted by their master's parameters, by acquiring experience points the normal way, or through special items and events."

"Maybe they'll get stronger if we feed them magic crystals?"

"Sounds possible."

"How about asking the hounds in question instead?"

Since they seem to basically understand what we're saying, it should be possible to get some information out of them by skilfully combining questions that can be answered with yes or no, shouldn't it?

"Oh, you're right!"

Miyoshi immediately begins to ask Cavall about various things. But, girl, aren't you forgetting something? What about your stats?

Since I can't do anything about it either way, I vacantly stare at the values on the monitor, pondering about what we're going to do tomorrow and afterwards. We've told Ms. Naruse to freely use our office since we're going to dive for a while.

"Well, Glessic is over there, so our office should be mostly safe..."

As I start saying this, a hellhound's head suddenly pops out of the shadow in front of me, tilting slightly to the side as if asking, "You called?"

"Wh-...? Hey, Miyoshi. Is this Glessic?"

In fact, I can't really tell apart the four hounds. About the only thing I know is that it's Drudwyn who's become emotionally attached to me.

Miyoshi looks this way and confirms.

"No, no, no, wait, wait...Glessic is watching our office, right? Eh? Are you saying Ms. Naruse is defenseless right now?"

"No, I think Aethelm is over there at the moment."

"Whaaa-?!"

Aethelm should have been knocked down earlier after covering for Miyoshi, no?

As I'm obviously confused, Miyoshi gives me a detailed explanation. According to her, the hounds are apparently taking care of the office in a fixed rotation.

"Otherwise, if only one were to watch the office, that hound wouldn't be able to listen to what everyone's saying."

Well, it's not that I don't understand that, but...

"Wait. Are you saying that these guys' ability to move through shadows works inside and outside the dungeon?"

"It looks like they can move around by switching places with their targets if both are separated by a

certain distance, so it's not like they can move around as they please."

"No, Miyoshi, doesn't that mean that you can get in contact with the outside from inside the dungeon and vice versa...?"

"Eh? But, these children can't talk, you know?"

"They dived into their shadows while carrying lamps, right? If you have them carry letters, they can deliver those, and if you have them carry storage media, we could send around any movie or text we want, no?"

"Oh, you mean as delivery service, huh? However, I can't tell whether that will work as long as we don't test whether the item they wear will switch places together with them every time."

"But, if it's possible, we won't need to attack the colonial worms with the objective of finding an item that might or might not exist!"

"As expected, you sure don't want to get involved with those worms, senpai."

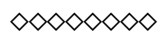
"Of course not."

Only trained soldiers are capable of calmly facing such disgusting monsters. For me, it's impossible. Absolutely.

But then again, despite having attacked those worms to an extent of causing traumas among the explorers of each country during the <Different World Language Comprehension> incident, none of them has been able to obtain that item. I mean, no one would willingly step on a landmine, right?

"I suppose, you guys are quite useful."

Glessic happily pants with his tongue out, but once he realizes that he won't get anything from me, he edges up to Miyoshi with only his head protruding from the shadow. What a calculating guy.



What Miyoshi learned from Arthur's about their strengthening options was extremely vague, but still gave us some pointers. In short, following three methods seem to work:

- They feel like their stats will grow alongside an increase of their master's MP (probably).
- They feel like their stats and skills increase through the intake of magic crystals.
- They might also grow through combat.

"Yep, it's kinda vague."

"That's unavoidable. I mean, we don't clearly perceive slight changes in our stats either."

"Yeah, that makes sense."

It's different when a stat suddenly doubles or similar, but we definitely don't feel a stat changing if it goes up by 1 over a long period of time.

"Even if it's just a feeling, MP seems to be important. Wouldn't it be smart to focus on INT?"

"I don't mind, but since it'd be a pain if you suddenly summon a large amount of doggos, hold back on that for the time being, okay?"

After all she currently can't send back any of the doggos once summoned. If we've got too many doggos around, it's set in stone that some folks asking to hand over at least one for research purposes are going to show up sooner or later. Besides, these guys all look the same. It's already confusing enough with four doggos, but it'd be next to impossible for me to memorize ten doggos.

"Okay. Ah right, about my AGI: please raise it for me since it's going to be tough on me at this rate when moving around together with you, senpai. Let alone during attacks."

"Oh, you mean as in travel speed? Well, it's definitely going to be difficult to carry you around in places where other people could see us."

"Even without people staring, I hate that way of traveling."

"Very well, I'll increase AGI to 20 and INT to 40. Okay, done. Feel any changes?"

Name: Miyoshi Azusa
SP 19.937

HP 23.60
MP 69.60 (104.4)

STR (-) 8 (+)
VIT (-) 9 (+)
INT (-) 40 (+)
AGI (-) 20 (+) (30)
DEX (-) 13 (+)
LUC (-) 10 (+)

"Ooohh? Somehow my body feels light!"

"Well, your AGI has gone up by almost three times thanks to the bracelet's power. If you get too hyped and frolic around too much, you're going to run into a wall."

When I changed my AGI to 100 for the first time, I crashed into a wall because I was running too quickly. It didn't lead to any serious injuries since I had raised my VIT to 100 at the same time, but Miyoshi's VIT is that of an ordinary person. I really don't wanna watch her turning into ketchup.

"I'm not you, senpai. I won't pull such a gaffe."

"Yeah, yeah, whatever. Oh, should I also raise STR and VIT to 10 to make it a bit easier for your appraisal?"

"That might be a good idea." Miyoshi says while staring at the paper with her stats.

"Alright. Set STR and VIT to 10, INT to 50, and put the rest into DEX."

"Okay~"

"Since I'm sure that I'll get the missing one SP in no time, raise DEX to 20 as soon as possible, please."

"No problem."

In the end, Miyoshi's stats have become like this (the bracketed values reflect the effect of the item):

Name: Miyoshi Azusa
SP 0.937

HP 27.00
MP 86.80 (130.2)

STR (-) 10 (+)
VIT (-) 10 (+)
INT (-) 50 (+)
AGI (-) 20 (+) (30)
DEX (-) 19 (+)
LUC (-) 10 (+)

Her HP is extremely worrisome, but since 90% of the damage is going to be absorbed by her MP thanks to the bangle's skill, I think she'll be alright.

"It'd be nice if Arthur's managed to power up with this as well."

"Yep."

"Oh, speaking of items...you looted the chair, didn't you?"

Miyoshi overreacts by jumping with a start, and then says after crossing her arms behind her back, "Ahaha, you found out? I was just curious whether I'd be able to take an item that's no drop."

"Come on, how do you expect me to not find you snatching such a big chair, girl?! So, did you appraise it?"

"When I put it away. Its name is 『The Throne of Ngai』. It was real gold, you know? It's too heavy, so I'm not going to take it out here." With those words, Miyoshi writes down the appraisal result from back then.

This girl sure has a good memory.

The Throne of Ngai

A chair made out of Ngai's gold.

Regenerate HP +200%

Regenerate MP +200%

One trying to sit on the throne ought to display a suitable might. Otherwise, the throne will reject them.

"The throne of Ngai, you say? It sure sounds like it'd weigh around a hundred kilogram..."

"Senpai, if it only weighed a hundred kilogram, I could take it out here. The relative weight of gold is around 19.3. If you take it as roughly 20, 100 kilogram would fill a volume of no more than 5000 cm³."

Speaking of 5000 cm³, it'd mean 10 cm x 10 cm x 50 cm.

"Then, assuming the throne is made out of pure gold, 100 kg would roughly cover one of the throne's legs, I suppose."

"Correct. That's why the throne likely weighs more than 600 kg."

"Haah. But, if you sit down on a chair of pure gold, its legs and backrest would bend or something under the wait, no?"

"That's why it's being described as 『Ngai's gold』."

"However, judging from its effects, this thing is pretty much a health chair, isn't it?"

"It definitely sounds like it'd alleviate fatigue."

A doubled recovery rate of MP/HP might be handy, depending on the situation.

"And what about this flavor text here?"

In response to my question, Miyoshi folds her arms and knits her eyebrows.

"It's kinda iffy. It seems like anyone who sits down on the chair besides Ngai would get cursed by it."

"This isn't the Mask of Tutankhamun. Something like curses nowadays — well, it's not like I can exclude the possibility, though."

Stuff like curses sounds ridiculous. But then again, monsters created by dungeons prowling around are already ridiculous to begin with. At this point anything might be possible.

"If we interpret the text literally, it sounds more like not being able to sit on the chair than getting cursed by it, don't you think?"

"The part about displaying your might does sound a bit fishy. Something might appear, as if rubbing Aladdin's lamp, as soon as you sit down on the throne, resulting in a battle or something like that."

"Stop it."

We exchange looks due to this highly possible development, and promise each other to refrain from sitting down on it for the time being.

"That's all the items we obtained on the summit, huh?"

"Ah, it's not from the summit, but there's actually one more item." Miyoshi retrieves something similar to a tree's branch from her <Storage>.

"What's that?"

"Mufufu." Miyoshi grins broadly with a look teeming full of triumph.

"Give it a rest with the gross smile of having your sinister trick exposed."

"Gross smile...how rude. This thing is called 『Mufufu』, just so you know."

"Mufufu?"

"Brachylaena huillensis is a tree, commonly referred to as Mufufu. Mufufu seems to be its name in Swahili."

Mufufu is an extremely tough tree, and seems to be used as flooring for places carrying heavy

machinery.

"Originally it's a tree growing in dry lowland forests, but same as with the Kenya Mountains, it's growing around here as well."

"So, what about it?"

"This hasn't crumbled apart into black light particles even after cutting it off." Miyoshi puts the Mufufu branch back into her <Storage>, suddenly puts on a serious expression, and fixes her sitting posture.

"Senpai, you can't go back while carrying dungeon monsters since they immediately vanish after you defeat them, right?"

"Yeah."

"In that case, can you bring back the trees or stones inside a dungeon?"

Now that she mentions it, I haven't paid much attention to that part. After a dungeon trip, my dusty clothes were still dusty on the surface. Thus, wouldn't it be okay to consider that you can take back such things?

"You can, I'd say."

"Then, what happens to the stones and trees after bringing them back?"

I'm starting to somehow grasp what Miyoshi wants to say. Monsters respawn. But what about objects that can be moved inside the dungeon? It might be inefficient to break down the walls, but you can cut down the plants growing there. Will those plants respawn in such a case? What about rocks you've picked up?

"If you go by common sense, they'd remain with you."

"But, I doubt anyone has tested it out."

It sounds like the 3D-mapping tool programmed by Miyoshi worked as impetus here. After we started to go down to the second floor and below, the forms of the plants plotted on the 3D-map were always the same on the paths we would always take. Of course it's possible that no one has affected any of the plants. But, could it really be that no one broke a branch or similar? Even if only to kill some time?

"Having said that, it'd stand out if a tree that had been felled before suddenly revived one day. You haven't heard any such stories, have you?"

"Isn't that possibly simply owed to no one having investigated this in the last three years? In the first place, what's the reason for undergrowth, which no one would trim, seemingly not having withered or grown over a period of three years, senpai?"

She's definitely right about that one. I've never heard anything about cutting down the grasses on

paths through forest floors because they were in the way.

Come to think of it, a similar question would also apply to the attendants summoned during boss battles. The summons of Hound of Hecate didn't vanish until the boss died or a resummoning. Would it actually be possible to bring back the defeated hellhounds to the surface then? Assuming some explorers would take on Hecate indefinitely without killing it or finishing the battle in another way, would it be possible to perform a dissection on the surface for research?

In a manner of speaking, the dungeons allow humans to take out the dropped items. However, it hasn't ever been investigated in full just how far this permission goes.

"So, you've cut a nearby Mufufu to check whether it's going to respawn?"

"It's right next to Dolly's entry. I mean, if stones don't respawn at the same location, I wouldn't be able to tell anything about their respawn."

Even if you defeat a monster, it's not like it'll respawn at the same location right away. It's considered that they likely respawn at some place on the same floor, but currently there's no way to make sure of that theory in this huge Yoyogi dungeon. Even if stones respawn, we won't have any way to check it.

"Is there some benefit if the cut branch respawns?"

There are fairly big trees inside the dungeon, but not enough that they could serve as wood resources. At most, furniture might sell if you add the extra label of it being made out of dungeon-native wood, but I doubt that it'll have much of an impact on society.

"Didn't we talk about the food drops before?"

"Hmm? Yeah, we did."

"I think that in itself will be magnificent for areas suffering from food shortage. There's the issue with the necessary number of explorers, though," Miyoshi shrugs her shoulders. "But then it struck me. Various environments exist within dungeons, right?"

"Yeah, I mean, Yoyogi has a lava floor (11th) or ice and snow floors (19th~20th)."

"Even dungeons, which have dry and cold lands where you can't grow any crops, possess floors that are suitable for farming, I'm sure."

Speaking of Yoyogi, the second to fourth floors consist of plains and forests.

"What if you could perform farming on a large scale on those floors? Assuming sown wheat would normally grow there, would the dungeon allow for it to be taken out?"

"You mean it might be possible to harvest wheat and take it out, if you can take back a naturally grown tree after felling it, huh? As long as it doesn't turn into black particles, that is."

"Correct."

"But, assuming it's possible, even the floors in Yoyogi, which are said to be fairly big, have a radius of around five kilometers. Wouldn't farming on a large scale be impossible?"

"That's the point, senpai. That's why the outcome of this experiment is so important."

"Don't tell me..."

At the moment it's no more than a simple confirmation whether plants that were cut in the dungeon respawn. However, in the next step, it might lead to a talk about whether plants brought in from outside can be turned into dungeon plants. And if that's the case——

"Assuming dungeons respawn the plants growing in the state before being cut——"

"Indeed. Assuming grains which were brought in from outside — though it'd be fine to raise them from seeds — were to be recognized by the dungeon as native plants belonging to the dungeon from the start——"

"——it might be possible to keep harvesting them infinitely. It'd be the birth of magic fields!"

"Amazing, right?"

She's right, it does sound amazing. If it proves to be true, it'd be the discovery of the century. But, wait a sec...

"However, how's that related to Ngai's Throne?"

Miyoshi raises her body partially with her eyes wide open, tightly clenches her fists, and emphasizes by furiously swinging them up and down, "What are you saying, senpai!? If that's made out of gold, and if it respawns alongside Ngai, we'll be able to farm 600 kg of gold on a daily basis! It'll be a major mine yielding the annual yield of gold at the Hishikari Mine in merely ten days! Something like the 50th floor won't even matter any more, it'll become completely insignificant!"

No, wait, that got nothing to do with farming though. In the first place——

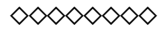
"That plan of yours has a fatal, life-threatening flaw, doesn't it!?"

What battle maniac do you have to be to fight something like that monster every day!? Well, leaving aside the throne, 90 SP is a pretty charming prospect, I believe. Though, turning it around, there must be some kind of reason why Enkai has given us that much SP. I'm 100% sure that there must be something hidden behind that.

"Tehehe. Well, I suppose you're right about that."

"Heck, pray that Enkai's repop doesn't actually take place on top of that damn throne."

"Ugh, I hadn't considered that possibility at all..." Miyoshi panics for a change.



Waking up the next morning, Miyoshi rushes out of Dolly faster than I can wash my face, visiting the brachiosaurus she cut yesterday.

"What large dinosaur are you talking about...?"

"Don't mind it. So, the Mufufu, what about the Mufufu?"

"Mufufufu."

When I look at the place where Miyoshi is pointing at, the same branch as the one in Miyoshi's hand has grown back without a hitch.

"You cut it at that spot?"

"I'm certain."

The tree with that branch having been cut off is displayed on the tablet Miyoshi shows to me.

"So it does repop, huh?"

"It's a great step towards infinite harvesting fields!"

"Well, the problem is rather whether the dungeon will recognize imported plants as a part of itself. According to your own words, plants inside the dungeon don't grow, right?"

Even if sown seeds are recognized as native plants by the dungeon, they'll stay seedlings since they won't grow here. Even if those respawn, it'd be unreasonable to look for them by walking all over a huge dungeon.

"About that part...doesn't it grow somewhere from the start, wheat that is?"

"Then you could only use places where it grows naturally, but not fields."

"Figures..."

"In any case, this issue is full of questions we won't solve without testing out various things. For now, let's accomplish what we came here for."

"You're right. Let's return to the mountain's foot."

Moreover, Enkai fortunately hasn't respawned on top of the throne. I think he's revived in that inner sanctum located beyond the birth canal. Most likely.

On that day, we continued farming genômos as if we were dealing with the first floor's slimes here. For the sake of allowing various people and countries to test out <Mining>, we need a certain amount of orbs. Of course we're planning to sell them through auctions. Because the drop rate is

1/10,000, the cooldown time for <Making> amounts to 8.64 seconds. As that's a value close to zero, the timer poses no problem at all.

Learning from yesterday, we didn't enter the plaza in front of the temple. As we had Arthur's pull the genômos from around the cave's entrance area, we didn't get exposed to any dangerous situations either.

Several stacked futons were an efficient means of defense against the stone throwing. Futons are really amazing. We were lucky that there were no monsters capable of using fire around, but objectively seen, we might have looked like weirdos when shooting our iron balls and spells while covered in futons from head to toe.

Even as we kept defeating them, the genômos kept appearing without end. They kept spawning and spawning so much that I started to suspect it as the dungeon's measure to guarantee the obtaining of <Mining>.

"Let's soon go to the 20th floor and check things out?" I suggest to Miyoshi after obtaining one of <Nimbleness>, <Night Vision>, and <Earth Magic> each, and the seventh <Mining>.

"You're right. Senpai, your MP seems a bit low, too."

"The recovery is quick, but with those numbers..."

I wanted to fire one inferno from the entrance, but considering the MP recovery and the spawn of the next group, I found no good opportunity to do so. Unfortunately.

"Okay, once we check out <Mining> on the 20th floor, we'll return to the surface."

"Sure, sure."

We quickly withdraw from the cave. The genômos wouldn't follow any further than halfway through the tunnel, as they're apparently tied down by something.

"Wouldn't it be super easy to hunt them en masse from a safe zone by using that habit of theirs?"

"Are they still going to spawn if you don't go deeper inside the cave? When we first entered the tunnel, there were none around, you remember?"

"Oh, I see."

"It seems good for running away, though."

Taking the shortest route according to the map, we descend to the 20th floor while chatting.

"Now then, time to test the credibility of RU22-0012."

In order to test the relation between LUC and the drop rate of ores, both of us used <Mining>. Afterwards, Miyoshi respectfully said, "There are some epitaphs with slightly wrong contents, too...I shall yield the first strike to you in commemoration, senpai."

Yoyogi's 19th and 20th floors are ice and snow floors. The monsters appearing here are yetis, abominable snowmen, ice crawlers, and snow al-mi'raj. Sensing a snow al-mi'raj that appeared right ahead of us, I throw an iron ball. The ball pierces through the al-mi'raj like butter, causing the rabbit to burst, and scatter into black particles.

"...There's a limit to overkills."

"I guess 200 STR was too much..."

"Well it was enough to kill a god, albeit on the 18th floor..."

Either way, the snow al-mi'raj has dropped a silver ingot.

"Ooh? Silver all of a sudden?"

Picking it up, I frown after seeing the name displayed there. It's because it reminds me of the trouble related to vanadium that led to me leaving a company.

"Vanadium?"

"Yep, vanadium."

The size of the dropped metal ingot is roughly that of a gold bullion with 113 mm x 52 mm. However, its thickness is three times that of a gold bullion. Vanadium's relative weight is less than a third of gold. In short, this is a one kilogram ingot. The drop rate is 33% for Miyoshi, and 100% for me. Same applies to any monster we slay. It looks like LUC plays a role in this as well.

After checking as much, we quickly begin to prepare our return to the surface. No matter how great Dolly might be, I can do without spending a night on an ice floor.

And then, on the next day, we returned to the surface.

§067 D-Factor 12/15 (Sat)

After hurrying, we came back up to the surface in the late afternoon of the thirteenth.

"We're back~"

"Oh, welcome back. So, how did it go?" Having completely grown accustomed to our office, Ms. Naruse greets us as naturally as if she's been our office staff for a long time now.

"We've managed to confirm various things."

Probably for the sake of noting it down for her report, Ms. Naruse retrieves a pen, and writes something down on a blank sheet.

"First off, it looks like all the explanations about parties are correct."

"With this, it should work as good collateral to prove Heaven's Leaks' credibility."

"I see. Somehow it takes a load off my mind."

"And as for <Mining>, genômos properly drop it."

Hearing that, Ms. Naruse drops her pen with her mouth wide-open.

"Y-You've already acquired it?" Ms. Naruse picks up her pen in a hurry, and asks in astonishment, baffled by us having obtained an unknown skill very easily.

"Yes, somehow we've got lucky."

"While at it, we've also confirmed the drops on the 20th floor!" Miyoshi says excitedly while immediately taking the silver ingot out of her bag, and placing it on the table.

"Huh? You've already used it!?"

The usage of an unknown skill is accompanied by danger. For us that doesn't apply since we've got <Appraisal>, but — wait, I kinda feel like we've calmly used the orbs even before acquiring <Appraisal>, just judging the orbs by the skill names, but considering it now, it wouldn't have been weird for a skill like <High Recovery> to be a trap that would turn your body into that of a slime, like <Immortality> turns you into an undead.

Even though it's something you'll encounter often in history, many scientists have been using their bodies for their experiments. Though it almost always led to those scientists being called crazy by their surroundings. In situations where they want to test and analyze something by all means, such scientists tend to take risks. And as long as they use their own bodies, it's not in conflict with the Helsinki Declaration either. [efn_note]Check <https://www.wma.net/policies-post/wma-declaration-of-helsinki-ethical-principles-for-medical-research-involving-human-subjects/> [/efn_note]

Werner Forßmann, who won the Nobel Prize of Medicine in 1956 because of his work on heart catheters, tried to insert an urine catheter into the right atrium through the vena cava of his own left arm during his time as medical intern. Thanks to that experiment, he was dismissed by the hospital, but it resulted in him winning the Nobel Prize 30 years later. Even if you refer to something more up to date, Michael Smith performed experiments using himself as a guinea pig in the year of the dungeons' appearance. He tested which place would hurt the most if stung by a bee. He apparently found out that it was the nostrils, but thanks to that, he could proudly earn himself ten trillion after winning a prestigious prize in physiology and entomology. Even if the currency might have been Zimbabwe-Dollars of 2015 with the award being the Ig Nobel Prize. Of course I'm not talking about the Canadian Michael Smith who won the Nobel Prize for Chemistry in 1993.

Thinking back on it now, you could say our actions lacked prudence, but since we wouldn't have reached any conclusions by just thinking it over, we actually had no choice but to try the orbs out.

"Yes, but it doesn't seem to have any effect besides triggering the ores to drop."

Ms. Naruse breathes out deeply, obviously relieved, but in the next moment, she says, "Moreover, you could confirm the drop, huh?", in surprise.

"Just on the 20th floor, though." I point at the vanadium. "It was vanadium that dropped on that floor."

"Vanadium!?"

Vanadium is a rare metal also used in the chemical company we worked at, but I think it's mostly demanded as an additional agent in steel manufacture. Its price should be around 10,000 Yen per kilogram. Since gold costs a little less than 5,000 Yen per gram, it's literally cheaper by several digits.

"Hmm? If I remember correctly, its price has been rising steeply, but you can't describe it as overly valuable, can you?"

"Senpai, you're talking about vanadium with a low purity. Since it's a product of the dungeon, this one should be a 99.99 vanadium ingot at the very least, don't you think?"

It means 99.99% of it is pure vanadium. Such purity values are also noted as 4N. Old audio maniacs supposedly use cables with 6N or 7N for their speakers. Come to think of it, she's right. Since it's a dungeon drop, and is called vanadium by the dungeon system, it's even possible that it's a 100% vanadium ingot.

"You're right. It could also be a 100% ingot."

"You see? In reality, such a purity degree of vanadium doesn't exist."

Vanadium is a metal existing in reasonable quantities on Earth, but its ore deposit grade is low. [efn_note]Ore deposit grade describes the content of a metal in an ore in percent.[/efn_note] Moreover, no groundbreaking, efficient methods to procure vanadium with a high purity have been discovered so far. This means the refining costs go up in proportion to the purity degree.

"Even the price for a purity from 99,7% to 99,9% goes up from 80,000 to 110,000 Yen per kilogram."

"Hee, I hadn't expected that, really."

"Vanadium is sold in tons. If it's retail, something like a 4N cube of Kanto Chemical Industries costs 100,000 Yen per 100 gram."

A million per kilogram is damn amazing. One drop of an ingot has the same value as a heal potion (1). Wait, isn't tenfold kinda extreme? Still, it doesn't get close to gold.

"Leaving aside the price, vanadium is unevenly distributed over South Africa, China, and Russia as a resource, so wouldn't it be a major piece of news from the standpoint of a stable supply and security guarantee?"

Yeah, you can look at it like that as well, I suppose. For a country it's important, I'm sure.

"But, in the end it's a one kg ingot. It'd be difficult to satisfy a big demand, wouldn't it?"

"According to the documents I read at our previous company, the annual demand of vanadium seems to be ten tons. Of course that excludes ferrovanadium, the alloy with the biggest demand."

"If you were to try covering all of that with monster drops, it'd require three million monsters just to get that amount of vanadium, no?"

Hearing that, Ms. Naruse looks mystified, "Eh? How did you calculate that...?"

"Normally one ingot drops every three monsters," Miyoshi supplements.

Yep, hunting more than 8200 monsters per day is a bit... Even if you challenge that task with a hundred teams, every team would still need to defeat 82 monsters per day on average. This would be way harsh. I mean, that floor is damn cold.

"You're correct if you only try covering it with Yoyogi, but there's quite a few dungeons in Japan," Ms. Naruse adds.

Come to think of it, that's also quite a riddle. It's considered that around 80 dungeons have been discovered in the 36 or 37 Areas on Earth, but if you include the very shallow dungeons, nine dungeons exist in Japan. There should be a reason for the uneven distribution, but currently it's not really clear.

On top of that, there's many unexplored places in other countries, too. You could argue that the other dungeons simply haven't been found yet, but even considering that, the dungeon spawn distribution is still too biased.

Anyway, very likely it's only Yoyogi where vanadium drops on the 20th floor, but it's no mistake to believe that it might also drop on another floor in other dungeons.

"Either way, it means that the content of RU22-0012 has been proven, right?"

"At least on the 20th floor of Yoyogi."

At that moment, Miyoshi's smartphone vibrates.

Saying "Oh, excuse me for a moment. It looks like Midori is calling," she leaves towards the dining room.

"So you're going to publicize it on Christmas as planned then?"

Since it's also Ms. Naruse's time for sending the report to her superior, she might feel uneasy.

"Finishing all the various preparations will take around that much time. Monica — America will also need around that long to publish its findings, I believe."

"I see."

"Even without hurrying it, I think we can obtain a reasonable amount of <Mining> if it's Yoyogi."

After all, the drop rate is 1 to 10,000. It's an exceedingly high drop rate, considering that it's an orb. On top of that, the monsters spawn infinitely. If you possess high-level area-of-effect magic, it's super easy to farm. If it's that cave, it looks like you can bring in small, powerful firearms, too.

"How do you know that?"

"Umm...look, we managed to get it after a few days as well."

"That's only D-Powers...no, I understand. On that subject, I've mostly finished sorting through the information, too."

With those words, Ms. Naruse heads over to the next room, and brings back a tablet stuffed with her translations. The 266 registered epitaphs are classified into 161 dungeon manuals, 82 historic documents, and 23 cryptic epitaphs. Around 40% of them seem to overlap in content.

"266...that's way more than I expected."

"On average, one epitaph per dungeon has been discovered every year."

Oh, I see. Even if it's just 80 per year, it'll become 240 in three years.

"Now that I've heard the breakdown from you, I somehow feel like the epitaph discovery rate is rather low."

"Since the discovery frequency goes up the deeper you head into dungeons, the pace might increase in the near future. Though, the overlapping content might become even more confusing as the epitaphs grow in number," Ms. Naruse frowns.

The discovery of epitaphs is similar to drops from monsters, but an epitaph can be hidden

somewhere on a floor, or simply lay on the ground.

"As far as I can tell from the additional information from what I've translated, items obtained from area bosses seem to play a major role in this as well."

The epitaph about the ore drop of RU22-0012 came from an area boss, and BF26-0003 about the food was discovered on a unique monster that suddenly spawned like Hecate.

"It's the same for something like this." Ms. Naruse points at a page with GB26-0007 written on it. "This has been found in the dungeon on Man Island. It talks about safety zones in dungeons."

"Safety zones?"

The epitaph gives an overview about safe areas and safe floors which start to appear on the 32nd floor of a dungeon and below.

"Safe floor means an entire floor is a safe area?"

"Looks like it."

"Senpai, if we spot such a floor, we can definitely build a town there." Miyoshi rejoins the conversation, apparently having finished her call.

"What did Ms. Midori say?"

"We talked about that device in question. For the time being, we've agreed to meet up tomorrow."

Nodding at Miyoshi, I return to the topic of safe areas, "It sure sounds like a recurrence of the land-use issue inside dungeons. Ms. Naruse, it'd be best if you set up some rules in advance while you still can."

Ms. Naruse bobs her head, answering, "I'll bring it up with my boss."

There are too many important epitaphs to count, such as US01-0001 which backs the dungeon = passage theory, or AU10-0003 which writes about the roles of dungeons. While roughly scanning through those, I notice that many terms you wouldn't hear overly often in daily life appear on several occasions.

"What's this 『Magic Source』 that's frequently referenced in here?"

"Isn't it the source of magic power as it often appears in fictional stories?" Miyoshi immediately replies, but it's Ms. Naruse, the holder of <Different World Language Comprehension>, who has used this term to describe the dungeon's concept in our language. Therefore it should be quite dependable on Ms. Naruse's vocabulary.

"What's your image of it, Ms. Naruse?"

"Let's see...I guess it feels like 『an element for the sake of embodying dungeon power』. I think it'd have been fine to go with atom or element, but that'd have invited misunderstandings." She explains

in a reserved manner.

An element embodying dungeon powers, huh? Dungeon's Atom, or Dunam for short? Yeah okay, that really sounds like some robot anime.

"If it's for embodying dungeon powers, wouldn't factor work? D-Factor. The latin word root is 『Perpetrator』." [efn_note]A/N: Miyoshi has randomly mentioned it in Volume 2, but it's been corrected in the second edition of the volume. Eh? You possess the first edition? Forget about it!! Btw, Shasu-kun possesses the 3rd edition[/efn_note]

"That one got a nice vibe."

"Ah, but D-Factor has been mentioned in the Psychological Review that was published this summer."

What Miyoshi has looked up refers to an element commonly shared by those with dark personalities, according to a study that was released by a joint research team of the Copenhagen University, Ulmer University, and University of Koblenz and Landau. It's called Dark Factor, I think.

"For abbreviations to overlap is rather normal, isn't it? Stuff like ATM is really overloaded, you know?" [efn_note]Automated teller machine, Asynchronous Transfer Mode, Anti-Tank Missile, just to name a few[/efn_note]

For ATM, it's anything goes.

"Okay, that makes sense."

"According to AU10-0003, dungeons seem to be tools for scattering magic source — D-Factor now, I guess."

"A tool for scattering the D-Factor?"

In short, it means dungeons are continuing to spit out a material called D-Factor even as we're speaking? Adding to that, over a period of three years now?

"Eh? Are we going to be alright?" Miyoshi asks with an uneasy look.

The fact that mankind has been unknowingly exposed to an unknown material for three years inevitably makes the issue of pollution cross your mind if you consider it just for a moment.

"You mean as in the existence of the D-Factor, right? The effect it has on the human body isn't recognized as a particular problem if you look at it in regards to public health."

It appears to be data based on the physical examinations of all explorers. When they compared the data with non-explorers, they found no significant difference in the examination results after researching the medical check-ups and disease rates. Rather, the researchers seemed to have the impression that the explorers' health has been promoted on the whole.

However, what's bothering me is the phraseology used by Ms. Naruse.

"In other words, there's a problem if you disregard looking at it in regards to public health?"

"Nothing less of you, senpai. You love spinning words around."

Miyoshi teases my perceptive contemplation through an evil comment. But, girl, anyone would think so if she expressly uses such a preface like 『looking at it in regards to public health』, right!?

"I guess you can call it a problem——" Ms. Naruse reveals a smile at our exchange while adding, "——Mr. Yoshimura, what is your take on such a game-like system with leveling, stats, and so on?"

Stats - those can be considered a quantification of human abilities like it happens in games. The existence of experience points and stats was highly contested among researchers at first when the dungeon research began, and until this very day, researchers haven't fully understood the details. But then again, the existence of these values will become clear from the information written on the epitaph about the party system.

"If you're asking with the intent of wanting to know whether levels and stats are related to the phenomenon that could be called a strengthening of the explorers, I'd agree. Is that the problem you're talking about?"

"Rather than a problem, I think it should be described as a phenomenon that can't be explained adequately..."

The influence of stats. Our own investigations have led us to the guess that stats might somehow function like an exoskeleton. No matter how much you examine the physiological values, the effect doesn't really reveal itself in those. Thus, she might be right in saying that medical science can't explain it as anything but a phenomenon triggered by an inexplicable power.

"Having said that, there's no evidence of explorers being affected by some mental influence making them especially aggressive or anything like that. Ultimately it's at the level of explorers becoming stronger or having more stamina, but——"

"The extent of its influence goes beyond any imagination."

Ms. Naruse nods, "Nowadays high-ranking explorers might be easily able to break world records in athletics."

She's right. Around that much should be possible. As someone who has actually experienced an AGI of 200, I even feel like running 100 meters in less than two seconds should be possible, not to mention something like nine seconds. Now then, can you still call people capable of something like that humans...even that is already questionable at best.

"If the mysterious phenomena taking place inside and outside the dungeons are caused by this D-Factor, it might mean that skill orbs or potions wouldn't work without it either."

If that's the case, any frantic chemical analysis of potions is bound to fail in clearing up the phenomenon behind them. After all, the real part triggering the phenomenon very likely doesn't

exist within the potions themselves, or isn't a chemical component even if it's contained in the potions.

"Then, the effect being big if you use skill orbs or potions inside a dungeon means——"

"It looks like it's not necessarily a groundless, false rumor."

In reality, the effect of <High Recovery> used on Ayesha was tremendous. Wasn't that affected by the high density of D-Factors within the dungeon? Although it has diffused widely over the world during the last three years, the effect of a potion applied on a person, who doesn't possess a D-Card, in a place far away from a dungeon might be far, far lower if compared to that.

"And it appears that monsters are formed out of D-Factors, which get scattered if you defeat them."

"Are those black light particles when a dead monster disappears the D-Factors in question then?"

"Wanna try to catch them in a bottle next time?"

"I think it's an invisible element?"

"Couldn't you confirm them under an electron microscope if D-Factors actually exist physically?"

A part of modern microscopes, and especially electron microscopes and scanning probe microscopes, allow you to observe atoms. If the D-Factor exists physically, it might be possible to confirm its existence.

"But, how are you going to catch a sample?"

No matter what microscope you have at hand, if you can't obtain an appropriate sample, observing the target will be impossible. Likewise you can't simply watch the oxygen atoms swirling around in the air right where you are.

"How about letting the black light pass through a super fine mesh, and hoping that you've been lucky enough for something to get stuck on the mesh?"

Thrusting a carbon deposited grid mesh for electron microscopes inside the black light, and trying to check it afterwards, huh?

"We can give it a try if you think it's necessary, but I've got almost no hope at succeeding with this method. I mean, it's light, you know?"

Rather, it sounds like sucking it into a very thin pipe and hardening both ends with resin would have a better chance of locking it in. If it's truly a light-like material, that might not work either, but still...

Come to think of it, light enters your body whenever you use a skill orb, too.

"Maybe the stats are influenced by the amount of D-Factors brought into one's body."

I clap my hands together.

"Either way, the mysterious material called D-Factor does exist, and it might be naturally put to use on the other side of the dungeons. I think it means the people on the other side have troubles with worlds that don't possess any D-Factors, and thus they try to prepare a suitable environment for them by creating dungeons and scattering the D-Factor on the worlds connected to theirs."

"If they're capable of something like that, they should also be able to fill other worlds in one go, though. Why would they be using such roundabout methods?"

"We won't know the answer to that unless we ask them, but it might be because they are intelligent life-forms who are building a material civilization for the time being, even if we might look to them like uncivilized monkeys."

"You mean as in them having a rule for getting in contact with intelligent life?"

"They're using magic-like, sophisticated technologies, so I think it'd be reasonable. It's a standard you'll find in many SF works, too."

"Okay, but assuming humans would fly into space and find a planet suitable for life, I feel like the humans wouldn't give a damn if they spotted life-forms at the level of monkeys, even if they had some intelligence as native inhabitants of that planet."

"No, they'd still care if they planned to build a material civilization." I say while bitterly smiling at Miyoshi's extreme comment, but leaving aside the logic, although it's a standard as an immovable hypothesis for life-forms with advanced ethics, you probably can't call it correct. It's no more than a talk at the level of it being nice if it were so.

"Also — ah, right. Maybe suddenly raising the density of the D-Factor might have some bad effect on the native people?"

"Wouldn't such an effect show in the explorers?"

"That'd be the result, right? If you consider it as a patch test performed towards the Earth, it wouldn't be all that strange."

Patch tests are used to verify whether an allergic reaction occurs by clinging an allergen to skin. If you consider it as a test on the small group of explorers to see if any effects occur in an environment with a high concentration of D-Factors, you could explain their actions to some extent. Though I've got no clue why they're using dungeons.

"Maybe they're trying to coexist with us native inhabitants in the end. I mean, they've thrown in various benefits, and it sure looks like mankind is about to get dependent on dungeons, right? It'd make no sense to do something so bothersome if they intended to simply destroy us. Probably."

Their objective might not be Earth, but us humans in fact.

"Senpai, whether they might plan to destroy us or not, do you believe that mankind could oppose something capable of realizing all of this in reality?"

"Definitely not."

"Figures."

In short, everything depends on how they feel about things.

"Well, we've got no choice but to follow the path shown by the dungeons, steadily capture the dungeons, and wait for the first contact, right?"

"I wonder, why doesn't the other side approach us?"

"Maybe they're shy." I joke, but it doesn't ease up Ms. Naruse's expression.

"Even just listening to you two makes me worried what kind of reaction mankind is going to show after seeing all of this. I feel like I slightly understand the reason why Russia hasn't revealed all information they obtained."

If mankind is told that dungeons are tools to remodel Earth, they'll likely react allergically to that. It might trigger movements demanding for the dungeons to be buried all over the world. However, I think it also depends on how you explain that part. In reality, no negative effect befalling Earth has been found so far. Even looking at it from the standpoint of an ordinary citizen like me, I can only see dungeons as an overwhelming plus.

People who lost family during explorations might have a different opinion, but those are risks you can't avoid as an adventurer, I believe. Since explorers head out on exploration out of their own volition, it'd be mistaken to blame the dungeons for whatever happens to them.

"Is it really okay to publicize all of that?" Ms. Naruse mutters while fixedly staring at the tablet in her hands with worry dyeing her face.

"I think it's better to have all facts on the table, no matter how cruel the information might be, if you have to make an important decision. As long as the information is accurate, of course."

I want to believe that the cultural standard of modern society isn't so low that all the information would trigger a panic. This is just wishful thinking, I know.

"Anyway, Ms. Naruse, let me change the topic. There's a little something we'd like to consult you about."

"Huh?" Hearing that, Ms. Naruse puts herself on guard a bit while knitting her eyebrows.

Come to think of it, our last consultations with her were all just outrageous things like becoming a different world language translator or what to do about licenses for hellhounds.

"Please don't get so wary. As a matter of fact, we want to use land on Yoyogi's second floor, but we were wondering who we should ask to get permission."

"Use land? For what?"

"We'd like to cultivate a small farming field."

"Pardon?"

§068 The Long Journey to Agricultural Experiments and New Troubles? 12/15 (Sat)

When dungeons appeared worldwide, the nations were divided on how to handle their property rights at first. In Japan dungeons were initially regarded as property of the land's owner, based on Civil Law §242. In short, they were considered to belong to the real estate's owner as supplementary property. However, later, when the government understood that the interior of dungeons couldn't be described as having real land, they amended the ruling, limiting the ownership of the real estate's owner to only the entrance area of a dungeon. As a result, the property rights of the dungeons' interior remained unsettled.

If the dungeons' interior were to be deemed as property of Japan, the second clause of Civil Law §242 would apply, resulting in the area falling under the ownership of the state, but no one could conclusively determine that those places, which didn't exist on the surface, the underground, and much less the sky, were part of Japan. Some opinions stated that it might be possible to claim ownership over this unpossessed land inside the dungeons by occupying it according to international laws, but in the dungeons, where it'd be a stretch to describe all the various floors as identical areas, this idea was, in short, impossible since the establishment of the influence necessary to practically occupy all floors didn't match the costs this whole endeavor would take.

In the end, no one could claim ownership over the dungeons' interior. Basically it meant that it was impossible to generate tax revenue in regards to economic activity within the dungeons. The nations, which were fairly troubled about how to treat dungeons legally, adopted the format of founding an organization to control all of them. This was the establishment of the WDA.

At present, the WDA holds all the rights within dungeons, and the national dungeon organizations manage the dungeons within their nation's territory (depending on where to find the entrance to the dungeon). If a country with a dungeon needed the rights to manage and use it, the national dungeon organization would lend it out.

Moreover, in Japan almost all of the dungeon entrance areas have become national property. The reason why most land owners accepted selling off the land around the entrance or complied with an expropriation was the promise that they, as owners of land located at a dungeon entrance, wouldn't be held liable if monsters overflowed from the dungeon. In summary, almost all of them went along with not having to bear the responsibility for reimbursing any damages caused by monsters coming out of the dungeon, unrelated to the question whether it'd be their fault or intentional.

In any case, currently Japanese laws apply in regards to the interior of Yoyogi Dungeon. That's also the reason why Civil Law §239 provided the legal basis for explorers to claim drops as their own property. Whether a place would become someone's possession if they settled down inside a

dungeon for 20 years was questionable though, since no one had contended this yet. [efn_note]It's basically a law stating that even the land of someone else becomes your own if you occupy it peacefully and openly for 20 years. Moreover, it's possible for that period to shorten down to 10 years if the start of the occupation happened in good faith. Still, it seems like the land will fall into your hands after 20 years even if you occupy it with malicious intents.[/efn_note]

It's still only three years after the appearance of dungeons in the world. The development of laws will likely proceed further from now on.



"A field, you say...what are you planning to do with something like that inside a dungeon?"

"Aww, you gotta be kidding. Farming is the foundation of any slow life, right? Going by the fact that it's called a field, it'll obviously involve growing produce, wouldn't you say?"

"Haah."

"But senpai, if you listen to the stories of farmers, their life sounds anything but slow."

"Now that you mention it. Farming sure has a reputation of beginning at sunrise, and lasting all the way to sunset."

"Above all, you have to handle animals, meaning, it's not like you can take holidays as you please."

"Ugh...who was it? You who described farming as a slow life, identify yourself!"

"It was you, senpai. You."

"Eehh?"

"Besides, senpai, wouldn't you be an absolutely lost case when it comes to taking care of animals?"

"Oh, you're right! Very well then, Miyoshi, you're a kind person, so please sacrifice yourself for the greater good!"

"You're outsourcing everything to me!?"

"Oh, shifting responsibility to others is kinda like a slow life, I feel?"

"You're completely wrong there! Senpai, even if slow sounds like throw, your version of slow life is more like throw life, isn't it?"

Not slow, but throw, she says? Anyone can say such smart aleck stuff...

"In the first place, just what kind of image do you connect with a slow life, senpai?"

"Image, huh...? Lazing around all day long?"

"How is that any fun?"

Being asked with a very serious look...I recall that I had an extremely strong longing for lazing around back when I was so damn busy that I couldn't even take a day off, but now that it has become possible to put into practice, I feel like I wouldn't be able to settle down with just lazing around all day long.

"Well, I guess I'd get tired of it after three days...wait, just what the hell is a slow life then!?"

"Commonly it describes a life where you don't put any importance on efficiency and speed."

"Just how are you going to live without putting any importance on efficiency? You mean like deliberately idling around?"

"I'd say it'd be doing pointless things for some kind of purpose?"

"Usually, you wouldn't do anything that seems pointless. Wouldn't it be stupid to deliberately change that?"

"At least I've now fully realized that a slow life would be troublesome for you, senpai."

Now, wait a sec. I mean, if you check society for things that seem useless, you'll spot a plethora of pointless tasks being carried out. However, I doubt that anyone would usually do something completely useless if they identify it as such.

"Then, you're saying you want to borrow land inside the dungeon for the sake of a slow life?"

Ugghhh! Ms. Naruse is clearly clad in an aura screaming, "Do shit like that in your own garden!"

"I-It's for an e-experiment."

"Experiment? By farming inside a dungeon?"

"W-Well yeah, but...has there been anyone who did it before?"

"Hmm, I remember having seen records of it being done in some desert region, but..."

Ohhh! There were pioneers!?

"So, how did it turn out?"

"Just like with other facilities inside dungeons, the fields and everything around it apparently disappeared before they noticed, not even reaching the point of a harvest."

"Were slimes the cause?"

"I think that it's quite likely, but...if I'm not mistaken, the cause was considered to be unknown."

I doubt there's any need to mention it at this point, but slimes are the cleaners of dungeons. Nothing would happen if you pile up dungeon stones inside a dungeon, but if you try to build up something by bringing material from outside the dungeon, slimes will suddenly appear out of nowhere, glide across those structures, and dissolve them. It's unclear how the slimes make a distinction between foreign objects and dungeon-native objects. Also, it's a proven fact that slimes won't appear as long as someone is standing guard, but having people watch a huge field 24/7 is pretty much impossible considering the expenses.

There's no ceiling on Yoyogi's second floor. All you find above is a sky. On top of that, stars appear at night. It looks like you'd be actually able to head out in space if you launched a rocket on that floor, but when the JSDF-team that investigated the floor first launched a drone, they couldn't make it fly above a certain height. It's not like the drone collided with something, nor did the drone fall short because of a lack of atmosphere. All that happened was apparently a mysterious phenomenon where the drone's altitude didn't change in spite of the sensors confirming that it was ascending.

By the way, dead end walls like they exist on Yoyogi's first floor don't exist on open space floors. When it comes to the question how far those floors extend, it's been proven that the floors have no border as you'll end up at another end if you go all the way to the edge. In short, the floors appear to be isolated spatially. Thanks to this fact, Yoyogi's second floor was misinterpreted as a tremendously huge area during its first mapping. Maybe the same effect takes place up in the dungeons' skies, but either way, it's still a fact that no ceiling has been spotted.

Of course it'd be absurd to assume that slimes simply drop down from the sky. You'd probably ask yourself whether it wouldn't somehow be possible to stop slimes by building shallow moats filled with Alien's Drool, and keep goblins away with sturdy fences. But, if you get unlucky, any pinpoint respawn would force you to give up on this.

"Anyway, if it's about who would be capable of giving permission, I think the Dungeon Management Department of the JDA would be your best choice, but...since there are no precedents, it'll be difficult to get immediate answers. I'll investigate it."

"Thanks for your efforts in advance."

"Isn't this somehow the job of an exclusive deputy chief?" Miyoshi said from the other side of the monitor as she has been adding the translations to the website.

"Oh, come to think of it, you're totally right!"

No, I mean translation also perfectly fits as a job for a Dungeon Management Department, just...isn't it an ill match with an exclusive deputy chief?

"Still, we're leaving it in your hands, but is the permission for dungeon usage something that would be given to individuals or parties?"

"Isn't that unrelated?" Miyoshi brushes away my interjection as trivial. "Look, senpai, parties that are going to dive deep into dungeons in the future will need to build bases inside the dungeons, considering travel time, but it'd be kinda unreasonable to force those parties to hand in documents asking the JDA for permission each and every single time."

That does make sense. If explorers find a suitable place during their explorations, I'm sure they'll immediately build a base there. If those bases become permanent or exist for a reasonably long period of time, it'll be, in a manner of speaking, equal to the party occupying land inside the dungeon. Prohibiting that will be next to impossible, I think.

"Even if such cases are treated as exceptions, I think it'll become necessary to obtain permission for land use on the early floors which obviously won't have any necessity for such bases." Ms. Naruse comments with her face showing her conflicted feelings on this. "Otherwise some people might start to arbitrarily build villas on the second floor, if it becomes publicly known that building bases without any permission is okay."

Well, I'm sure...there might be some folks who would carry in house modules, and assemble them quickly on site. Of course slimes would likely destroy those if left unguarded, though.

"Besides, there's also the matter with the safe areas."

I think it'll definitely be difficult for the JDA to develop the safe area on its own. Precisely because they're located inside dungeons, the assistance of explorers will be indispensable, and when it comes to scale and meaning of developing the safe areas, it's a safe bet that enterprises will offer their support as well. You could call the whole project something like the ISS (International Space Station). That project seems to be deep in the reds, but with the bases, which can be constructed in safe areas beyond the 32nd floor, being located in areas with metal resources all around them, including gold on the 50th floor, it's possible that this could become a very profitable endeavor.

"I guess, that means, small bases outside the safe areas on the professional floors will be authorized without permission, whereas large bases and occupation of land on the amateur floors will require permission."

"I believe it'll settle down to something like that. So, is that land usage of yours for the sake of making money?"

Hmm? Being asked like that, it's difficult to answer.

"Miyoshi. Do you plan to make a profit if this experiment succeeds?"

"If there's something to profit on, it'd be the intellectual property right or similar, no?"

"Intellectual property right?" Ms. Naruse tilts her head at the sudden comment that got nothing to do with farming a field.

"We want to release the information for free to food support NPOs, but if major multinational crop companies copy the method, we should make them pay for it, right?"

Seeing Miyoshi pull an evil face as she adds, "As much as possible," Ms. Naruse is confused about the current content of our talks, but as might be expected of her, she doesn't butt into our conversation.

"Since that part seems to be somewhat questionable, treat it as us planning to earn money for the

moment, please."

"Eh? U-Understood."

"Senpai, it's a good opportunity, so let's set up a company."

I guess she's talking about the organization to return some of the auctions' profits to society we talked about some time ago. However, is she going to build up a commercial company?

"I wonder whether a NPO would be appropriate when it comes to activities concerning dungeon capture, though."

"A NPO takes more than three months to launch, you know?"

"For real?"

"When we first talked about this, I asked my Judicial scrivener teacher, so there's no mistake."

Nowadays you can establish a public company in less than ten days. And yet NPOs require that many legal formalities?

"In addition, a NPO needs more than 10 employees, more than three directors and one auditor."

"The heck? Wait, now that you mention it, a public company requires three directors as well, doesn't it?"

"It looks like just one director has been deemed acceptable under the new company law. In such cases, a board of directors becomes obsolete as everything will be decided at the general meeting of the stockholders."

"I see. In that case, I suppose it's also okay to go with a public company?"

"Considering our internal circumstances, a limited company would be better."

"A limited company?"

"It's a very exclusive company form, so it has the downside of having difficulties with obtaining financial support by banking facilities, but——"

"That doesn't matter to us, huh?"

Miyoshi then explains the differences between a limited and public company in simple terms, but a limited company doesn't seem to have any particular disadvantages, and if pushed to say, I'd rather prefer as much liberty as possible.

"Would it be okay for me to be the senior partner then?"

"Of course. With that cleared up, Ms. Naruse."

"Yes."

"Please apply for permission with Miyoshi or our party's trading license (it's S-Rank anyway). If it looks like a legal personality is required, we'll arrange one later."

"Okay, even if the size of the land is small?"

"Let's see, as long as it's a few dozen square meters, I'd say. It'd be perfect if the field is located in a remote location with low human traffic."

Rather, it'd be for the best if no one came there at all.

"Sure, I'll bring it up for discussion."

"Please persuade your superiors by bluffing that the outcome of this experiment might revolutionize the world." Miyoshi emphasizes her remark by pulling off a flashy pose of triumph.

As Ms. Naruse is obviously wary, believing that we might be about to do something outrageous again after hearing all that talk about intellectual property rights and major multinational grain companies, I modify Miyoshi words with an inoffensive and harmless comment of "Well, please do what you can."

Still, this much of a pain for just borrowing land inside a dungeon. It might have actually been faster to secretly create a small field in the back regions of the second floor...

When I deeply lean back into the sofa with this thought in mind, my smartphone vibrates.

"Hmm? Ms. Mitsurugi?"

The last time we met was the other Sunday. If I remember correctly, she mentioned that she'd have some free time this month, but... While being surprised, I pick up the phone.

"Yes?"

"Ah, coach?"

"Coach?"

Bah, that's Ms. Saito's voice, isn't it?

"Ms. Saito? What's up with that coach thing? Also, why are you calling me with Ms. Mitsurugi's phone? It's weird."

"There's a lil' something I've got to apologize for, Mr. Yoshimura"

"Apologize?"

"As a matter of fact, I managed to land a lead role, but——"

According to her, she has apparently been allowed to play the heroine in a movie that's going to air next year. Unlike a TV Drama, it's a movie that's going to strongly reflect the views of the casting producer and the director. Since it was very likely for her to get selected as both of them approved of her, even without being overly popular as an actress, she aimed for that audition. Because she had to keep it secret until the official announcement of the movie, she apparently couldn't talk about it when we met on Saturday.

"That's amazing. Then it's a matter of congratulations, isn't it?"

"It's not like I'm asking for a present or anything like that, okay!? Ah, no, there's a lil' something I'd love to have, though."

"Okay, but that's not all, is it?"

Somehow she's quite ambiguous here.

"You see, today there was a press conference for the movie's announcement, and some of the questions were about my recent improvement in acting ability."

It looks like some of the reporters knew about Ms. Mitsurugi and Ms. Saito's frequenting of a dungeon, and asked her whether her improvement was related to that. Well, they probably intended to talk about the somewhat peculiar hobby of the heroine, I suppose.

But since she definitely couldn't say that they had merely continued to kill slimes in the dungeon, she blurted out that she got trained by a coach in the dungeon.

"Pardon?"

"Well, y'see, everyone got super interested in that topic."

No, that's not super interesting, okay!? Just what have you told them, girl!?

"S-So?"

"The mysterious coach has become a super hot topic among everyone on TV and in the entertainment industry."

"Why!?"

"It's nothin' to brag about, but you gotta know, until two months ago, I was a nobody as my acting was ordinary at best."

That's definitely nothing to brag about.

"A newbie actress like me, who had only her cuteness going for her, kicked down the actress scheduled to become the lead in an audition that was partially fixed within a mere two months. It's pretty obvious that it'd cause a racket if such an actress would get selected by the director who didn't know anything about the prior arrangements, right?"

"It was that kind of an audition!?"

"No. That girl approached me later, asking how I won over the director... As I was confused, I got someone related to the movie production to tell me afterwards."

Even if it was called an audition for the lead actress, the TV station partially decided the cast beforehand, prioritizing the agencies they're associated with, exactly because it was a movie the station was deeply involved with. However, since the director is famous for being a stubborn artisan, they didn't let him know about those arrangements in advance. And because that man was very pleased with Ms. Saito's performance, it became impossible to influence his assessment, resulting in her being chosen.

"Okay, well, how to describe it...it sounds like you had your fair share of troubles."

"No kidding! And then, because of the agency of that girl, everyone learned a bit of the details behind this whole thing. As it looked like I'd be treated like a nemesis for a while, I was totally scared! But, what if there was an unknown coach in the shadow of my sudden success? It's pretty much set that many girls would beg to receive his instructions, wouldn't it?"

"It's not set!"

"I've had enough! Haru-chan already gave me a ridiculously long-winded sermon. Even now she's sitting right next to me while glaring. Anyway, sorry for calling you, okay?"

No, I know that she had no evil intent with this. I do understand that, but...

"Was it a live press conference?"

"No. It was a recording."

"Okay, then I'm praying that they're going to cut it out."

"Okay? But I think it's in vain since it was the most exciting part. It's goin' to be on air——"

Then Ms. Saito informed me of the channel, date and time it'd be aired, apologized once more, and hung up.

"Haa~"

"What's wrong for you to sigh so heavily, senpai?"

"It'd be weird if I didn't sigh here." I answer, and repeat what Ms. Saito told me through the phone just now.

"Oh, I see. Such requests will come in as well."

"Requests?"

"Remember the bootcamp we talked about before?"

"That was no joke!?"

As soon as Ms. Naruse, who has been listening to our conversation with a look clearly betraying her belief that we might be starting something again, sees my reaction, she withdraws to the next room as if trying to run away before getting dragged into it, and apparently continues with the sorting of her translations.

§069 Prototypes 12/16 (Sun)

In the early morning of the appointed day, we rent a minitruck, and visit the Secret Naruse Research Institute, matching our arrival with the opening hour we've been told by her in advance.

"Senpai, so far as it goes, this place is called TOKIWA Medical Equipment Laboratory."

The public company Tokiwa Medical Equipment Laboratory, or for short Tokiwa Lab. While asking me why I didn't know about this despite us having come here several times by now, Miyoshi opens the lobby's door.

"I mean, look, there's no signboard. I always thought that this was the Secret Naruse Research Institute."

"There's no point in installing a signboard since it's not like we've got a store, right? It's a waste of money. Besides, a small nameplate can be found on the gate, you know?" Ms. Midori says with her hands pressed against her hip while welcoming us. "Damn it, when I wondered what to do about the company's name, some idiots immediately tried to use my name, calling the place silly stuff like Naruse Research Institute or Midori Lab when I left them to their own devices... Hell, all of you are just so..."

"Why Tokiwa though?"

"It's because the previous workshop here was called Tokiwa Precision Tools."

That's all there is to it? I end up wondering, but it looks like she's talking about the small backstreet workshop of her family she told us about before. It was run by her mother's father, but as there was no successor, her grandfather passed the place to his granddaughter, Midori.

"Ah, so that's why your name is Midori."

"What do you mean?" Miyoshi asks with a mystified look.

"The tokiwa color is a variation of green. It's the green of an evergreen tree, I think."
[efn_note]<https://www.zhizhuxueyuan.com/article/129> [/efn_note]

Her elder sister's name has very likely incorporated the idea of their father's side. Because of that,

they had to allow the mother's side to pick the second daughter's name. Midori because of Tokiwa. At least, it's a very likely story. She might have been favored by her mother's father due to that.

"Hee."

"Well, hence I simply added Medical Equipment Laboratory to it." Without confirming or denying my explanation, she sets that topic aside, and gets down to the main issue, "Over here you've got the device for precise measurements, usable after installing it somewhere, and here you've got the simple, portable version."

She points at two sets of two types of bare devices. One device has been wrapped up in a simple packaging. It looks like Miyoshi has asked her in advance to pack it up since she's going to take it back for software development.

"So you've already finished making the simple version as well, huh?"

"Because it doesn't need to acquire almost any physiological values, its structure is much simpler to make."

Nakajima, who's bustling around restlessly with bundles of documents at hand, abruptly stops after hearing that, "Chief, please don't call it simple, okay? Do you know how much of a pain it was to put it together compactly? Besides, those devices are test devices. They're super powerful, you know?"

"No, I mean, Nakajima, you're excellent, right? This much should be a breeze for you, right?"

Hearing that, Nakajima rolls his eyes and looks up to the sky. All he can see is just the ceiling, though.

"Test devices?"

"For the time being, we've stuffed all sensors that seem capable of measuring the values into the devices. In a manner of speaking, it'd be fine for you to consider them to be devices with the highest performance."

"Hee."

"We'll keep narrowing down the necessary information and sensors by measuring things with these." Miyoshi comments while gently stroking the surface of a device.

It sounds like they're going to downgrade the abilities of the devices based on the test results. In the end, only the necessary sensors will be left before it'll be released as a product available on the market.

"The precise measurement device requires one to only stand for a few seconds on this disk."

"Huh? You're saying it can measure brain waves without contact?"

As if glad to be asked a decent question, Nakajima leans towards me, and begins to explain, "Yes,

it's capable of that. Of course it's impossible to reach the same sensitivity as SQUID, but nowadays ultra-sensitive MI devices that cannot be compared to past devices have been developed. Even TMR devices and similar have solved the issue of magnetic noise interference alongside——"

"Wha-, wait, wait! Even if you flood me with all those details, I won't get it since it's out of my field of expertise."

"Yep, yep. Male scientists don't take their conversation partners into consideration at all." Ms. Midori arbitrarily comments while repeatedly nodding her head with her arms folded.



"Midori-senpai, I think that's a prejudicial view."

"It's just as she says, Chief. Anyway, the output of magnetometers like this one has been adjusted to reflect the characteristic electrical waves of brain activity."

"Hee, that sure sounds amazing."

Upon me saying so, Nakajima laughs while looking embarrassed, "Well, for this reason, the simple version might produce a considerable measurement error depending on the measurement circumstances."

"I'll try to cover that part with the software, but...leaving aside the error of the acquired values caused by the measurement circumstances, the spread of the measurement's precision and between devices is low, right?"

"Since it also includes a range finder, it will be corrected with the data from there, and the spread itself is less than +0.05%, I'd say. Just in case, I have tuned it with the data I measured myself," Nakajima takes out a memory card. "This contains the raw text data recorded under the conditions back then. Please check these if something happens."

"Thank you! I think I'll be able to handle it somehow with this. Still, you had a D-Card, Mr. Nakajima?"

"Well, we live in such times after all," he scratches his head.

"Next, let's see...how much is one of these going to cost?"

"It's a mish-mash of existing technology, except for the special sensor... The precise measurement device is going to cost around 20 million Yen, and the simple version three million."

"The deposit of you guys' funds has been a huge help." Ms. Midori claps my arm while adding.

"Seriously. Yeah, it'd be a dream if we could freely use around this much of a budget every time."

"Don't be so fussy. Having no money makes you resourceful."

"There are limits to everything, Chief."

Chuckling as I used to be no stranger to this in the past, I try asking Mr. Nakajima about the costs during mass production.

"Now, now. So, how much would these cost as mass-produced devices?"

"Let's see. If we clearly grasp the accuracy and choice of relevant data through the tests with the prototypes, we will be able to eliminate unnecessary components. So it might become a third, a fourth...or, depending on the circumstances, even a fifth of the current price. At present, we can't make a detailed estimation."

A million Yen if it becomes a third, huh? It's kinda expensive and also cheap...but then again, high-

end hobby supplies like audio systems, PCs, and bicycles cost around that much, so I guess the price will settle down around that area.

"Mass production will need you to entrust the manufacturing to someone, right? We don't have any fabrication facilities. So, Azusa, just what the heck are you going to do with this? Don't you think it's about time you told me?"

"I'm aiming for a global best-seller."

"Best-seller?"

"But, if you exclude the special sensor for measuring electromagnetic waves attached to the range finder, most of it is a gathering of existing technology, so wouldn't it get copied right away if you were to start selling it? It doesn't seem to have many parts that could be patented either."

"The devices will be simple measuring instruments. It's fine like this. The special sensor is your invention, Mr. Nakajima?"

"Yeah, so far it goes." Mrs. Nakajima confirms while being a bit bashful about it.

After praising him for that, Miyoshi begins to explain the details about the protocols and hardware components of the display and communication parts.

"How about it, Mr. Nakajima? You think you could include these?"

"Since it's similar to what's added to mobile phones, it won't be much of a problem."

"Okay, can I have you build two precise and four simple versions for the sake of testing and sales promotion?"

"Sure. I will produce the case and the framework with a 3D-printer. Since the rest is only about ordering standard components...yep, I think it will be done sometime this week as long as there's no issues with the funds."

"Nothing less of you, Mr. Nakajima. You work quickly."

"Tehehe."

"As it's a sequential production, I'd like you to please contact me as soon as you've finished one device since I'd like to get my hands on it as soon as possible!"

"Understood! Please leave it to me." With those words, Mr. Nakajima immediately begins to write up a list of parts to be ordered.

"Azusa, just when have you become so skilled at handling men?"

Miyoshi says some rude stuff along the lines of "Since I'm taking care of some slacker?" while looking my way. But yeah, I feel like recently my dependence on Miyoshi has grown a bit. Occasionally there are times where she looks like a cat robot from the future to me. If Miyoshi

knew about those thoughts, she'd likely get angry with me about not being as round as that robot.

"What are you talking about? Everyone is thirsting for a proper evaluation. The company we've worked at until a while ago was super exploitative at some parts. It's what you'd describe as a negative example."

"Hoh."

"So, Midori, about the matter with the mass production from before..."

Miyoshi offers the establishment of a joint venture and the construction of a small factory to Ms. Midori.

"No, we don't have such monetary leeway, you know?" After having listened to Miyoshi's explanation, Ms. Midori pulls a face, making it clear that she's doubting the feasibility.

"I'm hoping for your brains and connections in that regard. It'll also be necessary to increase the personnel."

"...Is this cluster of existing technology going to blow up into such a huge business?"

"Midori, it's still just between you and us, but as a matter of fact, this is a device to quantify human abilities."

Ms. Midori freezes for an instant, but then she places a hand on Miyoshi's forehead, stating, "It doesn't look like you've got a fever."

"I think it's around 36°C," Miyoshi answers with a laugh while grabbing Ms. Midori's hand, and pulling her over to a small meeting space.

"Senpai, could you please go buy something to drink? It's going to become a slightly long talk."

"Sure. The vending machine is——"

"Oh, there's one in our lobby. Since it contains what our staff likes, I can't guarantee the taste of anything in there, though."

"Got it."

I lightly wave my hand, and start walking towards the vending machine. Miyoshi has apparently started to immediately tell Ms. Midori about our latest knowledge of the dungeons' effect on stats, and an outline about the measurements of that.



Come to think of it, I've never seen Miyoshi drink something like canned coffee, so sugarless or low-sugar coffee should be okay, right? Vending machine, vending machine, where are you... Oh,

found you!

The slightly old-looking vending machine ejects the drinks for free if you press the respective button. As expected of the Osare Development Corporation. It's kinda like a global IT Enterprise. Though, the canned juice part is a bit...yeah... Either way, the lineup is somewhat weird.

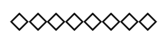
"Let's see, 『Drink Chou à la Crème』? What's up with that?"

A small piece of paper has been inserted at the drink description. It says 『The expiration date is 04/21/2018, but you can still drink it♪』. The heck...

Shit, the rest is 『DrPepper』, 『Prickly Prickly Mikkuchujuchu』, 『Durian Cider』, 『Takuan Cola』, 『UniLamune』...just how came this lineup to be...? [efn_note]All the drinks exist. You can google them.[/efn_note]

"Even if you say these are the preferences of the guys working here, there's a limit to everything, right...?"

The most normal one among those would be 『DrPepper』, no, 『Mikkuchujuchu』, huh? I get three bottles of that for the time being, and head back to the meeting space.



Once I get back, it looks like Miyoshi has finished with the explanation of the rough outline. While handing both of them a juice, I try asking Ms. Midori about the vending machine.

"Ah, yeah, it sure seems like some kind of joke vending machine, doesn't it?"

"What's this about?"

"All of it is for free, right?"

"Yes. Wait, so it's not linked to some welfare program?"

"There's no way that you'd find something like that at a poor venture like ours, is there? If you go a bit further down the lobby, you'll find normal vending machines as well, you know?"

"I didn't go all the way to the lobby..."

According to Ms. Midori, that machine seems to have been built by the workshop that used to be in here before. Since it was a good opportunity, she started to play around by putting drinks, which she bought on travels, into it. Ever since then, the folks going on travels have been messing around by resupplying joke drinks in the slots. There exist many joke drinks among local juices. Even nowadays they're still serving as a splendid way to punish losers in games. Or rather, it means other people except for Ms. Midori and Mr. Nakajima are working here as well, eh?

"That's only natural. In the first place, today is Sunday, right? Be thankful that I'm doing this for

you guys on a day off. Having said that, we're six people in total. The work for Azusa can be handled by Nakajima alone, but just in case, I'll be present, too." Ms. Midori says while fiddling around with the Mikkuchujuchu in both hands.

"Anyway, I've just heard from Azusa, but you're building a company that's going to support dungeon capturing?"

"Well, that's the plan."

"A NPO is suited for such activities, isn't it?"

"You're right, but it looks like the foundation of a NPO takes three months. Miyoshi says that it'd be better to go with a normal company in such a case."

"Wasn't there a legend about mouse years, not dog years?" Ms. Midori answers me while rolling her eyes.

Dog year - mouse year is IT terminology that used to be popular a little time ago. It's referring to technological progress being around as fast as dogs, who grow up seven times as fast as humans, and mice, who grow up 18 times as fast as humans. In short, it's something like a powerful wording to threaten others that they'll be left behind if they do things the normal way.

"I believe the dungeon captures will accelerate with the devices created by your company. Though I don't know whether it'll be 18 times as fast."

Above all, the impact created by numerical values as standard in a place that didn't have any indicators so far will be huge.

"As a prototype maker, I think our part is done here for the moment. If you ask me whether we want to be in charge of the hardware part as a joint business..."

"He's been humble, calling it a gathering of existing technology, but the core part is Mr. Nakajima's sensor, no?" Miyoshi asks while looking at Ms. Midori.

She smiles lightly over her own company's technology being praised while only answering, "I guess."

"Since the measurement devices are kinda similar to medical equipment, it'd be fine to handle it by creating another department within your company, or it could also take the form of a transfer to a new, cooperative joint company. Of course I won't mind if you choose another alternative either. Please discuss that part with Miyoshi."

"Well, to be honest, as it's common with puny ventures, we're struggling financially. If you say that you've got no issue with the funds coming from your side, I don't really have the option to turn you down here."

"Then, let's work together from now on."

"Yeah, please take care of us."

As I grab Ms. Midori's right hand, Miyoshi says from the side, "With that decided, please be careful of hostile buy-outs, okay?"

"Buy-outs?"

"Yep. If it becomes known that you're cooperating with us, attempts to take you over will probably start right away."

"Ha? What's up with that?"

"Senpai, what's the situation with the Tokiwa Lab stocks?" Miyoshi asks Ms. Midori.

"What's the situation? Hmm, I hold 60%. I think the rest is held by the employees with each having a certain share. And the university holds 5%, I think."

"What about investors and their ilk?"

"At present, all potential investors have been giving us the cold shoulder. I think my grandpa has some stocks. That's about it." Ms. Midori says in a style as if laughing at herself.

"If this story becomes publicly known, you might get fervent appeals from those who have been giving you the cold shoulder so far, so please be careful."

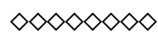
"What kind of story?"

"Anyway, I think the number of organizations trying to get on your good side will explode, but please ignore all of them for the time being. We'll provide you with the necessary financing from our side. —Got it, senpai?"

Since Miyoshi looks back at me, requesting my permission for the financing, I silently answer her by giving her an OK with a thumbs-up.

"I've got no clue what you're talking about, but...sure, why not."

We've exchanged an NDA previously. We decide to talk about the details in the near future while letting a specialist join, and then we leave the Secret Naruse Research Institute in our minitruck with the packaged testing device loaded.



Having arrived at our office, Miyoshi immediately sets up the device full of joy, and begins to adjust it.

"Okay, I'm going to bring back the car."

"It's past the park, right? Then you could come back in two minutes!"

"Ha ha ha...you dumb? If I ran at such a speed, I'd get reported and become an urban legend."

I'd like to be spared from reading a news article titled 『Kemur Man Sighted!』 on the front page of EastSpo. [efn_note]Kemur refers to some alien from a SFX TV show called UltraQ. The name comes from vanishing like smoke (kemu)[/efn_note]

"Gnuuhh! Then, please come back as quickly as possible!"

"Yeah, yeah."

And then, after bringing back the rental car and returning, I'm caught by Miyoshi as soon as I pass the entrance door, and get crammed into a cage for precise measurements as if I'm a prisoner. No matter what I say to Miyoshi, it falls on deaf ears. In other words, the quickest method to get released is to obediently follow her instructions.

I'm measured inside the device after I adjust my stats to those of the previous measuring. While single-mindedly changing my stats as told by Miyoshi, I'm being forced to accompany her on the testing that feels like an eternity.

Ms. Naruse, who arrives at the office in the middle of this, asks what we're doing full of curiosity, but once Miyoshi asks, "Kukuku, you really wanna know?" with a shady expression, Ms. Naruse scurries away into her translation room with a cramped smile.

"Senpai, I'll also measure Ms. Naruse afterwards, but if possible, I'd like to get the values of the actress duo as well. I want to increase the number of samples as much as possible."

I wonder why those three, but once I'm told that they're the people whose current stats I can check as we can make them form a party with me, I must admit that there's no one as suitable as them. Just as I was told, I call Ms. Mitsurugi, leaving a message on her answering machine.

§070 Data Collection 12/21 (Fri)

Waking up from his mobile phone's ringing in the editorial room of media24, a TV production company in Tokyo's Harbor Ward, Himuro Takatsugu cast a fleeting glance at his wristwatch while getting up from the sofa, and then accepted the call after clicking his tongue as soon as he saw the name displayed on the phone.

"What kind of business has the most celebrated, great producer of this station with a little pawn like me so early in the morning?"

Right now it was slightly past 12 o'clock. While roughly scratching his head with one hand, Himuro used the other to draw a package with a painting of Joe Camel across the table, and lit up a cigarette after pulling it out. Around the time when the company was bought up by JT, he had stopped buying that brand of cigarettes as they had lost their Turkey leaves flavor and only smelled like shit and filters, but as the German-based natural box, which started to be sold after quite some time had passed, was somewhat better, he had started to smoke that brand again. Nowadays he wondered whether he should keep smoking, but it was quite difficult to get rid of habits once they stuck. He was troubled by it all the more since smoking was recently shunned for its bad smell.

The caller was Ishidzuka Makoto, a friend from his university, and a genius who got employed by a national TV station. Right now he worked as a producer in the production department.

After Himuro entered the TV production company, he somehow managed to claw his way up to the post of director, also because of Ishidzuka's connections, but he himself believed that this was around as far up the career ladder he should go.

"Ooops, sorry. Did I wake you up?"

As Ishidzuka said so as if having no ill intentions, Himuro only answered, "Looks like it," since it was too late now anyway, although he fumed inside his mind, 'Just what the fuck are you asking if you already know the answer anyway.' "So what's your business with me?"

"Aww, man, don't be so cold with me. Remember, yesterday was that interview with the movie production team our station was involved with, right? The one with the newcomer actress."

"Ah, that Saito-something chick, you mean? But listen, no matter how much you rush things, you can't expect it to be done so soon."

'If you need it so quickly, then fork over some more cash,' Himuro bitterly cursed in his mind.

"That's not really an issue, but didn't she talk about her teacher back then?"

"Hmm, gimme a moment."

While absentmindedly recalling that they breached such a topic during the interview as he rummaged through the data, he took a pull on his cigarette in an attempt to clear up his mind, and

spat out, "Oh, I remember. What about it?"

"I'd like you to investigate that teacher of hers for a bit."

"Haah? You can ask a detective for stuff like that. We're a production company, you know?"

"No, no, it's for the sake of making a proper TV show."

According to Ishidzuka, a talent agency, which got interested in that teacher, apparently asked around a bit.



Hearing that, Himuro could fully understand their notion. After all, an actress, who could be described as being completely unknown, overturned the outcome of the audition, which was known to be a fixed game for almost everyone but the movie director, by fascinating the director with just her acting ability. Once the agency checked up on her, wondering what kind of prodigy she might be, they discovered that she used to be an ordinary newcomer actress as you could find anywhere until two months ago.

Assuming that this teacher of hers really existed, and even if only half the story proved to be true, you might as well call them a trainer for producing prodigal actors. It'd be only reasonable for a talent agency focused on actors to have a keen interest in such a person.

'But, why does he want the production company to investigate the trainer?

"Is that trainer a guy?"

"Probably."

Usually you'd suspect that this was a scandal in the making, but even if the TV station was only involved a bit with the movie itself, she was still an actress starring in it. Moreover, a newcomer. It'd be a different matter if it came to digging up something between two famous actors, but no producer would go as far as trying to drag their own heroine into a scandal with an ordinary person before the publication of their work.

"Are you going to use it in some show?"

"No, not really. Or rather, we're going to take this step by step."

"TV shows have certain messages, and one adds the recorded footage based on the message to be passed on. But if you keep the whole thing ambiguous, the viewers likely won't get the point. There's no way for Ishidzuka to not know as much. In other words, there's some catch to this job.

"Whoa, wait a sec. What's the goal then?" As he wouldn't reach a conclusion even if he tried to ponder about it, Himuro pressed Ishidzuka to tell him the whole story.

"Are you aware of the auctions that were held last month while drawing attention from all over the world?"

"Auctions? In Japan?" Himuro reflexively asked, naturally completely taken aback by the drastic topic change.

"What!? Buddy, you're so out of date with the latest news!?"

"Shut it. Oh wait, you're not talking about the one that was suspected to be a fraud, are you?"

"What, so you did know about it, man."

'I've heard a bit about it. I mean, just knowing that it's an orb auction, it'd usually register as huge news. But, anyone would think that it's a stupid joke after learning that the bidding would take three days for an item that vanishes after 24 hours, right? However, it sounds like that auction really went

down, finished and successfully concluded the trade. As proof of that, a second auction was immediately held afterwards without anyone complaining about it this time.

'It should have turned into a major scoop, but none of the existing media really picked up on it. But that makes sense. Without being able to tell who won the bids, it wouldn't be much of a story. And digging up the individuals and organizations capable of successfully bidding on orbs might also be described as extremely dangerous for the mass media. If they tried to make a big banner headline and then found out that it was a large sponsor of theirs, it wouldn't stop at the level of an apology.

"Okay, but what about it?"

"Well, you see, the place said to be in contact with the little missy in question kinda seems to be the same address as the one registered under the JDA's Trade License ID that ran those auctions."

"Haah?"

'Just how did this guy look up something like an address connected to a Trade License ID of the JDA?

"In short, you're saying the owner of the Trade License ID and the teacher in question are one and the same person?"

"Well, I'd like you to look up that part as well."

"You might say that, but if we're really talking about the organizer of those auctions here, wouldn't that rather fall in the sphere of the press bureau?"

"No, no, they say the JDA's guard is way too impregnable. But, don't you think it'd be really decent to use this as a light selling point for the movie by changing the approach towards something along the lines of 'A great teacher for a new star actress'?"

'The JDA's guard being impregnable means there's something that ought to be protected to be found there. If it's something that should be disclosed to the public, I believe that's the task of journalists, but that'd just make this a job for the press bureau all the more. And he's going to use something like that as a catchy story in the production department?

"Is that going to be alright?"

'The source of personal information connected to a JDA trade license smells like trouble.

"Look, unlike journalists, we can muddle our way through by saying, 『Oh? Were we wrong? Sorry then~』, right?"

'Yep, just as expected, the guys from production take society too lightly.

"But, why hasn't a guy like that teacher turned into a hot topic? Isn't that a clear sign that he's connected to some dangerous place?"

"So far I haven't heard anything about that, but...either way, I'd like you to at least try getting some

evidence by collecting a bit of data in lieu with the information I told you just now."

"This guy's 『get some evidence』 means he's telling me to misunderstand it beneficially, if it's not what he aims to find there.

"Well, if you're telling me to do it, I'll give it a try at least since it's going to be paid work for us anyway, but...I hope you're going to properly cover my back?"

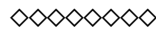
"I'd like to be spared from becoming a sacrificial pawn if he tries to cut his losses at the end.

"Well, as far as I can. Just, lately compliance is naggy about those things."

"So you're telling me it'd be best if I can clean up any mess on site?"

"Ahaha, well, that's how it is. Please take care of it."

Ishidzuka hung up before getting Himuro to promise him anything. Himuro spat out a deep sigh, stubbed out his cigarette, and stood up to take a shower.



Having ended the call, Ishidzuka faced a man who sat on his sofa, wearing a suit that couldn't be called tasteful nor well-made.

"For the time being, I've made the request, but is that really okay, Chief?"

"What are you asking at this point? I mean, even you've been doing whatever you liked so far, right?"

"If it's my own project, I'll strain myself, but I'd hate to bear responsibility for an accident that got pushed on me."

The man called chief listened to Ishidzuka's remark, and commented, "You won't rise in society otherwise, right?" with a casual laughter.

After exchanging some idle chatter for a while, Ishidzuka left the room after excusing himself. The chief, who had glued a cheerful smile to his face until then, quietly muttered with an annoyed look, "Sorry, Ishidzuka. It'll be a problem if I don't repay my debts. Especially if it concerns God."



"Thank you for allowing us to come over."

"Thanks for letting us drop by."

In response to my message on Saito's answering machine, the two girls came to visit us in the late afternoon two days later. Apparently Ms. Saito managed to finish today's work in the morning, and as it fit perfectly, we got the two to visit our office.

"Oh, teacher! It aired just as scheduled!"

"Geez, listen up, I'm not your teacher... Well, since it aired a little while ago, there's been no real harm as of yet, so I'd say it's alright for now."

I'm talking about the matter of Ms. Saito making a blunder during her interview. It's about a part unrelated to the movie itself, but seemingly considering it an interesting story, they've broadcast the whole thing without cutting out the scene in question.

"Meeting people here and there, I've been repeatedly asked to introduce them to you. Mr. Yoshimura, you've kinda become a celebrity, you know?"

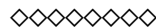
"Give me a break..."

"Sheesh, Ryoko, really, there gotta be limits to being careless!"

"Haru, I've already had more than a good fill of your preaching. Mr. Yoshimura, you see, before calling you, I got totally yelled at by her."

"You reap what you sow."

"Ehh!? You meanie!!"



"Whoa, she really went in there." Himuro muttered inside a car parked out along the street while stopping the recording of the small camcorder for business-use.

He had been tailing Saito Ryoko since yesterday, after finding out her schedule, and now this, on the second day. 'Have I been lucky, or are they meeting frequently?

"Considering that she's a highly-anticipated, new actress, she's rather careless, isn't she? Doesn't her agency manage these kinds of things?"

The place the two girls entered just now was the house at the address which Ishidzuka said to be connected with the JDA's trade license. With this, it was plain as day that the two girls had a relation to someone in there.

'Maybe it's an acquaintance of the other woman...if I recall correctly, Mitsurugi or some such, but I suppose it can be handled one way or another with media manipulation.

"Anyway, it means I was able to get some evidence."

Having said that, it didn't look like anyone came out to the entry hall, and even after re-examining the recording from just now, he couldn't spot much more than the two girls simply entering the building.

'If it comes to catching them in the act of an affair, it'll lack persuasiveness as long as the man in question doesn't enter a picture with her. Since this place seems to be a private residence, it might serve as supporting evidence if I investigate who's owning that house, but for the media nowadays, it's all about pictures. Still, I couldn't sense any such aim from Ishidzuka.

"But, I've got absolutely no clue about the TV show's name nor its filming content. Just what kind of picture would do here?"

Normally he'd take a camera man along for shooting on site, but since he didn't receive any explanation about the show's content, it'd be impossible to put a camera man to good use. As a last resort, he tried to use the camera by himself, and as he recalled his preparatory shootings during his time as an assistant director (AD), he started to enjoy this a bit. Back when he was an AD, he made a name for himself as 『Fireball Ryuuji』 as he charged into any place without reservation.
[efn_note]Ryuuji is another way to read his surname[/efn_note]

Even if Ishidzuka were to actually make use of his recording for some kind of show with some kind of intent, he wouldn't get far if the footage lacked volume. While pointing the camera at various points of the house, he thought that he might unexpectedly stumble upon something of value in one of the frames.

"Hmm?"

As he put his thoughts into practice, the blinds of the office's windows were lowered one after the other.

"What's going on? Are they planning to have some fun inside?"

A strange behavior was an omen for an unexpected event.

"It's not my hobby to play Peeping Tom, but well, this is also part of the job." Cracking such a joke, Himuro grasped the camera, and left the car.

'If you work for a long time in production — trying to peek at the secrets of others, you'll eventually understand firsthand that some things can be turned into money if it's stuff someone wants to cover up. And that's also linked to pleasure.

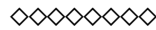
While nonchalantly slipping through the gate, he looked for a gap in the lowered blinds.

'Strictly spoken, I'm trespassing right now, but it should be fine for me to claim to have come to visit, if anyone finds fault with it. I mean, we're all just human. Sometimes you'll mistake the address, right?

"But, does he really want me to only investigate that 『Teacher』?"

'I don't really get what kind of value some unknown 『Teacher』 is supposed to have, but I guess I'll

put in some work for my salary', he decided while casually approaching the house.



"So, Mr. Yoshimura, what can we help you with today?" Ms. Mitsurugi asks while looking baffled at Miyoshi who's lowering all blinds in the office.

"Fu fu fu. It's a confidential experiment." Miyoshi answers, doing her very best to pull an eerie face while illuminating her face from below with her smartphone's light after having finished with the blinds.

"Teacher, is that person over there some kind of mad scientist or what?"

"From Tomiya Elementary School, I'd say." I answer with a wry smile.

Tomiya Elementary School is a short distance away from here.

Miyoshi staggers unsteadily across the room while laughing uncannily, and then removes the cover hiding the precise version of the stats measuring device all of a sudden.

"Tadaah!"

"Tadaah, you say...what's that?"

"Hark! It's a device to measure human abilities!"

"Huh?"

Ms. Saito approaches the device, and while staring at its bottom part and the three braces, she asks, "Abilities...you mean like a device that can instantly measure one's height and weight and so on?" with a look as if ridiculing Miyoshi for being an idiot for building something like that.

Well, it's understandable for Ms. Saito to think so. Values defining human abilities can be seen here and there in society. Starting with basic values like weight, height, and age, there's also other things like exam scores and similar. However, the idea to measure those by using an external device doesn't exist, except for devices measuring the outward properties.

"No, you're wrong. It'll measure your real abilities. Did you bring your D-Card with you?"

Hearing Miyoshi's question, Ms. Saito and Ms. Mitsurugi strangely look like they've finally grasped that it must be related to dungeons just as they had expected, while taking out their cards.

"Just as you've asked us, we brought them with us. But, what are you going to do with those?"

"We'll use them to form a party."

"Party?"

The information about parties hasn't been published yet. Thus it's only normal for them to not know anything about that system. I explain parties to the two as a dungeon system using D-Cards.

"No way...you're not kidding right?"

I confirm her question, asked while looking completely shocked, with a nod.

"If it's about somewhat grasping the location of the other party members, I can accept that, but...telepathy? What's up with that function possessing the potential to bust any human relationship!?"

"Function possessing the potential to bust any human relationship?"

"I mean, look, the world of show biz is a place where people constantly backstab each other. Even while seething with rage in their minds, they'll peacefully interact with you, wearing a bright smile on their faces. But, if your thoughts are passed on to other people, it'll turn into a huge mess!"

"No, it's not like you've got to form a party with such people, right?"

"Oki, you might be right about that, but...what are we going to do if they were to launch partying projects in TV variety shows?"

"It's not really visible, and thus it won't produce anything good to show on TV, right?"

Even if they try to do a close-up on this in a TV show, it should only be usable for a show to run some experiments. After all, the effect itself isn't visible, and thus it won't appear on video. At most it'd turn into something like having two actors form a party, with one guessing some information that can only be seen by the other one. Even if the TV producers have the actors do something like that, it can be reproduced easily.

"I see..." Ms. Saito folds her arms and ponders in an unusually serious manner.

Even businesses other than the show biz have similar human relationships. Everyone hides their true intentions behind masks, depending on time, place, and occasion. There's absolutely nothing weird about there being a discrepancy between what's visible on their faces and what they're thinking for real. However, Ms. Saito worrying this far probably means that she's working in a field where those relationships are very unreliable and brittle.

After all, the true, unadorned thoughts are passed on through telepathy. Just that might have the potential to result in an outcome that can't be undone anymore.

"It's not like you'll transmit all your thoughts. It looks like only the things you want to tell your party members are actually transmitted."

Hearing that, Ms. Saito blurts out with an openly relieved expression, "Say that from the beginning! I thought that everything in my head would be revealed to everyone."

"Are you thinking about something nasty to feel so relieved about this piece of information?" I retort at that part with a slightly evil streak.

In response, she answers as if it's nothing, "Of course. I mean, try to think about it. It'd be embarrassing if my budding love would be revealed to you, Mr. Yoshimura, the instant we form a party, right?"

"Ryoko!?"

"See, it'll also cause troubles right away." Ms. Saito says while sticking out her tongue.

Smiling bitterly as I realize that I'm completely no match for her, I caution the two that their thoughts will be unintentionally passed on if they don't pay attention.

"Well, accidents happen in real life, too. Like letting something slip carelessly, and some such."

"Indeed. Anyway, can you please hold out your D-Cards?"

Hearing that, Ms. Saito taps Ms. Mitsurugi's back with her eyes sparkling as if this serves as a great chance.

"Okay, I'll yield the honor to form a connection with Teacher first to Haru."

"Form a connection..." Ms. Mitsurugi holds out her D-Card with her cheeks lightly blushing.

Taking a glance at her card, I see that she's ranked 681. Since she should have been in the 980s before, it means she's risen by 300 ranks again. It looks like she's keeping up with the slime killing.

"Huh? Mr. Yoshimura, you know Haru's rank?" Ms. Saito says after observing me not being surprised after seeing Ms. Mitsurugi's rank.

Once Ms. Mitsurugi answers to her, "I consulted him about something some time ago," Ms. Saito sulks with her cheeks puffed out, retorting, "What, so you left me out!?"

Since I've meticulously trained telepathy with Miyoshi, I believe that I've grasped the trick how to not spill anything unnecessary, but while bracing myself just in case, I match my card with Ms. Mitsurugi's, chanting 『Admit』.

"Oh!"

At that moment, Ms. Mitsurugi yelps. It's probably that sensation of getting connected.

"What's wrong?" Ms. Saito asks, full of curiosity.

In response, Ms. Mitsurugi says, "No, somehow, just now..." while glancing my way.

"Well then, you're up next, Ms. Saito."

"Ayes!"

While giving me a weird reply, she holds out her card towards me. She doesn't try to hide her ranking in particular. Rather, far from it, she boasts, "I'm also quite something, right!?" while

throwing her chest out.

Her rank is 1421.

"The top group of Japanese civilian explorers seems to be in the upper ranks of the four-digit numbers."

Once I inform her of that, she becomes even more prideful stating that she also belongs into that group now, but apparently feeling something immediately after I chant "Admit", she groans puzzled, "Hmm? ...HmMMM??"

"Did you feel it as well, Ryoko?"

"Haru, you too?"

(This seems to be the sensation you feel when getting connected)

"Eh? Just now..."

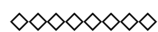
I face Ms. Saito, who's whirled around in my direction, and answer without speaking, (It's telepathy).

"Wow! It really exists!"

"I told you, didn't I...?"

"Well~ You see, a picture is worth a thousand words really fits. Though it's not like there's anything to see here."

After getting all emotional with those words, the two girls repeatedly exchange telepathic messages for a while, along the lines of (Hey, Haru, can you hear me?) - (I can, I totally hear you. It's awesome).



"Hey, hey, just a sec! Another brave challenger has appeared!?" The US D-Powers Observation Team member Kayama blurted out while staring at the monitor.

Ever since the disappearance of the guy believed to belong to a GB team, several others had attempted to trespass the grounds of D-Powers' office, but as of yet not one organization had succeeded as far as the US team knew.

Most recently it had become an open secret in the intelligence world that various nations were observing D-Powers, and it had turned into something like a contest, a competition as to who would manage to plant a bug first. After all, none of the challengers had died so far, with the only consequence being their deportation back home for some reason.

"Which country is it this time?"

Kayama's buddy today, Nole, had been transferred to this team from the NSA.

"No clue. But, unlike usual, his actions look kinda amateurish. Maybe he hails from some place like Pinkerton & Hargrave."

Pinkerton & Hargrave was a major detective bureau in the US. [efn_note]I can find Pinkerton as a detective agency, but the only mention of Hargrave appears in some movie as a detective. I'm assuming that it's a partner agency but it could also be two agencies or maybe the spelling is simply wrong and it's Hallgrave or Hallgreyve or some such.[/efn_note]

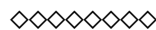
"Come on, those guys are pretty much professionals, you know?" While covering for the private detectives, who were more often than not ex-police officers, Nole accepted a paper with a quick note from Kayama, and ran it through their database. The paper listed the number plate of the car which today's challenger was using.

The search result displayed after a little while stated that the car belonged to a TV production company called media24 seated in the Harbor Ward.

"Someone from the mass media."

"Ah, sorry for wasting your time."

The two men apathetically accepted that they wouldn't get to see the man, who had vanished on the other side of the house, again today as if it was a preordained outcome. After all, everyone getting close to the house in front of them, the House of Horror, without permission would be eaten by something.



Looking at the two girls who've become completely engrossed with telepathy, Miyoshi approaches me and whispers, "Senpai, someone got caught," with a complicated expression.

Very likely it means that someone got caught in Arthur's net, but it's still bright outside. No matter how you look at it, it's still too early for the usual guys to show up, challenging their luck.

"Somehow it feels different from usual."

"Please don't tell me that it's some religious solicitor or salesperson."

"Just in case, I've installed a sign on the gate, turning all such offers down, so I don't consider it likely for someone to have simply ignored that."

"Let's check later."

"Sure."

Miyoshi separates from me, heads over to the two girls as if nothing has happened, and chats them up, "Okay then, you two, can I have you stand over here in turns?"

She's pointing on the platform of the precise measurement device.

"Oki. I'll start. I just need to stand there, right?" With those words she looks back at me, and further asks, "I don't need to take my clothes off or anything?" while acting as if she's about to pull off her clothes, obviously trying to tease me.

For a moment I consider simply telling her to get naked then, but she's the type of person who takes a joke seriously. Since I'd be troubled if she really starts to get naked, I leave it at silently shaking my head.

"No need. Thanks for your cooperation."

Hearing that, Ms. Saito laughs while facing forward as she stands on the platform.

"Let's get started then," Miyoshi announces, and begins the chain of measurements.

I sit down at my desk, take out a memo pad, and boot up Making.

Name: Mitsurugi Haruka
SP 65.36

HP 29.00
MP 55.20

STR (-) 10 (+)
VIT (-) 12 (+)
INT (-) 28 (+)
AGI (-) 22 (+)
DEX (-) 41 (+)
LUC (-) 16 (+)

Name: Saito Ryoko
SP 33.23

HP 28.50
MP 48.50

STR (-) 10 (+)

VIT (-) 12 (+)
INT (-) 25 (+)
AGI (-) 17 (+)
DEX (-) 34 (+)
LUC (-) 12 (+)

"Ooohh..."

The number of monsters I've killed up until today - at the point I've acquired <Mining> - amounts to 4800. And the SP I've gained until then is 74.333.

But, this also includes Enkai. Without him, it'd be very likely limited to something around 29.333. On the other hand, Ms. Mitsurugi has, according to my calculation, earned around 130 SP, if you consider that half of her SP has been automatically assigned to her stats. If you count back from her SP, she should have killed close to 6500 slimes. Just comparing her kill count, you can clearly label her as a top explorer, going far beyond someone like me.

Still, the only monsters she's been killing are the weakest, slimes. If I assume that most of my SP stems from monsters on the tenth floor, this result gives a true account of how awesome the efficiency of attacking slimes, including leaving and entering the dungeon after each kill, is.

Even Ms. Saito, who's stopped accompanying her at some point because she's become busy with work, has apparently earned something close to 70 SP, limited to looking at the rise of her stats.

"What are you up to?"

When I quickly lift my face due to the sudden question, I spot Ms. Saito standing next to me. She's apparently switched with Ms. Mitsurugi. Me looking on a screen that's invisible to other people definitely looks a bit weird, despite me having put a memo pad on the table as a dummy.

"It's nothing... Oh, right, Ms. Saito..."

"What?"

"What are you going to do if your acting improves drastically compared to now?"

"Huh?"

"Becoming really skilled at acting, being able to move quickly, having a lot more stamina, or getting stronger; if any of those would be possible, what would you choose?"

Being abruptly confronted with an incomprehensible question, she looks taken aback for a moment, but immediately alters her thinking in the direction of it possibly being some kind of joke.

"You're putting me on the spot with such a question. You mean me obtaining any of those without doing anything, like some god-sent miracle?"

"Well, you could call it like that, yeah."

Since it's actually the outcome from her having worked hard in the dungeon, it's not like calling it a god-sent miracle would be correct, but it'd be difficult to find another explanation.

Ms. Saito scrutinizes me as if probing for a motive behind that question, and then answers, "Say, Mr. Yoshimura, it's not going to be some match against a god with the depravity of my soul as a betting chip or some such, right?"

"You won't need to pay with your soul, no." I reply while smiling wryly.

Goethe's Mephistopheles did that with Dr. Faust's soul.

"Then you're saying you'll grant a miserable chorus girl like me, who lives in the basement of some theater, power?"

"I'm sorry to say, but I don't have any ape barrel organs on me." [efn_note]A reference to Phantom of the Opera.[/efn_note]

The music box, which used the design of a paper mache ape tailored into the shape of a barrel organ, plays an important role in the Phantom of the Opera and belongs to the phantom itself. Come to think of it, Simon mentioned a nickname like The Phantom, didn't he? 『The Phantom of the Dungeon』...doesn't that sound way too bombastic?

"How about you put on a white mask?"

Miyoshi and Ms. Mitsurugi, who have apparently finished the general measurement, join in on our conversation.

"Now that you mention it, it should be something like a female noh mask, I think."

"Or how about something like Tutanchmaskun?" [efn_note]It's a pun, but I suck at those. The ツタンカーメン refers to Tutanchamun, the pharaoh. The part カーマン (kamen) is read like mask in Japanese (仮面 - kamen)[/efn_note]



Everyone simultaneously whirls around, staring at Ms. Mitsurugi because of the unusual event of her making a pun.

"Eh?"

"...Haru, boring old men jokes shorten your life as a model, so I think it'd be better for you to refrain, you know?"

In response to Ms. Saito declaring something like that with a serious look, Ms. Mitsurugi blushes, quietly muttering, "Eehh!? Really!?"

As if there's such a rule...

"Now, now. Anyway, senpai, what have you been talking about?"

"I asked Ms. Saito in which direction she'd want to develop if she could freely choose. Well, it's just a talk about dreams. That's all."

Damn you, Miyoshi, only answering "Heeeh~", while looking at me with eyes clearly branding my remark as a barefaced lie.

"Assuming development in any direction is possible, you say?" Ms. Naruse, who has apparently reached a point in her translations allowing her to take a break, joins in on this topic.

Ms. Saito, who hasn't expected that someone could be staying in another room, asks me with her eyes who the new arrival might be.

"Ah, come to think of it, it's your first time meeting her, right Ms. Saito? She's Ms. Naruse Miharu, a JDA staff member and our exclusive deputy chief. Ms. Naruse, this here is the actress Ms. Saito Ryoko. You're already acquainted with Ms. Mitsurugi, I think."

"We met previously at the sushi restaurant."

"Ah, the one I couldn't attend!"

"Nice to meet you. I'm Naruse Miharu."

"Oh, hello. Saito Ryoko here."

"Just as I was steadily working in the next room, I heard you talking about a somewhat interesting topic, so I just had to join you guys. Sorry for the interruption."

"No, don't worry about it."

Does Ms. Naruse unexpectedly like such stories?

"Do you have a favorite, Ms. Naruse?"

"Well of course. It's strength. More power!"

"Haah!?"

Listening to Ms. Naruse blurting out something that could have come from the owner of an old car who crazily speeds so much that you'd turn in your seat, we end up astonished.

"Eh? Strength? Wouldn't you usually get men to handle things requiring strength in the first place?"

That's Ms. Saito for you.

"No, I'd rather get strong enough to wring the necks of explorers who won't do as told..."

"Ahh."

Makes sense. I can imagine that some people don't feel like listening to what a young woman is telling them, even when she cautions them as part of the management department. I guess I'd also feel the urge to wring their necks if I had to deal with folks who are irresponsibly ignoring my thorough explanation of the rules while laughing frivolously.

You can definitely describe that as earnest, but at this point, my image of her...

"Sure sounds like the Dungeon Management Department is a stressful workplace..." Miyoshi says seriously in response to Ms. Naruse's overwhelming remark.

"Well, underlings mostly take care of managing ordinary explorers. That was the time when I was closest to breaking into tears on a daily basis. It's also the reason why the rate for personnel to stick with our department remains quite low."

Which reminds me, I don't remember having seen many young female employees of the management department in Yoyogi. At most it's the reception, but they seem to belong to the Commercial Department which is also called Guild or some such.

"That's why I'm really grateful to everyone from D-Powers," Ms. Naruse smiles cheerfully.

I guess that means she didn't need to do that work anymore after being assigned to us. Back when I met her for the first time during the uproar about a possible suicide case, she must have been right in the middle of that duty.

"I'd like to have a little more stamina." Ms. Mitsurugi voices out thoughtfully with a finger placed on her cheek.

It sounds like models need a lot of stamina.

"Leaving aside show models, photo models for magazines and similar, mostly work early in the morning. As the clothes you wear represent the fashion of the next season, you have to put on midsummer attires during the cold seasons, and midwinter clothes during the harsh late summer heat."

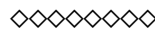
I see, that'd require stamina, yep.

"Haven't you already built plenty of stamina after leaving and entering the dungeon so often? For me it's got to be acting ability! And while we're at it, eternal youth, and a name without 『ko』!"

Girl, eternal youth or your name are completely unrelated to growth, aren't they?

"Sheesh, silly Ryoko."

After we chatted about this topic excitedly for a while, we resolved the party, and did the same measurements once more.



Just before 9 p.m., the two taxis I had called arrived in front of the gate.

"Good night then." Ms. Mitsurugi bows with a graceful movement.

"Good night. Thanks for helping out today."

"Non, non, it's only natural, seeing how it's been the request of my teacher." Ms. Saito, who has apparently regretted the matter with the interview a bit, claps my shoulder with those words.

"We'll thank you with dinner on the 23rd," Miyoshi says.

"I'm looking forward to that one. Cya then~"

"Goodbye."

Quickly getting onto the backseat of the taxi, the two girls wave their hands from the other side of the rear glass.

"Okay then, I'll also go back home for the time being."

Ms. Naruse has broadly finished the English translation. Since AIs support translations nowadays, she can get through it at a fairly good pace, but since Google's translation AI sometimes returns questionable results, she can't just use everything as is. According to her, the upcoming, major milestone will be a better consolidation of terminology.

"Thanks for your good work. You're coming on the 23rd?"

"Unfortunately I've got a prior engagement on that day. I don't know what it's about, but we've got a family meeting planned, so I must return to my parents' home."

Family meeting? That's not related to our business cooperation with Ms. Midori's company, is it?

"It can't be helped in such a case. See you tomorrow."

"Yes. Goodbye."

We stand at the gate until the taxi with Ms. Naruse vanishes out of sight after turning around a corner.

"Pheew, it's finally over. Did you get all the data?"

"That's a matter of course, perfectly. All that's left——" Miyoshi descends to the garden from the entranceway, and picks up something laying over there. It looks like it's some handheld camera. "—— is this, I suppose."

Oh, the mysterious intruder who got caught by Arthur's, eh?

"A camera... Some journalist?"

"No idea. Let's take a look at what kind of video he's recorded for starters."

"Right."

Heading back inside, we place the camera on our dining table, and I hang a pot over the gas burner to brew tea.

"Come to think of it, senpai, you fiddled around with their stats, didn't you?"

"Oh, you figured? Well, it's something like a Christmas present for my two pupils."

Listening to their wishes, I adjusted their stats accordingly.

"How much did you tamper with their stats?"

"Hmm, as far as necessary to suit their wishes. Take a look."

Name: Mitsurugi Haruka
SP 0.36

HP 48.50
MP 71.90

STR (-) 10 (+)
VIT (-) 25 (+)
INT (-) 34 (+)
AGI (-) 35 (+)
DEX (-) 70 (+)
LUC (-) 20 (+)

Name: Saito Ryoko

SP 0.23

HP 34.90

MP 60.50

STR (-) 10 (+)

VIT (-) 16 (+)

INT (-) 30 (+)

AGI (-) 25 (+)

DEX (-) 50 (+)

LUC (-) 12 (+)

Seeing the stats I wrote down, Miyoshi grabs her head in sheer exasperation.

"What's wrong?"

"Senpai, you went way too far. Didn't we talk the other day about what kind of stats the top explorers have reached in the last three years?"

Based on our independent investigations and the SP acquired by us, we've predicted the SP gained by the top explorers to be in the range of 80~200. Going by those values, we concluded that the average stat should have a value of 30~40. Even if the person had an inclination towards one or two stats, they'd reach at most 50~60.

"Ms. Mitsurugi's DEX is the best in the world by a wide margin! Of course, with you excluded."

"W-Well, I've raised it quite a bit, but you see, if it's someone with an one-sided specialization, around this much should——"

"Senpai."

"Yes?"

"A little while ago we established that around half of the SP gets allotted naturally, right?"

"Geehh!"

She's right. Even without thinking too deeply into it, the assumed stats were counted backwards from the SP acquisition we predicted. In other other words, the true stats would be——

"Half of the predicted values!?"

"Probably, I'd say."

I guess that would mean the highest values would be around 30...no, wait a sec. Assuming the top explorers have earned 200 SP in total, and if we guess that 100 SP has actually flown into the stats—

"Wouldn't that mean Ms. Mitsurugi's aggregate stats are higher than those of Simon's team!?"

"It looks like you finally got it."

"It'd also mean, your INT, and their DEX—"

"—are the best in the world, if we leave you out of account, senpai."

Miyoshi's INT is 50. Ms. Saito's DEX is at 50, and Ms. Mitsurugi's at 70.

"The impact of a stat changes drastically by just 3 points, you know? Since theirs have jumped up by almost twice their former values, they'll definitely have issues with coordinating their bodies, I'm 100% sure. I hope the two are alright..."

"No, but look, it'd be weird if we told them to be cautious, right?"

It'd be the height of fishiness if I told them to watch out since their body's performance has increased incredibly.

"How about saying that today's pseudo measurements unlocked their latent abilities or some such—"

"Are you trying to start a new religion, or what?" Having rolled up a newspaper to use it for slapping my head several times, Miyoshi sighs once while rolling her eyes, takes the pot off the burner as the water has started to boil, and makes pourover coffee. "Should we launch a dungeon boot camp, keep the effect to something around 10 SP, please."

"I know. But you see, normal explorers should have that much SP left over in the first place, right?"

It's no use to cry over spilled milk. I copy the video data from the camera's memory card, and start watching it.

"The hell's this? Is this guy a stalker of Ms. Saito?"

The video records how the man has followed Ms. Saito.

"Hee. Are there any R-18 scenes?"

"Now listen..."

"I mean, with those we would just need to pass the video to the police."

Well, she's right about that, but I feel like I'd have a psychological aversion to simply leave such

scenes on the memory card.

"I don't know since I haven't watched all of it yet, but I kinda doubt that I'll find any such scenes in this video."

"But, I wonder did he get hold of her schedule? Otherwise he wouldn't have been able to shoot this video, don't you think?"

"Maybe he's someone related to her...but, would someone like that really do something like this here?"

"Isn't it the most likely option for a staff member to have stalked her?"

"Hmm, Dr. Lecter also mentioned that people want to obtain what they see every day..."

"How about examining the guy in question?"

"Are we still fine on time? I mean, quite a bit of time has passed since we caught him, no?"

"We'll handle it swiftly. Besides, it'll be OK if we numb him once more if he should regain consciousness."

"Somehow I feel like we've turned into an evil organization."

As I smile wryly, Miyoshi calls Cavall and has him spit out the captured man on our office's floor. He's got a medium build and gives off the impression of being quite stylish with his parted, swept back - though it's disheveled right now - hair. On top he wears a high-necked sweater and a long coat. His lower body is covered by tightly fitting, unbranded slacks.

"He looks around forty, but he's wearing fairly youthful, trendy clothes for that. Someone working in the entertainment industry?"

"It'd make sense if he's a staff member, wouldn't it?" With these words, Miyoshi quickly takes something out from her pocket.

"Wait...aren't those medical gloves!?"

"Fu fu fu. It's what any good investigator needs, senpai."

Looks like Miyoshi intends to examine him all over without leaving fingerprints behind. But, even without going out of her way like this...

"Hey, Cavall. You guys always take away the belongings of the folks you capture, right? How's that side of things?" Once I ask, Cavall inclines his head in Miyoshi as if asking whether he should go ahead.

As soon as Miyoshi nods, the man's belongings are spewed out the shadow after he himself sinks back in.

"Wow. Does that mean they take everything that's not alive from their targets?"

Not only his belongings, but even his clothes and socks are now scattered on the ground.

"Bah, there was no need to bring out his boxers as well." Miyoshi reflexively frowns when she spots those among the man's clothes.

When checking his clothes and wallet, we find out that this man is called Himuro Takatsugu. If his business card is the real deal, he should be a director at the TV production company media24. Their main customer is Fuji TV.

"I've seen Fuji TV among the sponsors of the movie starring Ms. Saito."

"So he's a stalker after all, huh?"

I stretch out a hand for a voice recorder among his belongings, but Miyoshi stops me.

"Wait, wait, senpai, you've got to put on these first."

I reluctantly put on the gloves she's handed me, and pick up the recorder. I'm very curious about what's recorded on it, but since it doesn't appear like I'll have the time to fully listen to it, I erase it completely and put it back to the rest of his things. Because it's one of the recorders using a memory card, I could also have purged it with a PC. Miyoshi picks up his smartphone and starts doing something. Don't tell me, she's not installing spyware or something like that, is she?

"Don't commit any crimes that'll leave traces behind."

"You don't need to tell me that."

Her smile somehow looks very evil...

I pretend to not have seen that, turn around to Cavall, and ask, "Can you return all of this to its previous place, Cavall?"

Cavall nods twice, and let's the scattered items fall into the Shadow Pit.

"Still, I must say, this Shadow Pit is pretty handy. Unlike storage, it can also hold living beings."

"You've got to remember that the weight restrictions are tough on anyone but us, and it seems like the things inside can also become a hindrance." While answering, Miyoshi removes the batteries from the smartphone and the voice recorder, and tosses them into the Shadow Pit one after the other. I'm slightly marveled why she's doing something like that, but she must follow some kind of idea.

"Really?"

Cavall nods several times, and spits out the man from the Shadow Pit. Now he's returned to being completely clothed, just like he was before being caught. While looking at that, I suddenly feel like it'd be a handy skill to have when putting on your clothes in the morning.

"Wouldn't it be possible to instantly transform if you asked Arthur's?"

"And what's the point in that? Are you going to become The Phantom?"

"About that..."

"Huh? You serious, senpai?"

At present I'm somehow managing to stay in Miyoshi's shadow, but it looks like Simon or Ms. Mitsurugi are close to finding out the true power behind D-Powers. If we're going to put some effort into capturing dungeons from now on, it might take a slightly bad turn. Having said that, I don't want to give up on the leisurely life of being a G-Rank. In that case, if I were to be active while pretending to be someone else like Clark Kent or Kondou Shizuya [efn_note]Protagonist of Shizukanaru Don – Yakuza Side Story by Tatsuo Nitta. Despite being a yakuza don, the MC works at a underwear company during the daytime, happily selling bras n's stuff.[/efn_note] ...

"It's not a bad idea, correct?"

"Senpai, you're surprisingly childish when it comes to such matters."

"S-Shut it! It's tradition for heroes to hide their true identity!"

"That's not the recent trend, though."

Now that she mentions it...

"Anyway, I think it'll be difficult for me to stay active in the same way as I've done until now."

"We've traveled underpopulated floors like the first, tenth, and eighteenth floor so far, so this didn't pose that much of an issue."

"It's likely that we'll need to visit safe areas and such in the future. Explaining ourselves will become a hassle in various ways, won't it?"

"I've been thinking about this for a while. Look, wouldn't it be fine for you to wear a costume or similar? I mean, everyone has weirdos among their friends, right?"

"Just a moment there. Right now you used a term I can't let pass uncommented."

"It's just your imagination, senpai! Cosplaying sounds fun, right?"

"C-Cosplaying...!?"

I'm immediately assailed by uneasiness, seeing as I'm soon going to be 29 years old, but well, Miyoshi almost never makes mistakes in her setups. Though it's somewhat problematic that people will frequently consider me to have a screw loose.

"W-Well, don't be too hard on me. Either way, what are we going to do with this guy? In the end we haven't grasped his objective, but he's going to wake up soon, isn't he? Should we toss him out at

the gate?"

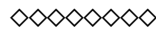
"Senpai, wanna try asking him about his objective then?"

"Haah!?"

"Don't get so upset, senpai. Please leave everything to me."

"S-Sure..."

For some reason I've got a really bad feeling about this, but for now I decide to go along with Miyoshi's request. Miyoshi goes back to her own desk with a broad grin on her face. I wonder, is she going to continue parsing the measurement data until he regains consciousness?



"Ngh..."

As his consciousness surfaced from deep darkness, he should have become capable of perceiving himself, but his current location was shrouded in deep darkness just as before.

"What? Where am I?"

Himuro reflexively tried to raise his body, but his head bumped against something, making it impossible for him to get up any further. Once he tried lifting a hand while laying sprawled, he discovered something like a wall around 20 centimeters above his face.

"Come on, don't tell me..."

He attempted to extend his arms, but as soon as he stretched them out a bit to the sides, his hands hit something similar to walls. In a hurry, he extended a hand above his head, just to feel a wall with his fingers. All that was left was the area under his feet, but assuming he'd find a wall there, too—

"They put me into a coffin and buried me alive!?"

The instant he reached that thought, he suddenly felt pangs of dizziness, and his breathing started to become shallow and quickened.

"Calm down, me..."

Being aware that he was on the verge of succumbing to panic, he closed his eyes and tried to recall what had happened when he lost consciousness for the sake of preventing the panic to gain the upper hand.

'If I remember correctly, I should have entered the grounds of the office Saito Ryoko had visited. It was a rather daring measure, but it was only natural for a TV man who would be treated as scum unless he managed to record the video as requested. It shouldn't have become much of an issue if I

simply apologized for having made a mistake upon detection. At least it's been like that until now.

At that moment, he noticed a weight in the inside pocket of his coat. Apparently he hadn't lost his smartphone. While fishing it out in a hurry, Himuro felt relieved of the fact that he'd be able to escape this world of darkness at least. However, even though he pressed the button, it didn't light up.

"Fuck!"

He was attacked by another fit of panic. 'If I'm really inside a coffin right now, the amount of oxygen in here might be limited if I assume that I was buried underground or something.

The instant he reached that conclusion, his fear burst forth.

"H-Help me!" He continued to drum against the wall in front of him with all his might. "Help meeeeeeee!"

The sweat gushing out from all his pores filled this narrow space, and even though he was breathing, no oxygen reached his lung. He was assaulted by a sensation similar to suffocation. With tears streaming out of his eyes, he knocked his feet, hands, and head against the walls in all directions, screaming in pure terror.

"Himuro Takatsugu."

"Help m...huh?"

"Himuro Takatsugu."

"W-Who? No, it doesn't matter. Just get me out of here!"

The voice he could hear from underneath him definitely was that of another human. It seemed like a single spider thread extending into an airtight room that was colored with death.

"Who's your employer?"

"Please! Let me out of here! The air...I'll soon run out of air!" He screamed, but he didn't receive any reply. "Hey? Heeeyy!? Are you kidding me!? Heeeeyyy!"

"I've got no business with someone who doesn't answer my questions."

"A-Answer?"

He frantically tried to recall what he had been asked. 'If I'm not wrong, they asked about my employer or something...

"Who, you ask? A producer of a TV station. I'm just a simple TV man!"

"What's with this questioning about my employer!? This isn't some movie or drama, but reality, right? Do such things happen in Japan!?"

He had fallen into a half-state of panic.

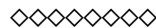
"Why did you snoop around?"

"Snoop around...I've...I've just..."

He explained the chain of events revolving around the request by Producer Ishidzuka of Fuji TV to the unknown voice.

'Just how did this end with 『Oh? Were we wrong? Sorry then~』!? Didn't I end up in a dilemma with my life on the line just because I acted in accordance with the common sense of the production department!?' He raged inside his mind. 'That's why I said, the guys from production take society too lightly!

However, now it was too late for regrets. His only option now was to spill the beans and beg for his life.



After a sequence of questioning and answering, Mr. Himuro got tranquilized again, but because it'd hurt our conscience to have him quickly carried away by an ambulance while being fully aware that nothing is actually wrong with him, we decided to go with the usual and contact our special friend Mr. Tanaka to have him take care of this whole matter. Despite it being fairly late into the night at this point, he immediately showed up at our office.

"Can you put him into some hospital?" Miyoshi asks.

In response, Mr. Tanaka looks a bit mystified while asking in return, "Why?"

It's probably because we haven't asked him for something like this up until now.

"That man doesn't look like he's a trained soldier. If he should be an ordinary civilian, I thought that we should pay him a visit at the hospital later."

Mr. Tanaka casts a glance at Mr. Himuro who's been placed on a stretcher, "That might be a very noble reason, but...for tonight we'll admit him to Nakano's Police Hospital."

"Understood. We leave it in your capable hands."

Mr. Tanaka nods slightly, and leaves with his men.

"Didn't we go a bit too far there?"

It might have turned into a slightly troublesome situation if he had started to spasm around or hit his head so hard that he cracked his skull after falling into a state of panic.

"Just in case, I gave him an impetus at timings so that this wouldn't happen. If I had used true

torture techniques, I'd have left him alone for a while in a narrow space that only allows him to stir a bit."

A space where you can barely move, and absolute darkness...just thinking about it almost makes me feel claustrophobic.

"Just imagining such a situation is terrifying enough. So, in the end you made him fall asleep with another Shadow Bind?"

"I've even put the batteries back into his smartphone and voice recorder. Once he wakes up at the Police Hospital, it'll make him wonder whether he'd actually dreamed all of it."

"You sure?"

I kinda find it hard to believe that he'll think of this as a dream...

"Anyway, what have you been scheming?"

"Eehh!? That's an unwarranted accusation from your side, senpai!"

"You trying to pull some ham acting here...? Going by the fact that you've expressly asked about the hospital he'd be brought to, there must be something more to all of this, right? At least that's what I believe."

"It wouldn't be bad if he thought that he mistakenly got involved with some secret agents, would it? For the time being, I've been thinking about visiting him tomorrow."

"Okay, and what's your real goal?"

"We don't have any connections with the media, so I thought I'd love him to become our friend. Look, he forgot his camera over here, didn't he?" With those words, Miyoshi picks up the camera he seems to have dropped.

It looks like her point is that she hasn't handed it over to Mr. Tanaka because we've found it in a place unrelated to him. But, you know, threatening someone into becoming your friend is...

"By the way, senpai, personal information connected to a JDA trade license is confidential, isn't it?"

"If I remember correctly. Otherwise, our doorstep would be crowded by folks wanting us to do something for them no matter the costs. All the trades run through the JDA, I'm pretty sure."

Hearing this, Miyoshi kicks up a fuss, bickering, "I've got to complain about this to Ms. Naruse then," and further continues, "But, thinking that the JDA's censoring of the information about the auctioneers is too strict, they're treating it as a lil' selling point for their movie, using the angle of a newcomer actress' teacher? Are the people at the TV station idiots? I mean, supposedly they've all gone through high education."

"Aren't they trying to use any little gap in the rules precisely because they're highly educated folks?"

Until now they've always been forgiven for going too far as long as the actors bow their heads a bit during the TV show. And even when filing a claim with the BPO (Broadcasting Ethics & Program Improvement Organization), you'd be talking to an organization that even the Minister of Internal Affairs and Communication describes as having low independence and vested interests in their decisions. The BPO's perception of what's right and wrong might already be dulled and compromised at this point.

"But, you really think that this was their objective?"

"What do you mean? I think you'd need to have nerves of steel to lie under those circumstances."

"No, I don't really think that he's been lying to us... Just, what the hell would he have tried to investigate about the auctions? Even without investigating it all too closely, you'll immediately find out who the auctioneer is, right? I mean, it's an ID that became an S-Rank all of a sudden. Don't you feel like something's odd here?"

"Now that you mention it, it makes sense. When it comes to information they'd want to disclose, it'd be about where we get the orbs, whether we don't have a connection with the World Rank 1...or whether we haven't discovered a method to preserve orbs, I'd say."

"Even the big number of folks camping out in the mansion behind our office probably has the goal to find answers to all these questions. You think that's something a simple TV man would come to invest?"

"You're saying, someone instigated him?"

"The Fuji TV producer called Ishidzuka?"

"That seems to be the direct connection, but...I'll try to look it up a bit."

"Hey, wait a sec. You say 'look it up,' but how are you going to do that?"

"Well, since they're people who readily violate the privacy of others under the pretext of news coverage, I think it's important for them to understand that they can be investigated as well."

"Are you going to use a private detective agency?"

"It was necessary for us to take some steps against the media soon anyway, and since the connection was as kind as coming to us, I feel like wanting to make the best use of it!"

"Ah, okay...yeah...but keep it moderate, okay."

"Leaving that aside, can you take a look at this for a moment?"

Probably having finished her calculation while the whole mess was going on, an oddly shaped 3D figure is visible on the tablet Miyoshi holds out to me.

"What's this?"

"That measurement device, you see, raises its precision by using the data on the time axis."

"You mean like a Synthetic Aperture Radar or something similar to Multi-frame super-resolution?"

A Synthetic Aperture Radar is usually installed on man-made satellites, and counts as radar which increases its resolution by using the fact of the radar's area moving to turn into a huge sham-radar. Multi-frame super-resolution is an algorithm producing high-resolution frames from a sequence of low-resolution frames in a video.

"You could say so. It has a function to output the data it has acquired over time just like that, but if you check that output, you'll see something like a very cyclic fluctuation in the values."

"Cyclic?"

"Yes. As for this figure: In addition to the data obtained through super-resolution as envisioned by Mr. Nakajima, I've convoluted the changes on the timeline with the data acquired in set periods, converted all of it into 3D, and then used a visualization tool to plot it."

I check the figure once more. It's a weird three-dimensional object which vividly reminds me of a Solid Klein Bottle which is next to impossible to build in reality.

"All I can understand from this is that it has a weird shape. I've got no clue about the details."

"Well, I've tampered with the convolution methods and coefficients in various ways to get the desired result, so even I don't quite understand what this is supposed to show." Shrugging her shoulders, Miyoshi adds, "It's just a model for convenience."

"The only thing I can say for sure is this." Miyoshi tabs to another, similar figure on the screen, and combines it with the first figure. As if it's been arranged in advance, both figures fit almost perfectly.

"This is?"

"The first is my model, the second one is the model when you set your parameters to the same as mine, senpai."

"So they're almost the same, huh? That's an amazing discovery."

"And, these are the values plotted as measurement values by Mr. Nakajima..."

Once I look at the values written there, they're definitely close to Miyoshi's and my models, but there are striking differences, too.

"Didn't he mention that the error would be +0.05%?"

"In regards to the device's performance, yeah."

Still, this means... Even a simple comparison between the values put out as measurement results and the values put out by my Miyoshi mimicry won't overlap perfectly.

"Does the difference stem from using or not using cycles?"

"I think it plays a big role, at the very least."

"Wow, that's awesome, Miyoshi. It means you'll be able to turn this weird figure back into values, or to be precise, into stats, if you fully analyze its traits?"

"That should probably be possible, but that's not the issue here."

"Huh?"

If we can display the information obtained through the device as stats, it'll solve our problems, won't it?

"Please take a look at this."

A model labeled as 『saito』 is visible. Right on top of it another model has been added, called 『saito-c』. C probably stands for 'comparison' to keep them apart. The two models displayed in front of me cleanly overlap just like Miyoshi's model and my fake Miyoshi model earlier, but a strange spike exists at one part of the comparison model.

"What's that spike over here?"

"Of course it's possible that it's noise that got added during the plotting of the model..."

Not only Ms. Saito's model, but also Ms. Mitsurugi and Ms. Naruse's models seem to have the same disparity with the comparison model that imitates me.

"In short, I have something they don't?"

I reflexively think about a certain part of my body that becomes all lively once in a while Precisely because it shows in the shape of a weird spike.

"Senpai, if you're thinking that it's triggered by a difference in gender, I think you're probably wrong."

"Why?"

"Wasn't there a match between your and my models when we compared them a little while ago? I'm a woman, you know?"

She's right, my model mostly matched with hers earlier, without any conspicuous discrepancies in the spikes.

"Hmm, then this would be a special trait only you and I share?"

"If you consider it from the little data we have, it's just as you say."

That basically means—

"The skills?"

"Yes. Moreover, the most likely candidates are the space storage skills."

"Why?"

"Senpai, Ms. Naruse possesses <Different World Language Comprehension>."

Oh, I see. If the reason were to be found with a passive skill, this spike should have shown up for Ms. Naruse as well.

"I think we'll know for sure if we make Ms. Saito or Ms. Mitsurugi use a skill orb, and measure once more, but..."

I'm sure Ms. Saito would joyfully accept it, but she has some carelessness to her. Unlike with the teacher issue, it'd turn into a major issue if she were to blab about this.

"So Ms. Mitsurugi?"

"If I had to choose either, I think she'd be the safer option."

But, <Storage> to Ms. Mitsurugi? If that were to get exposed, it's very likely that her future would take a drastic turn away from her current dreams...

"I'd rather give one to Simon who's already offering his services for the world! How about that?"

"If the source of the orb gets revealed, we'll be hated by the JSDF, so no thank you."

Having said that, I'd like to be spared from having the JSDF keep a close eye on us after we suddenly offer an orb to them without having any connections with them. In the end that might happen anyway, but at the moment I'm not mentally prepared for this.

"Erm..."

"So, in the end, one of the three would be the best choice for a comparison experiment, right? It'd be a different matter if we got Mr. Simon or his team measured in detail before putting the measurement device to use, but I'm sure their stats are regarded as confidential information— Oh right, if we build something like a jammer, it'll definitely sell!"

"Now listen..."

Certainly, if you develop a bacteriological weapon, it probably won't be of much use if you don't pair it with a vaccine against the bacteria. A pair of a device disclosing something, and another device preventing that disclosure will doubtlessly be handy.

"It'd be a lot more useful if there was something in here allowing us to distinguish a person." Miyoshi says and spins the stat model around on the screen, "I've created many different models from your data using different stats. If I extract the parts that haven't changed among those, it might be possible to define them as information that distinguishes you as an individual. The idea would be

then to compare that information with other people afterwards or some such..."

There's a common trend among relatively smart people to completely stop caring about what they've been up to moments ago as soon as their interest shifts. Or in other words, the verification of the Storage holding might have been put on hold until her interest gets re-ignited.

§071 Appraisal 12/22 (Sat)

"So you pulled an all-nighter?"

"Phi..."

As I go downstairs the next morning, Miyoshi is getting scolded by Ms. Naruse.

"Mornin'. You guys seem awfully busy in the morning."

"Ah! Senpai, the PC is too slow~ Pwease, buy me a supercomputer?"

"Haaah?"

It looks like she's been processing something related to all the data gathered about me, but as she's been fiddling around with it in various way without coming to an end, she was discovered by Ms. Naruse, who's come in in the morning, and admonished for staying up all night.

But wait, <High Recovery> stops working if you don't focus on using it, doesn't it...? And yet, what's this girl blabbing about all of a sudden, despite it being obvious that she's become high from the all-nighter.

"Currently, one Peta-FLOPS costs around a billion Yen, I think?"

Hmm, she's right, we do have enough cash to build the successor for the 『K Computer』 which will apparently start getting manufactured next year. Going by the price of that thing, one peta should cost around 130 Million Yen. But then again—

"You an idiot? Where do you want to install that? We don't have the proper place for such a huge monstrosity of a device."

Nowadays, large computer systems run while eating the electricity of several households, but a supercomputer is a no go. In the worst case, we'd actually need a power plant.

"Ueeehn."

"You're really incorrigible, aren't you? If I remember correctly, the K Computer was open for communal use, right? Back at our company, I looked up whether it couldn't be used to analyze the

structure of the materials. If I remember correctly, renting it for one day costs something around three million Yen...wouldn't that work for you?"

"That's a great idea!" Miyoshi jumps up, and opens the site of the HPCI.

HPCI is the abbreviation for 『High Performance Computing Infrastructure』. It's a shared computing infrastructure for the national universities and research institutes to be used for storage and data processing with the computer of RIKEN as its core. In short, it's a structure that makes the usage of a supercomputer, which was built with subsidiary aid of the state, available for everyone.

"Heeh, HPCI's Exclusive Paid Computing offers a 24/7 reception. Yep, money does rule the world."

Usually non-profit research organizations get an application period once or twice a year where they can request free use, and then it's decided whether they receive permission based on a review. On the other hand, paying the rent yourself for industrial use gives you preferential usage rights, and you can apply for it at any time.

"It looks like you can use the K Computer for up to six million node-hours [efn_note]A node-hour is the usage of one node (server) for one hour, or its equivalent. The K Computer consists of 88128 nodes in total. So if you rent the whole K Computer for one hour, you get the computing of 88128 nodes (servers). Six million node-hours would mean you're monopolizing the whole supercomputer for a little more than 68 hs.[/efn_note] . It'd definitely move the construction of your model ahead a good chunk."

No wait, no matter how much cash you throw at them for industrial use, being allowed to use it so quickly is... If you limit it to around 100 Giga-FLOPS, I feel like an account should be issued within three days if you apply with FOCUS (Federal Organization of Computing for Universities and Science), the first address when it comes to applying for participation. But then again, FOCUS is kinda like an organization created for the sake of allowing the industrial world to use the supercomputer without reservation.

Having said that, the CPUs of modern PCs are very fast. If we're just speaking of theoretical values, then a high-end multi-core PC should have a performance of one Tera-FLOP, let alone a few hundred Giga-FLOPS.

"Senpai! The Earth-Simulator is still alive! Yep, the vector-type is definitely rocks! We should use the chance, and just apply for that one as well!"

It looks like the K Computer and other HPCs require different applications. But, is that Miyoshi really alright, despite having become so ridiculously high?

"Miyoshi. Miyoshi, go sleep for a bit, okay?"

"Kyaaa! It's an all-you-want-use of Japanese supercomputers! Kyahoo!" Miyoshi suddenly stands up, places the palms of her hands on her head, and heads upstairs while turning her hands around as if to drill them into her own head.

Ms. Naruse mutters while watching that go down with a stupefied look, "Is Ms. Miyoshi going to be okay?"

"Yeah, don't worry. It's what occasionally happens with her after becoming high from an all-nighter."

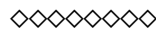
Back at the company she became like that when she got permission to use expensive reagents, didn't she? Still, that girl, just what is she trying to do for her to need such a large computing power.

"By the way——"

"Yes?"

"——What did she mean with 'your model'?"

"U-Umm...that's still confidential. Since it's slightly difficult to explain without Miyoshi, let's wait for her to wake up!" While frantically making that excuse, I curse Miyoshi in my mind.



"Sorry for having kicked up such a fuss, really." Miyoshi, who woke up around four hours later, apologizes while filling out the application form for the usage of the HPC she requested.

"But, I mean even your Desktop-PC is fairly powerful, isn't it? If the model creation takes this much time, won't we need a ridiculous amount of CPU power to return the data received from the device after calculation?"

In such a case it might actually be useless, no?

"Ah, no. Once we affix an array of coefficients allowing us to set the separate formulas, the calculation itself will take but at an instant, so that part is no problem."

In other words, the calculation formulas have been broadly set with yesterday's models. But, what the hell has she been calculating then?

"What have you been doing then?"

Seemingly minding Ms. Naruse, who's in her translator's room, Miyoshi lowers her voice, "The determination of skills and the identification of individuals."

"What?"

Miyoshi removes the cover of the prototype, "As might be expected of labeling it as the highest performance device for measurements, Mr. Nakajima has apparently built this for us while going way overspec."

For example, he's apparently set the possible acquisition rate of all data to 240 fps with the reasoning that we don't know the best data measurement rate, even if it's data slices for a super-resolution, but what Mr. Nakajima has apparently been using to determine each parameter is data at

most measured eight times in 0.5 seconds.

"There gotta be a limit to overspeccing, right?"

If you poll data eight times per 0.5 seconds, it's a frame rate of 16 fps. Setting the performance to 15 times that is the height of folly.

"No kidding. I feel like I can somewhat understand Midori why she doesn't want to grant a budget to him."

Producing a highly-efficient device going far beyond the requested specifications is wonderful, but cost performance rates play a major role in this world. Generally budgets have a limit.

"And now?"

"For the time being I've been modeling different settings of your data with various methods while using the full spec, looking for parts that don't change."

"Ah, what you mentioned yesterday at the end, right?"

"Yep."

If parts that don't change even after altering the parameters exist, and if they are different depending on the individual, it'd create the possibility to distinguish individuals.

"Does it look like it's possible?"

"No, that's..."

Once she wrote a code to search for those parts after randomly creating a model that seemed like it'd be useful and let the program run, she got nothing back at all, resulting in the situation in the morning.

"Your program hasn't entered an infinite loop due to a bug or something like that?"

"Since I've logged the progress in a file just in case, I don't think that's the case."

"Well, it's not like it's based on some kind of theory or anything."

"Thorough searches are the basics of computer arithmetics."

It's not like you can prove that some pattern exists if you let a program run against infinite possibilities, but if it comes to industrial use, it's okay to know the outcomes within a certain range.

"Even if that's the case, you'd implement it after at least specifying the targeted amount of calculations, wouldn't you?"

"Well said. I just thought if I cram the model into an order of $O(n^3)$... Anyway, since the HPCI

won't set up an account for us right away, I'll just let it run for a while on that PC."

I'm told the PC should give a notice if it finds a model that works. I'm just praying that it won't end up like the young lady who explains combinatorial explosions. [efn_note]No clue what this is about. By the way, the explosions part has nothing to do with the boom one, but https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Combinatorial_explosion [/efn_note]

"Did you finish your conversation?" Ms. Naruse asks as she leaves her room, seemingly having waited for us to wrap up our talk.

"Oh. Yes."

"If you could give me an explanation, I might be able to help you as your exclusive deputy chief." Ms. Naruse has quite the freezing aura oozing out of her as she stands there squinting at us with her arms folded.

"Senpai, that's what a capable woman is about."

"Moreover, she's got the personality of a dominatrix."

"What are you prattling about over there?"

""Oh, nothing.""

"It looks like it's confidential, but it appears you had me also cooperate in your measurements of whatever. I'd like you to give me an explanation any time now."

"You heard her. Miyoshi?" Somewhat troubled, I try to bring it up with Miyoshi.

Miyoshi nods at me with a face clearly telling me that it was about time to do so anyway.

"I think you'll hear about it at your family meeting on the 23rd anyway, though."

"Huh? At the Naruse family meeting? What do you mean by that...?"

Miyoshi roughly explains the business cooperation with Ms. Midori and the intended device to Ms. Naruse who looks mystified.

Ms. Naruse silently listens to the end, but at the same time as Miyoshi stops speaking, she excitedly blurts out, "A quantification of stats? Are you serious!?"

"Well, that's the idea, yeah."

Completely disregarding that it's about a device that will be produced by her sister, she first latches onto that part of the story. That's a JDA staff member for you.

"Mine as well then?"

"If you're okay with the data I calculated yesterday."

Miyoshi fetches her tablet, and opens her data. She has calculated the stats after drawing up the aforementioned model from the measured values. As for HP and MP, those are reference values derived from the calculated stats. In reality, if the xHP or xMP types of skills have been applied, the values might be completely wrong since they won't match with the values resulting from that simple calculation, but if you consider the number of people with those skills, and the current level of influence by those skills, it's pretty clear that it's not that much of an issue, on top of being practical.

Name: Naruse Miharu

HP 23
MP 27

STR 10
VIT 9
INT 15
AGI 9
DEX 13
LUC 11

Ms. Naruse stares at those values for a while with excitement gleaming in her eyes, but then her expression becomes uneasy all of a sudden, and she lifts her face.

"If those values truly reflect my stats, the benefit of this device for explorers will be unfathomable."

That makes sense, I guess. If the WDA announces recommended stats for each floor and dungeon for example, it's possible that the mortality and injury rate among explorers will plummet all at once. In addition, some kind of training method to raise any stat might be discovered as well.

Quantifying something is equal to adding a layer of abstraction to a target. And that simplifies everything as well as it adds objectivity to actual phenomena. The people will be released from the ambiguous subjectivity, spotting a path leading to a commonly shared perception. They might even be released from a cursed world as they're introduced into the refined world of science. Even if that might actually be a path leading to new curses.

Doubtlessly mankind, which has become able to assess results of trial and error, will head into an age of even more efficient dungeon captures.

"But, this story is going to have too much of an impact."

"Impact?"

"I mean, look...with this people will be classified, right?"

Well, I'm sure anyone would fear that possibility. Even when it comes to us, we at first came up with a fake Dragon Ball version.

"It might be so at the beginning, but I think it'll eventually become a device no different from a health meter. It's way too expensive to be used as a child toy," Miyoshi laughs.

Even a health meter is a device expressing a part of a human's properties. However, no one would use those values to rank others or anything like that, save unique researchers.

"Even if it's combined with one's weight."

"As a matter of fact, this is something similar to body fat percentage."

"Huh? What do you mean...?"

The body fat percentage is measured by checking the ease of electricity flowing through your body. However, since there are differences between individuals when it comes to a human's body size, it's just a simple electric resistance value which has an error if you measure it. In the end, the value is determined by comparing it against a database containing the measurements of a huge amount of people, and the determination of stats is actually something similar to that.

"Either way, people are already getting ranked through all kinds of values. There's such things as billionaire's lists, and the standard score for entry examinations, correct?"

"However, those are visualizations..."

"They are being judged by those. At the level of their livelihood or the school they entered."

In reality the ranking of people is being carried out at all kinds of occasions. It's a problem if people go too far with that, but increasing those criteria by one more value won't do much harm at this point.

Ms. Naruse sighs lightly, obviously having given up, "So...are you going to publish the algorithm and theory behind the status output of this device?"

Miyoshi silently shakes her head.

"But, otherwise the credibility of the measurements will——"

"Ms. Naruse." Miyoshi interrupts her.

It tells me that the time where Miyoshi's resolve, which she had hardened inside the dungeon, will be finally put into action.

"Ultimately, this is a device created as a result of us having researched the stats recursively. That's why senpai compared it with the body fat percentage."

"R-Recursively?" Ms. Naruse blinks in surprise at Miyoshi's implicit suggestion.

"Ms. Naruse, I—" Miyoshi produces a dramatic air of tension by making a pause there and averting her eyes from Ms. Naruse. And just as the tension reaches its peak, she quickly pins her eyes back on Ms. Naruse, puts some force into her look, and confesses, "—own <Appraisal>."

At that moment I feel like a piano dramatically answered to a dominant raised by the orchestra. Just like it happens during the opening of Op. 54, the sole Piano Concerto in A minor of Schumann.

"...Eh?"

Miyoshi takes out her D-Card which she has prepared in advance, and shows it to Ms. Naruse who looks dumbfounded, unable to believe what she's heard just now. The part about all skills besides <Appraisal> being hidden with a cover is shady as hell, but I guess that qualifies as pointless to point out this late in the game.

Ms. Naruse confirms it, looks at Miyoshi's face, and then looks down at her D-Card once more. This is the moment when <Appraisal> has been confirmed in the world for the very first time, three years after the appearance of dungeons.



Several days later, a single log entry was displayed on Miyoshi's PC monitor as a result of the search that seemed to have taken forever, but of course none of us noticed it right away.

『Conformity: KY2538-21104 (1284,7743,6430-1312,6661,6434)』

§072 A Kind Hospital Visit 12/17 (Mon)

— Nakano District - Tokyo Police Hospital —

In the afternoon, just as planned, I headed over to Yoyogi Dungeon to get <Storage> as its cooldown timer ran out. After Ms. Naruse wrote her report in our office for a while, she rushed back to Ichigaya with the completed work. And thus Miyoshi visited the Police Hospital in Nakano by herself.

"Listen, Cavall. Please bring me all the way to his room, okay?" Miyoshi says to Cavall in her shadow, and then drops into the shadow herself at a place where no one is looking.



Because nothing was found to be wrong with Himuro who received a medical examination and explanation by a doctor after he woke up early in the morning, he was asked to vacate the patient's room during the day. He didn't quite get the meaning behind the exchange, or rather interrogation, with the featureless man who had entered the room after the doctor, but Himuro was quite baffled to learn that he had looked up even the woman he went out with for just a month during his university days.

In any case, he heard that he wouldn't get punished in any way, and that he'd also be released from the two men standing watch at the door after leaving this place.

"But, why did they go this far with their investigation about me?"

While vaguely suspecting something, like a pig that smelled truffles but couldn't quite dig them up, he got ready to leave the hospital.

"Hello."

Even though he didn't hear the door being opened, he was suddenly spoken to. Himuro, who got so startled that he almost jumped up, hurriedly looked back towards the door. The one he spotted there was a small, energetic-looking woman. Even if she was Himuro's acquaintance, he couldn't quite remember her.

"From just where..." Himuro muttered, but soon calmed down, believing that the door could be the only feasible explanation, and asked the woman, "I'm about to leave the hospital very soon. Did you possibly mistake me for someone else?"

"No, I'm certain I've got the right person, Mr. Himuro." The woman called his name with a grin.

Himuro felt like he had somewhere heard that voice before, but in the end he still couldn't connect it

to a particular memory.

"Excuse me, but who were you again?"

Leaving aside who that woman might be, Himuro was puzzled why she knew about him being here. After all, his days at the production company started late, so it would pose no problem for him to go work after leaving the hospital, but he hadn't contacted anyone about his stay here.

"That's what I want to know." With those words, the woman put the camera he had lost on the table. "That's yours, right? You dropped it in our garden."

Himuro picked up the camera with its media24 sticker. The lens was cracked, but he assumed that it must have happened when it fell down. Now it was in a state where repairing or buying a new one would cost around the same. Himuro thought that it'd be possible to insist on it not being his, but he wanted to retrieve the memory card within.

"It does...seem so, yeah."

"What were you doing in our garden?"

As it'd be next to impossible to admit that he had been taking peeping shots, Himuro hesitated for a moment after recalling last night.

This morning the doctor had gently accepted Himuro's claims with a smile, concluding his patient to be likely confused. Something tangible capable of proving his claims to be true couldn't be found anywhere, and contrary to Himuro's claims, his smartphone, which had been found among his personal effects, worked normally, too.

He used Google Map's timeline function as guaranteed evidence, but according to its records, Himuro had never left the area around a certain house. Even now Himuro found it difficult to believe that his experience in that dark place was no more than a dream. Especially since he had felt close to death at one point. However, all external sources pointed towards this having been a dream. And luckily he was blessed with the disposition of being able to quickly forget precarious situations once they passed which was beneficial for making a living with his current job.

"Ah, I'm terribly sorry about that. It looks like I mistook your home for another place."

He didn't clearly remember what he had confessed last night within the darkness. Hence he tried to weather this situation by playing dumb with a winning smile, just as usual. However, the instant he feigned ignorance, he found himself standing within darkness.

"W-What!?"

Until now he should have stood in a bright hospital room. But now pitch black darkness was encroaching on him from every direction, almost as if he had a flashback of yesterday's memory. And just when he almost started to panic tragically, he found himself in the sickroom from before, kneeling on the spot he stood before.

"Kahaa!"

While experiencing a sensation of tunnel vision with the edges continuing to warp as if looking through a fisheye lens, the woman in front of him felt like some kind of abnormal being.

"What's wrong?"

Now that he had heard her voice once more, he remembered where he had heard it before. Alongside an oppressiveness that didn't allow him to even stir. It triggered him being assailed by a hallucination of sweat gushing out all over his body.

"Y-You...just what the hell are you!?"

"Pardon? Are you okay?" And with a smile, the woman reconfirmed, "You said you mistook the houses, right?"

The instant he nodded at that, he felt like he'd be plunged into darkness again. He didn't know where that place was, but he was absolutely sure that he didn't want to go there ever again. Even if it was no more than a vision.



"I see, then it can't be helped. But, seeing how we got to know each other, how about we get along from now on, and cooperate with each other?"

"...Get along?"

Himuro nodded while almost completely unable to comprehend what the woman was talking about.

"Yay, thank you! —Oh right, here, a get-well gift."

What the woman took out of nowhere was a small, potted plant. Seeing the plant, he recovered his common sense for a moment, wondering whether a potted plant as a gift for someone being hospitalized was supposed to be some kind of harassment. In the first place, according to the code of conduct at the hospital he was shown in the morning, this place prohibited bringing in fresh plants, regardless whether they were rooted in soil or cut. A small tree with many small leaves grew inside the flowerpot. Feeling like they had used it in some recording before, he absentmindedly stared at it, trying to recall its name. And then, all of a sudden, he remembered.

'If I'm not mistaken, we used it for its purple petals during a summer TV show, despite its flower code which I had looked up thanks to my usual habit.

"A-A Duranta...?"

Visibly all blood drained from Himuro's face when he remembered what he knew about this tree.

"Well then, I'll contact you again in due time."

Coming to his senses thanks to her voice, he turned around to where the woman was. But, he didn't find anyone there.

"She'll °contact me°...again?"

Himuro rushed over to the door, threw it open, and thrust his head out, scanning the hallway. Because of that overwhelming abruptness, the two men of the Cabinet Information Research Office, who had been assigned as his guards, half jumped up to their feet from their chairs, and asked him, "Hey, what's wrong?"

"Did a woman come out and leave just now!?"

"Woman?"

After the two guards reflexively looked at each other, they suspiciously scrutinized Himuro with eyes that clearly told him that they were thinking he might have taken some nasty drugs. Seeing their reaction, Himuro changed his mind as he didn't feel like receiving another long examination as a result of acting up here.

"No, sorry. It's nothing." He said, and withdrew into his sickroom.

"Get along from now on...cooperate, she said?"

While getting very uneasy about what the woman planned to have him do, Himuro closed the door behind him. He felt like the potted plant placed down in front of his eyes was monitoring him, and only after he spontaneously stripped off the bed's sheet and covered the plant with it could he breathe out deeply.



— **Yoyogi-Hachiman Office** —

"So, what attack did you use to finish him off?"

"Finish him off...how rude! I just went over to bring him a flower as a get-well gift."

"Flower?"

"Unfortunately October already passed, so no flowers were in bloom, but I had a *Duranta* pot delivered to the office in advance."

"A potted plant for a hospitalized patient?"

Commonly those are forbidden as they are regarded as bad omen for their implied meaning of 『taking root』. There's got to be a limit to harassment, no?

"He just slept there for one night, and it's not like he's being hospitalized either. Besides, as expected of a production director said to be very knowledgeable by many people; he turned pale the instant he recalled the name of that tree."

"What? Is it poisonous or something?"

"No way. We're talking about a Police Hospital here, you know?"

"Why then...?"

"The flower symbol of a *Duranta erecta* is—" Miyoshi explained with a broad grin, "—『I'm watching you』."

Oof, that's scary shit, Miyoshi! Are you imitating some horror movie, or what!?

"I had also considered a sunflower with its meaning of 『I'm only looking at you』, but because it's an annual plant, no flowers or flowerpots can be bought around this time of the year."

That's close to a Yandere-like pun.

"It sure is a nice story for two people who are in love with each other, but..."

Miyoshi has been laughing as if not having the slightest evil intentions, but in the end being told 'I'm always watching you' in such a way sounds like a threat. I can totally understand why Mr.

Himuro went pale there.

"When I used the occasion to ask him for a cooperation in regards to media-related matters, he willingly agreed. It did help that he's such an understanding man."

"Willingly? Really?"

In response to my retort, Miyoshi looks into the far distance, whistling some silly tune.

"Anyway, stop doing stuff like tying people up."

"I'm not doing anything like that!" Miyoshi rebukes angrily as if I said something rude to her, but it looks like she does intend to investigate the people concerned in this case.



— **Ichigaya - JDA Headquarters** —

Miharu had been tiredly dragging her feet while looking up to Ichigaya's headquarters of the JDA. She was uncertain how she should report the overwhelmingly sensational news brought up by D-Powers a while ago.

"For now I can't inform my company about Heaven's Leak and <Mining>, so I'll go with Farming, <Appraisal>, and moreover, the stats measuring device, I suppose..."

She was fully aware that she wasn't quite suited to control the pieces of information that would be released to the world while knowing the full extent herself. There were limits to what she could handle.

"Naruse? Is something wrong?"

Saiga sensed that something was out of place from her visiting his booth at a time outside their regular meetings. He closed the door, which was usually kept wide open, making it difficult for any sounds to leave his booth.

"Chief, there's something I'd like to urgently report about D-Powers." With those words as an opener, she handed her report to Saiga.

Currently all matters pertaining to D-Powers were set to be kept at section chief level within the entire dungeon management department. After all, many of the items brought up by D-Powers couldn't be publicized openly.

"Good work. Ah right, let me give you this here first. Please take a look while I'm reading your report." Saiga retrieved some documents and passed them to Miharu. A brief glance told Miharu that this was a temporary draft of rules for land use inside dungeons. "It's a major pain. The draft still needs a consensus with sales, but they don't take this seriously at all, going as far as even asking why it'd be necessary to decide something like this."

"Well, that's because the possibility of any company currently renting land inside a dungeon is next to zero."

'It might be a different matter if the information about safe areas as it's recorded on the epitaph becomes publicly known, but if it comes to using land inside dungeons at present, it's something at the level of explorers setting up bases on a whim. It's the same with places like the one at the exit of the eighth floor for example. People assume that it'd be no more than something at that level. And it's definitely not like we could take rent from a place like that, right?

In the end sales didn't take this matter seriously, entrusting it to the dungeon management department. No one could even imagine that this oversight would cause them to cry tears of blood in the near future.

"Still, you can't tell me that those two plan to enjoy a slow life inside a dungeon for real. What do you think is their objective?"

Being asked, Miharu laughed ambiguously. She believed that Yoshimura's words might be actually true for the most part.

"Since it doesn't look like they require an overly big patch of land, I think it's for experiments, but as for what exactly..."

Hearing that, Saiga nodded, and only said, "Figures."

"Them trying to do something on land inside a dungeon means—" Saiga folded his arms, and brooded for a while with a troubled expression.

"Chief?"

"—that they found some kind of means to deal with the slimes. Don't you think so?"

"Huh?"

'Certainly, if you tried to build some kind of facility inside a dungeon, you'd definitely need a way to deal with slimes. I don't know what it could be, but if those two who lack any common sense, it wouldn't be all that strange for them to have come with some ground-breaking method.

"Want me to ask them?"

"Please. But, don't try to stir up any hornets' nests."

"Okay."

"In any case, it'll be troublesome to handle if they start something without giving us any time to prepare. Please keep a close eye on their progress."

Miharu confirmed while smiling wryly in her mind as she deliberated the worries of her section chief who was currently pulling a troubled face.

"It's a temporary draft, but it won't be a problem to set up a contract with Ms. Miyoshi based on those rules, correct?"

"Yes, feel free to do so. I suppose it'll become a kind of test contract."

"Understood."

For a while afterwards, both read their respective documents, but Saiga, whose expression had gradually paled, finally sighed deeply, and spoke up to Miharū.

"Ah, Naruse. This report...is not some light novel or anything like that, right?"

"Unfortunately, no."

Everything written in there was completely absurd, lacking any shred of common sense.

"I see... So, about Miyoshi Azusa...it says here that she possesses <Appraisal>?"

"I've seen it on her D-Card, so there's no mistake about that."

The report also included a rough explanation of the skill's functions. According to it, it appeared to be a skill allowing one to obtain a detailed explanation about the dungeons' dropped items and orbs.

"I guess this skill would allow one to handle unknown skills and items with a much higher safety margin than until now."

"Yes."

"The monsters who drop the orb are the eyeballs of the wandering mansion..."

"Yes. It's the mansion shown in the video uploaded by the Dungeon Information Department. It refers to that large amount of eyeballs that have been hanging down from the mansion's eaves."

"That means even going to get it would already be quite a hurdle, doesn't it?"

"Ms. Miyoshi apparently hopes to use this information to obtain many of the book page-like epitaphs they found inside the mansion."

"I see. Well, let's put that aside for now. But, you're saying they developed a device to measure stats by using that skill?"

"Yes, they used it to measure me as well. It seems to have unavoidable limitations for non-explorers, though."

"So they've already developed it up to such a point..."

It's also surprising that stats, which researchers have considered as a possibility, have been clearly confirmed, but with them having already reached the point of having a working device to measure

and display those stats, you might as well say that they're at a separate level altogether when compared to other researchers. A level where it wouldn't be strange for one of them to have a cat robot from the future clinging to their back.

"Even the JDA might feel like getting involved with this, I think..."

"D-Powers possesses plenty of funds and technology. With them being at a stage where they've already completed prototypes, wishing to get involved with this..."

'No kidding,' Saiga smiled bitterly, 'Let alone getting involved in its production, it sounds like they've got an array of stuff where our side will need to beg them to teach us while bowing our heads.'

"It sure sounds like something that would cause Executive Director Mizuho and his men to secretly maneuver around again, if this gets out."

"Though I've heard that his reputation took quite a heavy blow thanks to the matter with <Different World Language Comprehension>."

Apparently various events took place in the top management as a result of that bureau director level meeting.

"He could regard it as a chance to recover his lost honor, right?" Saiga grimaced in annoyance.

'There's no way that a fairy-tale like saying it's for the sake of Japan would pass at this point in time. It'd just piss off D-Powers. They'd have no problem cooperating with the US, EU, or China. Actually it'd be better if Mizuho truly insisted on that since it'd simply sound like an empty slogan to anyone with some brains. They'd likely just keep their distance from him.'

'Still, Azusa Miyoshi's value has skyrocketed with this. At this point it'd be no understatement to call her the number one VIP explorer in the world, let alone Japan. The innovations are too centralized; dangerously so. In reality there are some plausible rumors going around that some country is plotting an assassination.'

"These guys didn't sell their souls to a dungeon devil or something like that, right?"

Although he had just managed to somehow settle the matter regarding the renting of land in the dungeon by running back and forth between departments a few days ago...he couldn't even estimate just how many new rules would be required this time thanks to those two.

"To be honest, things would work out much better if we simply pretended that you've written down some wild dreams in your report after your head got messed up, you know Naruse?"

"You're awful, chief." Miharuru said with a laugh, but actually thought the same.

Originally the excessive abnormality and importance of the information was at such levels that she even worried what to bring up where. Fortunately she was blessed with a lovely boss who had the ability to push things through even at the sacrifice of himself, and thus those worries remained small.

"Looks like rough waters are ahead again..." Saiga looked outside the window while leaning back on his chair and stretching his back.

Outside he saw a beautiful clear sky spread over Tokyo, but in the far distance he could see how small, black clouds began to well up.

◇◇◇◇ 12/18 (Tue) ◇◇◇◇

— Yoyogi-Hachiman Office —

"Good morning."

In the morning Ms. Naruse opens the door, holding some documents under her arm.

"Good morning. You're early today."

"Yes, I've gathered the necessary rules and everything about the matter with the land, and while it's only temporary, I wanted to report it to you as soon as possible."

It looks like she's come here carrying the documents for the renting of land inside the dungeon we talked about before.

◇◇◇

"30,000 per tsubo!?"

"Yes."

As soon as they begin to talk about the details after preparing some tea, Miyoshi flies into a rage, obviously unable to come to terms with the pricing.

"30,000 per tsubo; that's at the level of an office in Roppongi or Shinjuku's 3rd District, you know!?"

"Is that expensive?"

Miyoshi rolls her eyes at my question, but reluctantly begins to explain, "Senpai, how big was your previous apartment?"

"Hmm? The dining room has 6 plus 2, and the inner room has another 6 tatami, I think. Also, since it also has a bath and a wet area, I'd say it has around 10 tsubo?"

"Right. An average 1DK has a size of around 32 square meters. So, with 30,000 per tsubo, the rent would be 300,000 Yen."

"Whoa, rip-off!"

"If you're lucky, you can get the same in Ginza. In the first place, just how the heck did you calculate the pricing for this?" Miyoshi flares up at Ms. Naruse, but she's just passing on what the JDA has decided, so it must be troublesome for her to take the brunt here.

"Now, now, Miyoshi. There's no point in you getting angry at Ms. Naruse, is there?"

"Yes, of course not, but...listen, senpai, if we assume a floor of Yoyogi to be a circle with a radius of 5 km, its size will be the product of $5000 \times 5000 \times 3.14$ square meters."

"Yeah, okay."

"In other words, if they were to rent out all land of a single floor, the monthly rent would exceed 700 billion Yen, you know? No matter how you look at it, that's way too much of an overcharge."

"Darn, you're fast at calculating."

"I believe they integrated the matter of the safe floors, which are going to play a role in the future, but I hear it's a provisional sum for cases where the land is rented out to commercial enterprises." Ms. Naruse says apologetically, but Miyoshi remains fuming.

"Alright. Let's rent one tsubo then."

"One tsubo?"

"Yep. It's approximately 3.3 square meters, or two tatami."

In the end, there are two things we want to check by using the land in the dungeon: Is foreign vegetation that has been planted in the dungeon going to repop? And if it does, around when will they get accepted as native by the dungeon? I doubt we need a big plot of land for that.

"I understand. We'll rent one tsubo then. Is it fine for us to freely choose a place?"

"Yes, I hear it doesn't matter as long as it's limited to the second or third floor, and not part of a road. You will be given a license later, so they'd like you to install it on the plot of land you decide to use."

"Understood."

Yay, this will allow us to go ahead with the farming tests. I'm really hyped about it.

"So you do have some countermeasures against the slimes, as expected." Ms. Naruse comments with a grin.

"Eh?"

"I mean, it's the installation of a license plate, right? Those are usually eaten by slimes, no?"

"E-E-Eeehh!?"

"You silently accepting such an installation means that you have a means to prevent this, doesn't it?"

"Hmm, well, umm...that's still in testing."

"Sure, please inform me about the results once you have them, okay?"

"...Roger."

It's totally obvious that Miyoshi is doing her utmost to hold back her laughter while looking at me.

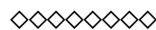
As long as we don't announce that slimes drop storage-type orbs, the number of explorers hunting them will likely stay low, even with the benzethonium chloride as option. From the standpoint of protecting facilities in dungeons, we've previously talked about the possible necessity to publicize it sooner or later, so it won't be much of a problem to tell her, but somehow it'd kinda feel like I lost to her.

"Senpai, shall we choose a place later then?"

"Yeah, sure."

At the end I embarrassed myself a bit, but the experiment itself sounds extremely interest...err
cough cough*...sounds like being well worth it as it might save the world.

We decided to head over to the dungeon in the afternoon to look for a good place.



— Yoyogi Dungeon Second Floor —

"Senpai, senpai, isn't around there good?"

"Hmm?"

At 12 o'clock is a small hill with a single tree.

"Don't you think surrounding the area around the tree with a wire mesh would work as a countermeasure against goblins?"

Even if we drive in stakes as a foundation, it won't be very stable if the area that could possibly be destroyed is shallow or some such. It might be quite helpful if we can use an already existing tree. It's not that big a tree either, and since it's growing there all by itself, I doubt that slimes would turn up there from above.

"You're right."

We explore the surroundings, but it's not like you could call it a patch of land infested with especially many goblins. We start planning to form a space of around two tatami, including the tree, by surrounding it with approximately three meter tall wire meshings.

It's still possible that the goblins will overcome the net by climbing across, but sun exposure would become an issue with a solid wall. For the time being we decide to use a net against goblins, and not against mice.

"It'd be also fine to dig out the surroundings, but amassing Alien Drool in trenches would be slightly..."

I don't know whether goblins eat stuff or drink water, but I'd like to erase the possibility of something else gathering here to eat the Alien Drool.

"Hmm, maybe we could set up a system where anything approaching would be showered by Alien Drool if we surround the place with circular pipes containing shower spouts and movement sensors, but what do you think?"

"It sounds like that'd have a bad impact if it hits the plants we're going to grow, so I believe we should separate those two a bit."

In such a way of making plans, we spent long afternoon hours on the second floor.



On the way back, while descending the hill, Miyoshi looks up to the place planned to become our field, and says, "But senpai, why do you believe that this is going to work out?"

"Now listen. You've been the one who brought up the idea, right?"

"Yeah sure, but considering it logically, it's impossible that something, which has been brought in from outside, will be accepted by the dungeon as native and repop. If this was possible, dungeons would be almighty 3-D copy machines, no?"

Sure, if you could use them for everything and anything, you could scratch the term 'rare' out of all dictionaries in this world.

"Well, usually it's impossible, I'd say."

"Considering your words now, you seem kinda convinced of its success, though."

"In reality, it likely won't work with most things. However, just food should be an exception, I think."

"An exception?"

"Correct. Look, Miyoshi, dungeons are tools to scatter D-Factors, right?"

"Yes."

"Then, don't you feel like they'd lend us their strength when it comes to things that accelerate that scattering?"

"Hah?"

"We're going to produce food that's been grown in dungeons and is stuffed full with D-Factors (probably). Moreover, scattering that food all over the world is like making people absorb the D-Factors directly. There's no way that the dungeons wouldn't cooperate on this (likely)."

Hearing all that, Miyoshi puts on a complicated expression, "When talking with you, it almost sounds as if you believe that dungeons are some beings with a consciousness."

"Huh? Well, they obviously are?"

"Eehh?"

"Ah, no, I don't mean the dungeons themselves, but rather some kind of will that created them."

To be honest, I feel like it wouldn't be all that strange if the dungeons themselves were sentient beings, but if I were to claim that without any proof, I'd simply get shunned as crazy.

"If such a being really exists, it'd be a being equal to a god for us. Though, at this point nothing would surprise me anymore."

Yep, compared to the time before the appearance of the dungeons, the world is plenty crazy. If we measured the current happenings with the common sense of the past, we'd find that reality is overflowing with stuff that would have been considered insane back then.

"You see, I'm kinda torn...whether I want to try meeting that being as soon as possible, or never get in contact with it for my whole life."

◇◇◇◇ 12/20 (Thu) ◇◇◇◇

— Yoyogi-Hachiman Office —

"Oohh." I call out reflexively after watching an array of same-sized, covered trucks pass the street in front of our office through the window.

"Is something wrong?"

"No, it's just that around eight 2-ton trucks have passed our office in a row moments ago. It made me think that they completely look like a mini-convoy."

Convoy is originally a term describing a fleet of ships, but because of Sam Peckinpah's movie's title, Japan started to use it when talking about a group of trucks.

Truck convoys themselves are a byproduct, stemming from the NMSL (A law limiting the maximum speed to 55mph. It was introduced to lower fuel consumption as a countermeasure against the oil crisis) established in America in the year 1973. Because the truck drivers had been working on a very tight schedule, they usually had to disregard this speed limit, but then got cracked down upon with speed traps (also called Orbis). It's said that this spelled the beginning of trucker convoys as a self-defense measure by having many trucks drive in a row, and thus limit the ones being caught in speed traps to just the front truck.

"Ah, it's because there's a lot of small alleys around here. If it comes to moving for a place situated deep in a residential area, it's impossible to just bring in one big truck to handle it." Miyoshi comments after joining me at the window. "I think the mini convoy you just saw belongs to the home diagonally across."

"Huh? That huge mansion?"

For a long time it's been kinda like a palatial residence. Even a family owning such a house changes residences?

"I don't know the reason, but isn't it possible that the owner went bankrupt or something?"

It's bad karma to say stuff like that, but such things might happen, too.

"Come to think of it, we've seen quite a few trucks most recently, despite this being an area with only owned properties, don't you think?"

Until just the other day, there was a frequent coming and going of moving companies at the mansion behind our office, as if it's some kind of tenement at a train station.

"Yeah..."

"What's up?"

"When it comes to people leaving, it's definitely as you say, senpai, but I haven't seen too many people who are moving in, have you?"

Come to think of it, carrying stuff in should take some time, but I haven't seen luggage being lowered from trucks. Especially considering that this area has only properties that are way too big for a single person.

"Well, it must be a coincidence, right? Leaving and arriving trucks must have different time slots. Since those moving in should come at a later hour, it's very likely for us to have been out when they turned up here."

"You might be right."

Besides, these days they have been optimizing to reduce labor costs, so the moving-in time seems to be short, too.

"Nowadays it sounds to be quite a chore if you want to move with a family."

"Quite a chore?"

"Thanks to the free price check services, moving companies are being compared."

"Ah, as expected, everyone uses those, huh?"

I'm a coward who would end up feeling pressured to use the company where I asked for an estimate.

"Senpai, your economic sense is just a bit too lax. That's all."

"You profited from that quite a bit, didn't you? Like for food expenses."

Miyoshi coughs unnaturally, "I had them give me an estimate as well when I moved in here, but——"

If you specify hours where different companies show up within 30 minutes of each other, they will clash with each other, making the whole atmosphere rather icky.

"The atmosphere is already heavy anyway. They'll look at any business person who gets an estimate with eyes full of disgust."

"No, that's got to be your own imagination, you know?"

"Nah, aren't there many of such people who compare prices? The movers probably feel fed up, suspecting to have run into another of those."

"Which reminds me, I've heard talks within the moving business world that catering to families is troublesome and unprofitable. Students and singles are simple because they don't have many things to carry, but in cases of families, they've got a shitload of things, and many of them bring up claims as well."

"Add to this the bargains."

"Bargains?"

"Some companies will offer very cheap prices during the price check, and tell the customers that they'll do it for this price if they take the deal before the price estimates of all companies come in."

"Smart move. So, did you do business with one of those?"

"No, I placed the order with a place that'd also get rid of all my furniture."

Most of the major moving companies take over your old stuff, but among them, some will put up

various conditions for doing so. As a result of Miyoshi leaving all the decisions about the interior in our office to one company, this place became a kind of furnished property. She might have gotten rid of all her old furniture except for those she cherishes. I've left my rundown apartment as is until this very day, but...I suppose I need to get my act together and do something about that place.

"Done~!"

Miyoshi and I look at each other after hearing that voice from the translator room. Once we peek inside, we find Ms. Naruse sprawled on her sofa bed, but she immediately sits back up, and hands a USB memory stick to Miyoshi.

"It's the complete translation of all epitaphs in English and Japanese."

Ms. Naruse has been using <Different World Language Comprehension> for a mere 20 days. Her speed in translating 266 epitaphs probably surpasses that of Monica by leaps and bounds. If it comes to technical expertise, Monica should be much better, but that should become a shackle as translating these too literally is a bad idea. Because she would choose words carefully so as to avoid any mistakes in the technical explanations, Monica's translations will be difficult to understand for ordinary people, most likely, but Ms. Naruse has the advantage of translating roughly and in a way easy to understand as she's got plenty of dungeon and fantasy background knowledge.

"Good work. Five days left until the publication."

"How to describe it, it feels like finally."

For an honest person like Ms. Naruse it must be quite difficult and give her a guilty consciousness to pretend not knowing anything while actually being aware of something important, but at the same time the completion of the translation must feel like a liberation and feeling of satisfaction as it's commonly shared among people who accomplished an important job.

But—

"Ah, come to think of it, a little while after we publicize this, we plan to hold an auction for <Mining>, so please take care of us at that time."

"Hah?"

—the devil always aims for gaps in your heart.

§073 What Gems Mean 12/23 (Sun)

— **Yoyogi-Hachiman Office** —

"It looks like Ms. Saito and Ms. Mitsurugi are going to drop by at 3 p.m." Miyoshi announces after checking her E-Mails while snacking on potato chips.

"Um, what do you got there? I don't think I've seen you eat those before."

"While the market is swamped with fried potato sticks, you almost never see sliced potato chips. I gotta say, these are pretty tasty."

She explains it with something along the lines of 'once you pop, you can't stop,' but whatever. Since we don't have anything important to do right now anyway, I absentmindedly listen to Miyoshi's ramblings. She even goes as far as letting her fervent speech touch upon Saitama's Shimada Head Family's potato crackers.

"This has yet a rather plain taste, or how to describe it..."

"No, Miyoshi, it's okay. I've fully grasped the extent of your potato pastry love. So, has there been some kind of action?"

Miyoshi's Appraisal should have been reported to the JDA as early as yesterday.

"No. I thought I'd be called in right away, but it's Sunday today, so I guess nothing is going to happen before tomorrow? The JDA is surprisingly bureaucratic on things like weekend work, I suppose."

"Don't go by yourself, no matter what. I'll go with you."

"Thank you very much, senpai. That was a slightly cool line."

"My pleasure."

Miyoshi repeatedly slurps from her tea. How unusual for her to drink Japanese tea...aaahhh!?

"Hey, don't tell me that this is my special reserve..."

"Senpai, I do believe that you have a good taste in this, but the storage life of tea is short, you know?"

Even though Japanese tea looks like it's been dried, it still contains around 3% humidity. It's pretty much common sense that it remains delicious for around two weeks after opening. Unopened tea usually lasts for three months.

"Even though it's the highest first-grade tea, you must drink it up before summer at the latest."
"I know."

"Well, then again, storing it away as a drink for special occasions and then completely forgetting about its storage life fits you to a tee, senpai."

"Yeah, yeah, I know I'm a timid person. Anyway, please pour me some of that, too."

"Sure." As she heats up the still hot water, Miyoshi adds with a triumphant look, "Is it something similar with girls as well?"

It's none of your business, damn it.

"As for what we talked about on Friday..."

"Hmm?"

"I've found the information to identify an individual in your model, senpai."

"For real!?"

In short, that program, which didn't return any results at all since the number of calculations was too much, actually managed to do its work properly, huh?

"I think this makes it possible to differentiate between individuals to a certain extent."

"That's amazing."

"But there's a catch."

"What is it?"

"The measurement jamming, which was the original goal, doesn't rely on any such individual pattern recognition."

Figures. Individual recognition might be required if you try to record the stat of a specific person to a measured value, but if not, it'd be okay to limit it to the information you want to jam.

"It'll be enough to possess a tool that emits some kind of signal, have the measurement device pick that signal up, and send a message to the server, right?"

"True."

"Such a device would be ideal for adding various extended functions, and not just just jamming!"

That makes sense. But, there are many things that would require careful deliberation before implementation such as security. In the first place, such a device would become completely obsolete if it doesn't work when other companies release their own stat measurement devices. Something like

needing to possess separate jamming devices for each maker would be completely nonsense for the users.

"It kinda sounds like the history of electronic money, doesn't it?"

"Huh?"

"I mean, I just thought that it'd be kinda silly for users to require separate jamming devices for each measurement device different companies produce, since the norms would be all over the place."

"Wouldn't this be closer to the mess in the music device industry?"

"Music device industry?"

"Devices that flout copyright protection laws are very popular, but wouldn't makers, who seriously care about that protection, discontinue such devices?"

"Ah, you mean makers who don't give a damn about jammers are going to dominate the market?"

"Well, it'd also be cheaper for them. After all, they won't really need to do anything in particular."

"It's a tough world, yep."

Miyoshi pours the now cooled, boiled water on the tea, and places the small teapot on a tea warmer. The tea's polyphenol generally begins to dissolve around a temperature of 60°C. Since the amino acid dissolves around 50°C, a delicious tea should keep its fragrance if you keep the temperature always slightly beyond 60°C. An expert might be able to do so by feeling, but ordinary people like us need to rely on the power of science to reproduce this. Unfortunately, though, it lacks elegance.

"In any case, the appearance of other measurement devices is still far off in the future. Rather than that——"

"What's up?"

"I didn't say so in front of Ms. Naruse, but there actually exists a problem that's far more serious."

"Whoa, you've got my attention, I've never heard you say something is 'serious' before, Miyoshi."

"The device will clearly differentiate between people possessing a D-Card, and those who don't."

"How so?"

"If you don't have a D-Card, some values will always be displayed as zeros."

"What about it?"

"Don't you somehow feel like it'll divide mankind?"

Conflicts between old humans and newtypes are standard material for any SF Drama. In most cases, the newtypes are supermen, few in numbers, and get persecuted.

"Everyone will be an old-type human when they're born into this world, and since the old-type humans will be able to become new-type humans by acquiring a D-Card at any time, I don't feel like it should lead to any major conflicts."

"Senpai, some people are capable of going ballistic over the question of whether other people eat meat or not, you know? If they learn that stats drastically enhance people, we have no idea what might happen if they squabble over that."

Seeing that the sand in the hourglass has completely run down, Miyoshi pours the tea in the small pot into a cup that had been warmed in advance. The clear, greenish liquid looks pretty against the white bottom of the cup.

"Moreover, in this case, the new-type humans will never be able to return to being old humans. In the words of a fundamentalist, if it's absolutely impossible to convert their religion——"

"They should be eradicated, huh?"

"——Such stories have taken place many times all throughout history."

In my opinion, she's overthinking this way too much. At least I want to believe so, but people do like things that are natural. Especially the Japanese.

I guess the influence of stats will become most noticeable in the world of sports. You could consider it as doping by the dungeons, split the athletes into those with a D-Card and those without, or something different altogether. Since the difference in values isn't that apparent yet, you could think of it as the same as high altitude training, but it's hard to predict how things will turn out in the future.

"If you're so worried, you just need to avoid displaying the parts that become zero."

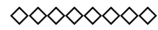
"That's impossible."

"Hah?"

"With that device and model it's impossible to acquire stats from people who don't possess a D-Card."

"That's...how to say it..." Finally, after being at a loss for words, I react in a way that can hardly be called appropriate. "It's great that it decreases the chances for situations where people say, 『His combat power...is just 5...? What trash...』."

"You're certainly right about that," laughed Miyoshi.



— **Roppongi - Tokyo Midtown** —

"Teacher, teacher, somehow Santas have been hung up there in a group!" Ms. Saito exclaims and breathes roughly through her nose while looking at a Christmas Tree.

"If you phrase it like that, it kinda sounds like a mass execution of Santas, you know?"

"Yeah, totally. I mean, it gives me that impression a bit."

"Sure. Though it'd be slightly scary if a group of teru-teru-bozu hang there instead, don't you think?"

"But, it'd be cute," Ms. Mitsurugi follows up casually.

We're currently walking along Tokyo Midtown's Illumination Route. If I were to explain how it came to this, it'd become a long exposition—



It was just past 3 p.m. when the two visited our office. Since it looks like we've made a reservation for 6.30 p.m. at a restaurant, we had a lil' gap of a bit more than three hours to fill. Seeing how the cold drizzle of rain that had been falling until a little while ago finally let up, Miyoshi suggested going to Midtown.

"Midtown at Christmas? Are you suicidal?"

"The restaurant is right around the corner from there, it'd be very Christmas-ish, and since the weather isn't all that great, the number of people should be low as well. It also fits perfectly that we've been introduced."

"Introduced? By who?"

It seems like Miyoshi received a letter from the jewelry store where she had bought Ayesha's present the other day, mentioning that they'd be running an event as sponsors.

"The folks dealing with jewelry sure are attentive."

"Well, it's a business circle where personal connections play a major role."

Once Miyoshi looked it up, it was something like a Christmas event, bringing her to the conclusion that it'd be just perfect to waste some time. The rain had also stopped. Thus we thought that it'd be fine to go there for a little bit, but we were idiots. As result of that—



"People, and more people. It feels more like a Hellmination than an Illumination, you know?"

"How strange. I had heard that it'd be alright in the evening, right after the sun went down, since many would be stuck in traffic jams after 6 p.m."

"Isn't that something applying to the time before the 20th?" Ms. Saito says after listening to Miyoshi.

Ms. Saito and Ms. Mitsurugi might be better informed in this area.

"Eh? Really?"

"This situation should clearly show that she's telling the truth, no?"

"Now, now, enjoying a crowd of people is part of the fun with Tokyo's Christmas."

That's not Christmas, but a torture.

As we follow the flow of people, the light suddenly goes out, and a blue light spreads out over the plaza. The people around us cheer in surprise.

"Blue light spreading out on the ground; that's a bit like Polan Square. "

When I mutter this, Ms. Mitsurugi, who's been next to me, fondly narrows her eyes at the light show, and happily hums a verse of the drama.

"The small lights lit up by the white Dutch clover are growing and growing in numbers. Their fragrance fills the air. Right?"

"Yeah, that's it."

The light show on the plaza continues to get flashier. Lights looking like meteors bustle about.

"But, senpai, that one's about a summer festival, no?"

"Don't worry about the small details if you can enjoy a pleasant song while being basked in the faint light of the galaxy and being illuminated by the lights of white Dutch clovers."

"I have my doubts about enjoying a pleasant song outside in the middle of winter. Which reminds me, just what the hell is Cats Ho Whiskers about?"

Many words I don't quite get frequently appear in the drama version. Cats Ho Whiskers is one of them.

Ms. Saito provides an answer for that one, "It's a piece of music played by the Benson Orchestra of Chicago, my theater teacher said. The Cat Whiskers."

"Hee, so you're learning stage acting. What a surprise."

"T-To be told that by you, teacher..."

While agreeing in my mind with her retort that it'd be weird for a new actress to not study stage acting, I dodge the topic, "W-Well, Kenji uses many such strange wordings. Until this very day I've got no clue what the Kanyahyau Problem could be."

"Hasn't it been mentioned in Kenji Miyazawa's lexicon?"

"Probably. But look, that thing's got more than a thousand pages with a paper size of 127x188mm...that's the kind of book I'd love them to turn into an ebook."

A light band traverses in front of my eyes. Then the flashy light show reaches its climax, and as soon as all lighting dies down, the blue light gradually begins to spread once more. The show might be about to end soon. Suddenly, as I look next to me, I spot Ms. Mitsurugi staring at me.

When I ask, "Something wrong?", she answers in a small whisper, "...Mr. Yoshimura. The other day you did something, didn't you?"

"Eh?"

Without me even needing to remember, it must be about the day I assigned her SP.

Ms. Mitsurugi's eyes are pinned on me, but as the event comes to an end, she turns her eyes in the direction of the plaza again, and quietly murmurs, "I'll think of it as a Christmas present. Thank you very much."

"Oh, okay."

Unable to confirm or deny, I keep following the route while being pushed around by the flow of the crowd. I think it's about time for our restaurant reservation.

"Hey, hey, Ms. Miyoshi, where are we going to go eat?"

"Today it's going to be Mita."

"Mita? Since it's you we're talking about here, I'd expected it to be Azure Quarante-Cinq." I say while looking up at the Ritz-Carlton.

Azure 45 is the main dining area of the Ritz-Carlton.

"Certainly, it'd be the best location, right? Around this time, the final afterglow of the sun melts into darkness, with the city's landscape being illuminated by its own lights. In front of you, Chef Sakimiya's steak. It's going to be the epitome of taste and mood!"

And then she drops her shoulders, crestfallen, and pulls a sad face.

Recently this girl has been acting way too much.

"But you see, senpai, the only one able to experience Christmas at Azure are happy lovers. Everyone else is going to be turned down! Mainly on the mental side."

She's right, with that seating arrangement, I'm pretty confident that I'd barf sugar if I were to be surrounded by all the love-love-couples around me. Or rather, I'd feel totally out of place there.

While looking up at the hotel in a theatrical pose, Miyoshi continues her speech as if being on a stage, "We're like Adam and Eve, who were chased out of paradise. We've got no other choice but to climb down, hand in hand, from the 45th floor like two beggars gazing up to the flaming sword brandished atop the main gate, telling us that the likes of us aren't desired here. For today, that is."

"Just use the elevator."

Ms. Saito and Ms. Mitsurugi are watching our exchange while giggling.

"After all's said and done, Kelvin being swung is a sign for it being booked out, right?"

"Indeed, it was next to impossible for me to get anything like a reservation! No cancellations either! Despite the bubble having ended more than 20 years ago, you know?"

"Golden Hill then?" Ms. Saito wedges herself between Miyoshi and me, grabs our arms, and interrupts our conversation.

Golden Hill is Mita's established French restaurant with the chef being an authority in Japan's world of French cooking.

Miyoshi denies that by shaking her index finger with a "Tsk, tsk, tsk."

"Now listen, okay? No matter which French restaurant you visit on Christmas, all of them got special mood menus. The menu items are mostly the same everywhere. The dishes mostly resemble each other closely (Barefaced Lie). And the price is generally 1.5 times that of usual! (Truth)"

"That's why: Japanese! Christmas is Japanese food time. Today it's going to be Seizan. The shopkeeper Mr. Motoyama is a nice person with a great smile, and this season's monkfish liver, which melts in your mouth, and the crab-on-cooked-rice are masterpieces. Saito, where we went with Ayesha, was also great, but it was slightly too early in the season," Miyoshi licked her lips.

"Hee, Haru loves crabs. When I had her take me along to eat some queen crab, she continued aaall the time to silently dig with her feet."

"T-That was what you'd call youthful indiscretion."

Ms. Saito teases Ms. Mitsurugi, who's walking one step behind us, while looking back at her.

"Which reminds me, I haven't asked what kind of role you landed."

"The movie? Let's see, a certain hotel in Honkong is the stage in a story about a trio of swindlers. One among the three is the heroine. Though I can't tell you about the story in detail." She answered.

I guess the script is treated as confidential before the premier.

"A role as a swindler. Okay, I agree. It fits you perfectly."

"Meanie! Even though I'm so obedient and sweet."

That's exactly what I mean!

I hold out a small box to her, who's still hanging between Miyoshi and me, and tell her, "Then, here you go. Congrats."

"Eh? Huh? A present for landing the leading role?"

"Yep, I promised you after all."

"What is it? Is it fine for me to open it?"

"I don't particularly mind, but while walking?"

"No one's going to care anyway." With those words, Ms. Saito carefully unwraps it, and carefully opens the lid of the case with a click.

"Eh? This is..."

Earrings with violet gems are in the case. Of course, a ring would have been out of the question, and since it looked like the gems would become too big with a choker or a pendant, I chose the safe option to match it with what I gave Ms. Mitsurugi.

"Somehow it's a gem that changes its visible color depending on the kind and angle of light hitting it. I thought that it'd be like you, Ms. Saito, in that regard."

"Huh? Those are alexandrites?"

"Yeah, they had such a name like that old Egypt city with the library."

As I'm wondering why Ms. Saito has frozen on the spot, Miyoshi sighs and explains to me, "Senpai...do you know the meaning of alexandrite in gem language?"

Gem language? The hell's that? Don't ask someone like me who doesn't even know the flower language.

"No?"

"Alexandrite means 『Hidden Feelings』."

"Haaah!?"

Who the hell assigned such a cryptic meaning to it?

"Ah, yeah, yeah. I totally got it with that just now. It's got a somewhat nice design, right? I'll gladly accept it, teacher!"

"S-Sure. Well, keep doing your best, okay?"

Ms. Saito quickly shuffles over to Ms. Mitsurugi while holding it, and whispers something into her ear.

"You relieved now, Haru?"

"Eh? Eeeh? Relieved...that's not..."

The taxi we got into passed the Gaien Higashi Street, turned right at the Azabu crossing, entered the Azabu Street, and then turned left at San-no-hashii. Immediately after, the hanging lantern of Seizan came into sight.

The monkfish liver, as creamy as if melting, and the Himi Winter Yellowtail with a moderate amount of fat were certainly great, but it was the Tanner crab's cream croquettes which made Ms. Mitsurugi the happiest.

§074 Dogs Need Collars 12/24 (Mon)

— Yoyogi-Hachiman Office —

I'm pretty sure that the city must be overflowing with lovebirds, today being Christmas Eve, but as lonely as it may sound, we don't have any events planned for today. On the contrary, with the release of Heaven's Leaks scheduled to take place late in the night, we'll be bogged down with the final checks on the site.

When I go downstairs, I spot Miyoshi in front of two of the dogs. While just their heads are poking out of the shadows, she's standing there with her arms folded and a troubled face. Though, it doesn't look like she's trying to feed them as one would by tossing something into their mouths.

"Mornin'. Just what the heck are you doing there?"

"Oh, senpai, good morning. You see——"

She tells me that she's in the middle of researching whether it's possible for her dogs to move through the shadows while carrying something, just as we'd talked about before the battle with Enkai.

"Please take a look at this first." With those words, Miyoshi takes out two thin but large collars of different colors.

"You did well to get hold of such big collars. Just where are they selling these?"

Have they been made for tigers or something?

"They're a custom order. That's why it took so long to get them."

Those collars have a mechanism for coming off easily by simply pulling with a bit of force. Probably a measure against it becoming a hindrance when it counts. The collar itself seems to be absolutely necessary for attaching the license and vaccination tags, and to connect to the leash when taking them outside. Wait! This girl intends to take them for a walk!?

"Now I'm affixing the red one to Cavall on the left, and the blue one to Aethlem on the right."

Just as said, Miyoshi puts the collars on. The two dogs allow this to happen stoically, showing no indication of hating it.

"Okay. Now switch places!"

The two dogs dive into the shadow, and immediately reappear...huh? In my eyes it looks like the two dogs have simply reappeared in the same state as before diving into the shadow.

"Say, Miyoshi, did they really change places?"

"Of course."

Apparently Aethlem, wearing the red collar, is now on the right side, and Cavall on the left.

"In other words, only the contents of the collars have changed?"

"Correct."

Even if we have them carry communication devices, it'd be meaningless if just the contents get switched out, but not the items themselves.

"It's very mysterious, but from the point of view that they're changing places, it's an acceptable outcome, don't you think?"

Though it's regrettable that our plan hasn't worked out.



"You're right. But senpai, there's still a continuation to this."

"Really?"

"Yes." Miyoshi answers and takes out a scotch tape.

"For you to carry scotch tape with you...you're quite prepared, aren't you?"

"This tape is pretty neat for labeling documents instead of stickers."

After all, paper stickers become unreadable after getting peeled off and similar. Also, they're kinda difficult to use on borrowed documents and books.

"Alright, please take a good look."

Miyoshi cuts off a small piece of the tape, and sticks it on top of Cavall's muzzle.

"Okay, you two, please change places again."

The two dogs switch places just like moments ago, resulting in Aethlem, the one with the blue collar, being on the right side, and Cavall being on the left...h-huh? As Cavall sticks his head out, the piece of scotch tape is stuck on top of his muzzle.

"The tape hasn't switched places?"

"Indeed!"

According to Miyoshi, the items worn by Arthur's are treated as a sequence in a contiguous area, starting from the parts touching their bodies.

"The problem lies with the mass of those objects."

"The mass?"

"Yes. Objects going above a fixed threshold in mass are left behind during the switch, but if it's a mass below that threshold, the object will be switched as well."

"Doesn't that mean you can utilize that mass for transporting communication media!? So, what's the threshold?"

"Around one gram."

"One gram? That means, a thin paper...no, I guess that won't really work either once you include something to affix it to their bodies."

Seeing my disappointment, Miyoshi flashes a daring smile, and waves the index finger of her right hand with a "Tsk, ts, tsk."

"Senpai, we're in the year 2018, okay?"

Immediately following her comment, she takes out something like a small chip.

"A Micro SD Card?"

"The weight of Micro SD Cards is generally around 0.4 gram."

Eh? For real? Micro SD Cards are this light?

"No wait, what are we going to do about attaching it to their bodies, though? Assuming you're going to pin it with a clip, are there any that weigh 0.5 gram or less?"

"None."

"Don't tell me you're going to toss it into their mouths and have them spit out the card after the switch?"

"It'd be a problem if they mistakenly swallowed it. And even then the card would become totally gooey."

"Are you going to stick it to the top of their muzzles with the scotch tape like you did just now?"

She might be able to stay below one gram with that.

"The card might fall off."

"Hrm, yeah."

Only the object the dogs are wearing can be switched, but just where does it go if it falls off? Eternally drifting through some undefined space sounds kinda scary.

"So you see, senpai, this PE Line that's used for fishing seems to be around 200 deniers."

What is she talking about all of a sudden?

"Denier was about stockings or something like that, right?"

"Yep. By the way, this here is around 40 deniers." Miyoshi pinches her own tights, saying, "They've only got a bit of a transparent look left, right?", and lets go, allowing it to snap back.

Stockings vary by maker, but it looks like most of them have 25 deniers or less.

"Denier is a measurement unit of the threads' thickness, but it's not always the case that threads with the same diameter will have the same denier."

Even though it's a measurement unit for the thickness of threads, different threads with the same deniers don't necessarily have the same diameter? That makes absolutely no sense.

Seeing me being completely lost, Miyoshi reveals the trick behind this with a playful look, "One

denier is defined as 1 gram per 9000 meters."

"In short, a unit of weight per length, huh?"

"Well, it was defined at a time when people had no way to measure a thread's diameter. Anyway, that's the reason the thickness might differ depending on the material, even with the same deniers."

"Hee, but, what's important now is the mass."

"Correct. A thread with a length of one meter and 200 den is just a little short of weighing 0.02 gram."

That's when Miyoshi takes out something like a transparent string. It's a collar with a small basket, knitted from a PE line.

"I've made a pouch with it! The weight is roughly 0.3 grams!"

It looks like just the glue for pasting a regular basket together would have been heavier than using a thread. Miyoshi stuffs the Micro SD Card into the pouch, and immediately orders the two dogs to switch places. Aethlem, who's wearing the ultralight pouch, swaps places with Cavall while keeping the pouch with him.

"Wow!"

"I think all that's left is to be careful about the pouch coming into contact with other equipped items. If it does, the whole thing is going to fail."

Because they'd be regarded as one object if they stuck to each other.

At that moment, the doorbell rings.

"Good morning."

Once we unlock the door, Ms. Naruse opens it and steps in, carrying some documents under her arm.

"Good morning. You're early today."

"Yes, we've written up the land contract, so I came over at once."

It looks like Ms. Naruse is carrying the rental contract for the land use on the second floor we'd talked about a while ago.

— Ichigaya - JDA Headquarters —

Miharu silently watched Saiga who sat listlessly inside his office at the Dungeon Management Department. His upper body had collapsed on the table the instant he had scanned through Miharu's report.

"So, Naruse. This is truly..." Suddenly jerking up, Saiga glared at Miharu with a face full of mortification.

"Somehow I feel like I keep saying the same things over and over!"

"It's just as you've guessed."

"So, what the fuck is this!?"

"Even if you ask me that, it's all written down right there."

Her report mentioned information about a site with the silly name of Heaven's Leaks which would be launched to the public tomorrow, or rather, later this evening.

"This isn't some prank either, correct?"

"No, it's not. I've checked the unpublished site."

"The translations of all discovered epitaphs are going to be released tomorrow? On a site unrelated to the WDA?"

Saiga got a headache from imagining all the inquiries and complaints that would flood them from all sides.

"Who's the translator?"

"That's...something I don't know." Miharu shook her head while apologizing in her mind to her boss.

"Do you know just how much trouble it took to force that troublesome orb on the US...and now this? Some unknown person translated all of the epitaphs, and on top of that, the translations are going to be publicized normally!?"

"So, it's a bad idea after all?"

"Well, the alliance of western countries has invested several billion Yen into this. Even if we were to insist that we had nothing to do with it, it's inevitable that D-Powers's involvement will be suspected, going by the contract information for the domain and server."

"No, sorry, I was just complaining. From the viewpoint of a security guarantee, it doesn't change the fact that obtaining that orb was necessary, with or without the existence of this site. I mean, only those possessing <Different World Language Comprehension> will be able to confirm that this site

reports the truth, right?"

"That's true, but..."

"Rather, the WDA might incur enmity from several nations because of this."

"In that regard, the excuse of having kept the DAs out of the loop on this could possibly be called farsighted. Though I've got my doubts that they actually considered it.

"But——"

The excerpts of the main epitaphs added as attachments contained everything that was in the documents said to have come from Russia, but they also supplemented the translation with the parts that hadn't been mentioned in the documents. The content differs from the Russian ones. That might work in favor of the site's credibility. After all, the additional parts of RU22-0012's translation looked like information which Russia would very likely withhold.

"——ore drops, huh?"

"It looks like Ms. Miyoshi is going to hold an auction for <Mining> at the beginning of January."

"It looks like she's going to hold one, you say...? What does that mean?"

Miharu had no choice but to simply shake her head at that question.

"So, I suppose they intended to slip in some advance information for tomorrow's YoyoDun News about a monster with <Mining> having been possibly discovered and currently being under investigation." Saiga said while placing a hand on the documents that were held out to him. "People will wonder whether this is some ridiculous bluff. Anyway, what monster is it?"

"They haven't told me yet. I think we'll know by the beginning of the year."

"I see."

'Still, I wonder, has Russia, who had this information three months ago, already gotten this far?

"Do you think we should join the auction, too?"

"Huh? Leaving aside the practical use, our budget..."

"The handling charge for <Different World Language Comprehension> was, well you know. If we don't use the money to some extent, it'll have a bad impact on taxes."

Smiling bitterly, Saiga realized that he had mentally accepted the idea of holding an auction for a specific and heretofore unknown orb, which could only be considered impossible according to common logic.

'Either way, for now I must consider how to mitigate the fallout of the storm these translations will bring.

Once Saiga pondered his fate with the week having started only today, he felt completely burned out before he even started to work.

§075 Late at Night on Christmas Eve 12/24 (Mon)

— Yoyogi-Hachiman Office —

The stars in the sky above Tokyo twinkled, losing nothing to the brightness on the surface, and while the radiative cooling caused the temperature to be frosty at best that only enlivened the mood of the lovers cuddling close together. Just around the time when presents would be placed at the bedsides of sleeping children, there was a single logon from the U.S., signifying the beginning of a story that would shock the world that very day.

Midnight Japanese time on December the 25th in the year 2018. The user to first access a certain website browsed all the pages like a madman, obviously completely excited.

"I'm pretty sure, that's gotta be Monica." Miyoshi said while gazing at the access statistics in real time.

The only ones we'd told the direct URL to our site were Ms. Naruse and Monica. Ms. Naruse might have reported it to the JDA yesterday, but I'm pretty certain that the JDA, which is a typical, bureaucratic organization, would access the website later today during their office hours. There's no doubt that Monica must have eagerly waited for midnight Japanese time.

At once my smartphone vibrates, informing me of an incoming mail from the contact address I'd told Monica. The message contained only one line, stating: "AWESOME!" Judging from that, I'd say she likes our new website.

And several minutes later, a flood of logons from the US begin to hit our website.

"It's either the folks who're monitoring Monica's communication, or relevant departments of the DAD after receiving the report?"

"At first I thought so as well, but the IPs have suddenly started to originate from all over the USA. Wouldn't that mean someone has posted it on some forum or SNS?"

Over there it's not even noon on the 24th.

—*。 —

A man, who was informed of the website as a practical joke by his friend, posted it on a subreddit without really browsing its content. The subreddit's title was 『I discovered an insane but fascinating website!』. As an explanatory comment he added: "The effort and imagination of the creator goes far beyond average! It's a must-see for all those celebrating 'Anatomy and Habits of the Rhinogradentia' by Prof. Harald Stümpke!"

That subreddit immediately drew many visitors, and immediately shot up to the front page of reddit. For a while people discussed the website's pages for their interesting contents, and gave their impressions about the well-done site, but amidst all that, a single man posted a comment, one that threw the world into chaos:

"Hey! Can you believe it!? I tried the party function with a friend who also has a D-Card. And once we did, we...could use telepathyyyyyyyyyyyyyyy!!!"

The first impression of the people reading that comment was almost unanimously: "What's this idiot talking about?" The majority of the hundred comments made within a few seconds said exactly that, just expressed in various ways, but since the number of humans possessing D-Cards is not insignificant, it didn't take overly long to establish that this comment was actually telling the truth.

"Don't you think people will use this to cheat during exams?"

"That makes sense...it's probably going to be difficult to stop the examinees from assigning a guy, who's likely to pass, as the party leader if they're going to take the exam together."

"Assigning the examinee's numbers at random would be the most they could do, huh?"

In other words, physically separating the examination sites. Guaranteeing a distance of more than 20 meters sounds rather difficult, but that's the extent of countermeasures examiners have available to them, when considering the cost. In addition, it might be possible to check whether the examinees are registered with the WDA and confiscate their D-Cards for the length of the examination. However, handing over a D-Card, which lists one's skills, sounds like a lot more of a problem in regards to privacy than even a mobile phone.

When I bring my thoughts up with Miyoshi, she responds, "Wouldn't everything be over if the examinees make up a lie that they don't possess any D-Cards before it comes to a confiscation?"

She's right. Finding out whether someone owns a D-Card is difficult. At present, the sole method would be to rely on an examinee's personal statement.

"The various dungeon agencies across the world might need to contact people who can be queried about the ownership of D-Cards by examinees."

"If you take the number of exams held all over the world into account, something like that would actually be next to impossible, don't you think?"

Figures. Even if it were possible to investigate the card ownership of each and every examinee, the time and expense required to answer all of those requests would likely grow to an astronomical scale. The only way I can come up with is the development of an API allowing access to the WDA's

explorer database with ports accessible by examiners, but even with something like, it'd be asking too much to allow limitless access.

"After this, it might actually be more important to develop a device capable of checking D-Card possession than a stat measurement device, huh...? Going by what you said the other day, some values become zero, right?"

"Yep. If it's just confirming D-Card possession, I think we'd only need to extract that part which would probably make production very cheap, but——" Miyoshi speaks ambiguously towards the end as if she's come up with something.

"You're worried it's increasingly turning into something like a mankind classification tool for the sake of detecting new-types?" I interpret her words after remembering what Miyoshi had said a few days ago.

Once you become a new-type, you won't ever be able to return to being an old-type. Still, I don't think that massacres by fundamentalists or some such are going to run rampant.

"No, that's not the issue here. It's just, this year's Center Exams (National Center Test for University Admissions) are going to take place on January the 19th and 20th."

"Center Exams? ...Aahh!!"

"A Christmas release was a great idea for us, but won't this develop into a heavy blow for Japan's university entrance exams?"

The university entrance exams are the largest and most important exams in Japan. After all, their impact is huge, since they're quite capable of affecting people's careers.

"Oh shit..."

If we had launched the site earlier, universities might have developed some kind of countermeasure. And, if we had done it after the exams, the impact might have stayed at the minimum. But, I wonder, are they actually able to adopt any countermeasures for exams at such a huge scale within less than a month?

"The entrance exams this year——"

"——are in for a rough ride, right?"

As we look at each other, neither of us could do much more than feel quite guilty about this.

"Oh, it looks like the thread has progressed towards the question, 『Is everything on that site actually true?』." Once Miyoshi peeks at her monitor, she bluntly changes the topic.

"Well, it's because the party formation within the dungeon system will have a huge impact. Then again, if it results in D-Cards being frequently used from now on, that might bring about its own complications..." I wonder.

"Wouldn't it be just fine if you simply don't party up with people you don't know?" Miyoshi carefreely answers with a sidelong glance at me.

Considering it properly, she's right. Even if it became necessary to hand over the D-Card during exams, they've got no other choice but to get through the exams now.

After watching the access log and checking various forums for a while, Miyoshi yawns lightly.

"Should we go to sleep?"

"Yep, let's do that."

The world has started to move but, for us, it was the perfect time to depart for the land of dreams in our beds.

— United States of America - Washington D.C. —

The first director of the Department of Dungeons, Curtis, was wound tight. His department fell behind the DAD during the offense and defense in Yoyogi, and after being led around by the nose by some G-Rank explorers of a group with a joke name such as D-Powers, his department not only proved completely useless in winning the bid for the orb, but they were even accused of having been a hindrance.

To add insult to injury, two of his agents who had tried to investigate that group's base were sent back by the Japanese government.

"Fuck!" Curtis cursed quietly.

That's because the only thing they managed to prove after spending a considerable amount of their budget was that their field force was a bunch of incompetent idiots. And now, another piece of unbelievable information laid in the form of a report in front of his eyes.

"So?"

A man in his late twenties with close-cropped hair in a simple suit was drenched in cold sweat due to his boss' ill mood.

"It mostly matches with the translation published by Russia."

"Wouldn't that mean the person who created this website was in a position that allowed them to access the document in question, even if we assume this to be a well-done fake?"

"That possibility does exist as well, but according to the message from the DAD, even the part beyond that...it looks like it's the real deal."

"Real deal?" Curtis lifted an eyebrow with a look making it clear that he didn't quite get the meaning.

'At present, only Russia and our country own <Different World Language Comprehension> in this world.

"Are you telling me Russia made this website?"

"No, that's next to impossible."

When they compared the translated information they were given in the past, a part that didn't exist in the Russian translation of the same epitaph had been added.

"Our country then? Did the folks over at the DAD go crazy, or otherwise, was it an executive order?"

"I tried to inquire about that part as well, but all indications are that the DAD is unrelated to it."

"You're telling me someone else translated it by their own effort then? They used an orb that cost 3.7 billion dollars?"

The man nodded at Curtis' question, "Very likely. Especially considering that they added an important piece of information missing in the Russian document."

The man opened an indexed section called "The Book of Wanderers" and displayed the epitaph found by Russia on his tablet computer.

"The one seeming to have the biggest relation to us among all of these is this one, I think."

"RU22-0012...the one about the ore deposits, huh?"

"The Department of Dungeons is under the DHS. Precisely because we're an organization dealing with resources within the U.S., it's unthinkable for us to be out of the loop here."

Curtis briefly scanned the translation, and then rejoiced over this piece of news that might allow them to recover from their recent chain of failures.

"If this is true, it'll become necessary to pool our efforts into genuinely exploring the lower floors."

"That's certainly true, but the bottleneck will be..."

"<Mining>, huh?"

"How about having them explore Yoyogi without a break?"

According to the JDA's official news site, they had already singled out a monster with a high possibility of dropping <Mining> and were now in the process of verifying it.

"This sluggishness sure is a special quality of Japan." Muttering that, Curtis signed the directive for the unit left in Yoyogi to gather information and pick up <Mining>.

— **Russia - Moscow - Central Administrative District** —

Kurnikov shivered as if a freezing wind was blowing his way from the other side of the desk. The man with razor sharp eyes, who was simply called 『Bureau Director』 by everyone, thought back on their recent failures while silently scanning a written report.

The first unbelievable piece of news was that the six members dispatched by the FSB's V Bureau had been found unconscious inside a dungeon by explorers. Because they had been completely disarmed, resulting in them having no weapons when they were discovered, it didn't develop into an issue, and they were apparently released after a simple questioning. Immediately following, they had reported in at the embassy.

They were completely unaware of what had happened to them. On the contrary, the man, who went down last, seemed to believe this to be the work of the devil. He reported that as his comrades continued to vanish one after the other, he finally heard the lukewarm breath of death, just for his consciousness to instantly melt into darkness.

The next unbelievable piece of news was that five men of the SVR's 『Bulwark』, were actually arrested by Japanese police. In other words, they were unable to kill themselves. Because they didn't cause any damage, they were officially arrested for a mere violation of the Swords and Firearms Control Law.

'Japan is a spy heaven. It likely won't be treated as such a heavy crime. But then again, their career as spies is as good as over anyway... And as a result of them failing their mission, we've now arrived at the current situation.

"So, Comrade Kurnikov, what about the contents of what was translated on this website?"

While straining himself to suppress the upcoming trembling of his hands, Kurnikov had little choice other than to reply that almost all of it was correct.

Ignat, whom they had unavoidably used <Different World Language Comprehension> on in Russia, was an explorer hailing from an illiterate miner's family. Because they had to educate him with basic knowledge for the sake of being able to translate, his performance was extremely lacking.

The 『Bureau Director』, who had received the report, kept his eyes pinned on the pages of RU22-0012 while confirming, "In short, that means our country's advantage has completely vanished?"

As Kurnikov nodded with a sheen of cold sweat glistening on his forehead, the 『Bureau Director』 further pursued, "It's already been three months. What's the status of obtaining <Mining> for our country?"

Even if Kurnikov was asked this, the acquisition of an unknown orb where they didn't even know what monster might drop it was simply unrealistic. It was an endeavor where they couldn't estimate how many years they'd need even if the entire Dungeon Capture Bureau joined in the hunt for it. But, it was unimaginable that giving the 『Bureau Director』 such a reply would be forgiven.

"C-Currently, we're in the middle of diligently exploring while focusing our efforts on monsters that might possess the earth attribute."

In other words, let alone not having found it, we're actually in a situation where we don't even know what monster might drop it.

The 『Bureau Director』 placed his elbows on the desk, linked the fingers of both hands in front of his eyes, and stared at Kurnikov with upturned eyes while bumping his thumbs together.

"Yoyogi is a public dungeon, isn't it?"

"Yes, sir."

"Dispatch a team then."

If the information on the JDA's website is authentic, a monster dropping <Mining> should exist in Yoyogi. It's probably far more efficient to go there than searching a dungeon where it's unknown whether it can be obtained or not.

"I shall contact the JDA through RUDA."

"Hurry it up."

"Yes, sir!" Kurnikov rushed out of the office after saluting.

No ordinary person should be able to deal with the V Bureau's 『Bulwark』. Them still having failed must mean that human covert and intelligence operatives don't measure up to explorers, when limited to within a dungeon. In that case, it means that we've got no other choice but to send in our own explorers, I suppose.

The 『Bureau Director』 stood up from his chair, and looked out through the window, which was made out of special, infrared-blocking glass. Below he saw the traces of people walking through the thinly accumulated snow, which looked like many lanes.

Probably, in less than a week, Djeduschka Moros will walk around with Snegurotschka, distributing presents. I'll have to write a letter in advance so as to receive what I'm hoping for.

— England - Downing Street —

The hero of the navy, who was accompanied by four, huge lions in Trafalgar Square, had cold rain trickling down his hat while staring through Westminster Palace to glare at France. In front of him, a man of the Dungeon Section, an organization established as part of the Defense Intelligence, crossed the road while lifting the collar of his coat, and entered Downing Street.

Larry, Chief Mouser to the Cabinet Office, sat at the window, staring at the man through the stream of water running down the glass.

"I confirmed it. It looks like all the epitaphs found in our country have been translated." The man reported while clapping his coat to get rid of rain drops.

"It was only at the beginning of this month that the States obtained a translator. It's great for them to be fast, but what's the idea behind releasing it to the public instead of using diplomatic channels?"

"That's...America did use diplomatic channels to tell us that they had nothing to do with this."

"You're saying Russia is responsible?"

The Dungeon Section's member shook his head, replying, "That's very unlikely."

For a while only the sound of the heater spitting out its warm air and the soft pattering of rain as it hit against the window dominated the room while Larry followed the rain lines on the glass with his eyes.

"So, who's responsible then?" The master of Number 10, who had pondered about something for a while, asked the man who came to give his report.

"As a result of investigating the server and domain, we found out the actual owner to be Azusa Miyoshi."

"Who's that? Though it kind of sounds like a Japanese name."

"She's the one responsible for the auction house dealing in orbs I reported to you before."

"What? You mean the rumored Orb Hunter!?"

"Yes, Sir Prime Minister."

The appearance of an auction site dealing in orbs simultaneously gathered attention from all over the world from the moment it became public, while also garnering disdain for its questionable authenticity. None of the state authorities took it for real at first. However, there were many statesmen who kept paying attention to it, even while being suspicious, based on the single fact that the JDA didn't shut it down. After all, if it was truly possible to store orbs, it'd have such a huge impact that it might change the world, depending on the circumstances. That's how big the advantage would be from being able to use an orb at the right time for the right person.

"And this time it's the translation of different world languages?"

"We don't know whether it has been translated by her in person."

"What about the possibility of a hack of America or Russia's confidential information?"

"I couldn't verify that, but it doesn't seem to be the case."

"There are differences in the text compared to Russia's translation, and maybe they're also different from those of America's. Otherwise, there's no way for those two countries to remain silent about this."

"Did you investigate that Azusa person? Is she working as an agent for some place?"

"How to say it..."

Her personal history could be easily traced back. Nothing about her was hidden. There were absolutely no suspicious parts either. However, if talking about strange things, she suddenly started to distinguish herself on a worldwide scale after quitting her company and obtaining a WDA trader's license.

"Do you think she acquired some special skill?"

"I believe that would be the likeliest explanation, but if you ask me about the skill's specification, I can't even begin to guess."

"Besides, it's unconfirmed information, but there's talk about her also having sent Russia's assets packing."

"What!? As an ordinary person!?"

"It doesn't sound like it happened while she was protected by Japanese intelligence."

The man brooded for a while after receiving this unbelievable report, but as if pulling himself together, he continued his questioning, "So, is it true what's written on that website?"

"In the end, that's all that matters. You might as well say that it doesn't even matter who has translated it.

"It mostly matches with the part previously sent by Russia."

"What about America?"

"They're still in the middle of confirmation."

The man precisely cut a cigar with a double-bladed guillotine cutter, and ignited it with a cigar match. It was a type which was associated with a former Prime Minister who looks like a lion growling with a reproachful glare and can be found on the backside of a five pound note. Once he slowly put it into his mouth, his mouth filled with smoke as mellow as the gentle aroma of freshly baked bread.

"Did you attempt the party formation using D-Cards as mentioned on the website?"

"We did."

"And?"

"...Just as advertised."

The man rested the cigar in the ashtray, pulled the telephone to himself, and picked up the receiver.

'Something like a telephone shaped like a monolith, I suppose a smartphone is still far off,' the man thought.

— **Yoyogi Dungeon - Entrance** —

『Hey, wait a minute, Yoshimura, that was you guys, right?』

On that day, I'm grabbed by Simon at the entrance to Yoyogi Dungeon.

『That?』

『Don't play the fool. I'm talking about the site that's leaking from heaven』

『Why do you think it's related to us?』

『Why you ask...isn't the domain owned by Azusa?』

There's no way that Miyoshi would register a domain under her real name. I'm pretty sure WHOIS should return a reseller.

『Nowadays, WHOIS returns the reseller as proxy, right? And yet, why?』

I ask while glaring at him with a sidelong glance. He laughs scornfully at that, and prompts me to talk without answering.

『Let me tell you in advance, but we're just providing the hosting for it』

『Hoh』

『In the first place, it shouldn't really matter all that much to the U.S. who's created that site, should it?』

It won't tell them who has obtained the skill orb when, even if it's <Different World Language Comprehension> we're talking about here, I don't think it'd be feasible for them to walk around and erase everyone getting their hands on that orb. They should have also taken into account that someday someone would obtain that skill and publicize the information.

『Shouldn't matter? After investing 3.7 billion dollars?』

Since Simon retorts like that with a face as if he's testing me, I shrug my shoulders lightly, 『At the time when they won the bid after cooperating with other nations, the U.S. didn't plan to monopolize the information anyway, right?』

America wanting to obtain that orb must have been driven by their wish to have a means for ascertaining the authenticity of the information within their own country. If they had planned to make a huge profit out of it by concealing the details of the information, it'd have been unthinkable

for them to cooperate with other nations on this in the first place. Even their budget should have been more than enough to buy it for their country, if they'd stretched themselves a bit.

Once I bring this up, Simon easily admits this much.

『Guess so. I don't think my country would object to it even if the translations were to be published by someone else. In the first place, for those of us who work in the field, this is something that doesn't matter at all』 After saying that, he adds, 『If it's originally』 with a serious expression.

In other words, it means there are authorities not very pleased with this, huh?

『Does that mean not all of the U.S. is on the same wavelength?』

『It merely means that a wide range of opinions can exist in a democratic country. But then again, right now it doesn't even matter what country it might be, don't you think?』

The website of Heaven's Leaks only mentioned that <Mining> exists, but on the same day, the JDA's YoyoDun news team featured an article hinting that it might have been found in Yoyogi. Moreover, the article specified that further information would be published soon. It was a great feat of Ms. Naruse and her department to have published that information for the public Yoyogi before fully confirming <Mining> by themselves. I guess the official stance of the government is that they can't say anything about this, but it's at a level where I got worried that they might get into trouble because of it.

『I'm amazed by Japan's generosity. Once again explorers from all over the world are going to gather here, I suppose』

『Wouldn't it be smarter to search their own nation's dungeons while waiting for the monster in question to be announced?』

『Now listen, assuming my country had a dungeon with the monsters in questions, it still doesn't guarantee that the monsters over there would drop <Mining>, does it?』

After all, the orb drop rate is low. Hence it's human nature to feel like hunting at a place where the drop has been confirmed. I guess it's something similar to wanting to buy a ticket at a place where a lottery was won once.

『Thanks to this, it looks like it's been decided that we'll stay here at Yoyogi for a while as well, you know?』

Simon salutes with a wink, and heads over to the place where his teammates are waiting for him.

— United States of America - Washington D.C. —

In the west wing's oval office, sitting behind a desk made from the wood of a ship discovered after it went missing, the man leading the strongest country in the world heaved a sigh of relief over the fact that the translated epitaphs didn't contain anything about The Ring.

If the dungeons had whimsically written something down about it, it was quite likely that his country would suffer heavy criticism by the world, depending on the circumstances. If possible, he wanted to avoid that by all means. At least until his own term came to an end.

§076 What about the Exams? 12/26 (Wed)

— Yoyogi-Hachiman Office —

In the morning of the day Heaven's Leak shook the world, a beautiful girl with dark brown skin stood in the entranceway of our office while smiling sweetly.

"Hi, Kaygo."

『Yo, Ayesha. Long time no see. How are you doing?』

『Because I had magic cast on me in Japan, every day is full of joy for me right now』

『That's great to hear. Anyway, come inside』

Once Ayesha takes off her boots and enters our office, Miyoshi asks her after guiding her to the sofa, 『So, how long are you going to stay in Japan?』

『I think until the 29th. I want to stay longer, but if I don't spend New Years with the family, Papa is going to kill me』

『Huh? Isn't Diwali the Hindu version of New Years?』

『Diwali?』

『Oh, you don't know, senpai? Aren't they holding an event in Yokohama every year?』

Hearing that, Ayesha explains, 『Yokohama and Mumbai are sister cities after all』

『Really? Then again, I guess it was unrelated to me as someone only staying at the company all year long. HAHAHA...saying this about myself makes me almost cry, though』¹

『What sad things are you saying there, senpai? Anyway, it's a religious festival』

¹ Author is having the same sickness as many JP authors: Write what 1st PoV thinks, and then let others, who obviously can't hear the thoughts in reality, react to those thoughts. I'll fix that by putting those parts in active speech, as far as possible

『Kinda like Christmas then?』

『Something like that. But, even if the origin is Hinduism, there are quite a few versions of it』

The standard version is associated with Lakṣmī, but depending on the location, it seems possible for it to be associated with Kālī, or some completely different, local deity. Either way, all versions share the meaning of it tolling the victory of light over darkness, just like the victory of knowledge over ignorance. And the fourth day of that festival is regarded as the so-called New Year.

『But, because India has been a British colony, the concept of the western New Year has taken root among Indians, too. Especially in our Mumbāī』

The center of Diwali practitioners seems to be located in North India. But then again, it's being flashily celebrated in Mumbāī too since it's a Hindu festival, Ayesha says.

『In the past the crackers and fireworks that lasted all night long were quite terrible, but that has been regulated for two years now』

It sounds like the Indian Supreme Court prohibited the sale of firecrackers during Diwali last year. It's apparently a regulation that was originally initiated under the pretext of air pollution, but various parts of society like the industry have been trying to influence this decision.

『Air pollution through fireworks and crackers...』

『Well, it simply means that they've been using that many of them』

『Sounds amazing』

Just how much did they have to use to let things go this far? I can't even begin to imagine it.

『For this reason, it's going to be until the 29th』

『Then we shall take you to a special place on the 29th!』

"Special place?" I reflexively knit my eyebrows about Miyoshi's remark I haven't heard anything about.

This girl has a tendency to come up with absurd stuff most of the time when she uses that way of talking.

"Chill, senpai. Please leave everything to me."

No, somehow I feel totally worried about doing just that...

『But, I gotta say, you did well to get that Papa of yours to allow you staying in Japan by yourself』

『Papa must learn to let go of his daughter』

No, look, is that man actually capable of that?

『So, where are you staying while in Japan?』

『Currently I've booked a room at the Ritz, but after today——』

Ayesha glances Miyoshi's way with an upward look. Miyoshi smiles wryly, and gives her approval while nodding.

『Though I'll be troubled if you expect a service similar to the Ritz from me』

『Yaaay, thanks, Azusa! I've never stayed over at a friend's house so far』

I don't know when exactly she got all those injuries, but I suppose it'd make sense for her to stay cooped up at home if she had her accident before Secondary School. In the worst case they could somehow handle her education with home tutors, but that's not going to fly when it comes to getting in contact with friends.

She's finally in Japan, and although it's just going to be for a few days, I'll get her to enjoy it to the fullest.

『Come to think of it, Kaygo, Azusa, have you guys heard of Altum Foraminis?』

『Altum Foraminis?』 I furrow my eyebrows, confused by the religious group's weird name coming out of Ayesha's mouth.

『You mean the one rumored to have a saintess who goes around healing celebrities?』

『Yes, that's the one. Do you know the details?』

If I remember correctly, Miyoshi mentioned them to cleverly move around while skillfully managing healing potions with a religious organization as a front and getting protected by people in high positions who love the occult, or something like that.

『No, it's just at the level of rumors. But, what about them?』

『When Papa was asked by various people all over the place about me, he kind of didn't want you two to stand out too much, so he glossed things over by saying that I got healed by a magician』

『Magician!?!』

I remember having heard that story somewhere...

『Senpai, maybe Monica heard about this from Mr. Simon——』

『——That old man is the source of it all!? Is that story spreading much?』

『It's lessened a lot recently, but at one point in time it was the hottest topic in high society』

Just what is that damn old man doing?

『So how are Altum Foraminis and this story connected?』

『I'm the party concerned here, so many people brought this topic up with me. But then again, most people lightly laughed at the magician story, and moved on to the next topic』

『Kinda like a conversation opener — a light and easy high society talk, you mean?』

『You could describe it like that, yes. Usually there are no people who'd seriously probe into matters on party venues like meets or courtesy visits. But—』

Among them were apparently some people who came at her with such a force that it'd regarded by anyone as bad manners, persistently interrogating her about the events in Tokyo. And the ones who behave like that—

『Were they related to that religious organization?』

Ayesha silently nodded.

People who can't read the mood getting ostracized happens everywhere, no matter what kind of group it might be. However, acting like that towards a group that could eventually result in them becoming unable to do business with the EU's upper class, if they end up being ostracized, is definitely abnormal.



『If you sum up what those people have been asking me, it would be 「Who cast the magic?」』

It looks like they have a keen interest in us, on top of their behavior being creepily fanatic.

『In addition, I have heard that they originally planned to expand towards North America after having built a foundation in Europe, but that was apparently changed to Tokyo all of a sudden』

I don't know how Ayesha knows all that, but this information might stem from her network of people she talks to in high society. However, I don't think that they're simply wasting money.

『Did you deliberately stick to Mr. Ahmed on his travel to Japan for the sake of informing us about this?』

『It's also true that I wanted to have some fun. Anyway, I'm going out for a bit to check-out!』

Ayesha answers while looking slightly bashful, turns around, and runs off towards the entry hall. After leaving our home, she gets into the back seat of a blackened luxury car, which stopped in front of our gate after suddenly appearing out of nowhere, and waves at us from inside the car.

"I wonder, has that car been waiting for her somewhere?" I smile wryly at Miyoshi while admiring their decent preparation.

"Senpai, until moments ago plenty of Ayesha's bodyguard-like folks have been hanging around our home."

"What?"

"All of them looked like Agent Smith."

"If he goes this far in relatively safe Japan, I suppose letting go of his daughter is still a long way off."

"It's what you call parental love."

"That old man is going way overboard. They won't get into trouble with the surrounding folks or something?"

"That's out of our hands. But I think the bodyguards might be cooperating with England, even if they're civilians..."

"Ah, that butler guy."

I recall the guy in an expensive suit, seemingly belonging to the British army, who stuck with Ayesha just like a butler back when we met her for the first time.

"Either way, leaving aside the special on the 29th, what are we going to do today, tomorrow, and the day after tomorrow?"

"Let's see. In her position I'd get my hands on as much food as possible. For today we should have

her slowly recover from her exhaustion while enjoying Chef Yoshimura's cooking."

"Oi..."

"If it's tourist spots suitable for foreigners, Ryougoku Kokugikan Hall, Kabukiza, and the Tsukiji Sushi Sen Asakusa Kaminarimon Branch — are all closed, so I guess it's gotta be Toyosu. Also, Ginza and Harajuku, I'd say?" ²

"The Kokugikan Hall and Kabukiza don't run anything until the end of the year?"

Miyoshi lets her fingers fly across the keyboard.

"Sadly, no. The Kokugikan Hall has a Sada Masashi concert planned for New Year's Eve. The Big December Kabuki at Kabukiza concluded just today."

"No hope then..."

"Toyosu should be open all the time though."

"But, she's at least visited eateries aimed at tourists, no? You think Ayesha will be happy watching the fish market through the windows on the second floor?"

"If it's Tsukiji, she'd be able to see it from close-by, but Toyosu will be limited to watching from the hallways on the second floor."

Seemingly believing that this wouldn't be enough for tourists, they've also added a tourist deck on Toyosu, but that area will only be accessible next year.

"How about the Asakusa Shrine then? You can't really see stuff like the dragon carvings at the bottom of Kaminarimon in photos."

"If we're unlucky, that street will be swamped with foreigners. I was really surprised about it when I passed it the other day."

"In that sense, it seems like recently Shinjuku Golden Gai is also full of Westerners."

"Isn't Ayesha too young for that place?"

"She should have been 19 years old when we met her the previous time, but...when's her birthday?"

"Wait, isn't that a flag right there?"

"No, we're talking about that Papa of hers, okay? It's unthinkable that he'd leave her alone on her birthday."

"What if he suddenly barges in because of that or something...?"

² Kabukiza is a place where they show Kabuki theater, Toyosu is an artificial island, and I think you know Ginza and Harajuku. All of these terms can be googled if you want more info or pictures.

"Please stop it."

He's still an authority in India's economic world. Something like ignoring all the various parties in Japan, and barging in to play with his daughter—

"I'm sure he'd be capable of at least this much."

"It's very likely that he'd do this."

Rather, in this completely crazy era, I'd be scared about him completely renting out Disney, or something like that.

"S-Shopping at Ginza probably isn't overly novel for her, so how about Harajuku?" Miyoshi changes the topic to not trigger any flags.

"Are you knowledgeable about Takeshita Street? I don't know that place at all."

"I only know about Urahara's restaurants."

"Still, that's more than I know."

"I've been craving for the crepe shop over there too, but..."

"Craving?"

"Senpai, do you have the courage to order and eat crepes over there?"

Hmm, everyone around there is quite young, right? In the worst case, it'd mean me being almost twice as old. Such an old guy blending in and chewing crepe...ugh, that's already plenty terrible to imagine.

"No way."

"Right!?"

"No, I mean, aren't you more or less fine in regards to age?"

"It becomes impossible if you mess up once. I think it's what you'd call a manifestation of self-consciousness."

"Is that how it works?"

"Yes."

I suppose it remains impossible as long as you don't change your mindset, if you end up thinking that it's no good at one point in time.

"W-Well, I suppose we could also ask Ayesha what she wants to do once she gets back."

We postpone the decision, and start to analyze the access logs of Heaven's Leaks which have become huge.

— **Komaba - National Center for University Entrance Examinations** —

In a place close to the end of Komaba Street, which started at the side of the Toudai Komaba Campus, surrounded by a tall hedge, stood an imposing building with security permanently guarding the entrance. 『National Center for University Entrance Examinations』 was written on a signboard which you wouldn't find unless you looked for it because it was in a location drawing almost no attention, enclosed by garden shrubs.

A single man passed through the gate while greeting the security guard with a Good Morning, called out to a man walking a few steps ahead of him, and quickly ran up.

"Yo, mornin'."

"Oh, mornin'."

As soon as the two were walking next to each other, they naturally started to talk about yesterday's uproar.

"Did you hear the story related to those D-Cards?"

"Yeah, it has been merely a day, and yet the operations' 1st department has been flooded with inquiries."

Their talk was about the story that people would become able to use telepathy if they formed a party through their D-Cards, which seemed ridiculous at a first glance. But, apparently this was the truth. In other words, as long as the party had one excellent student, they'd be able to cheat as much as they wanted. This came completely out of the blue for the National Center for University Entrance Examinations.

"Inquiries?"

"Many of them were inquiries asking how they should deal with this. The majority concerned changes to the procedure under these new circumstances, but — in reality, the worry is that it might become a considerable disadvantage for examinees who don't own a D-Card, if we don't adopt any countermeasures at all."

"Countermeasures, eh...? If it results in there being absolutely no countermeasures available, some prep schools might actually integrate it into their curriculum."

"Even leaving prep schools aside, it's quite possible for the same to happen between fellow high school friends."

"Yeah, well, after all it's not a story you can somehow deal with by adjusting the scores or some such."

"But, even if we were to take the latest date for the next National Center Test of University Admissions, it's realistically impossible to implement any countermeasures at this point in time, isn't it?"

'In the first place, it's not even clear what countermeasure would actually work here. But, this matter is also going to influence the Supplementary Examinations. The National Center is an organization that mostly focuses on implementing the National Center Test, but one of its crucial tasks is also to research and examine improvements for the new student selection processes of universities. It's very likely that its reason for existence will be called into question if the National Center simply stands by and watches.

"How about spreading the examinees, seeing how the telepathy's reach is apparently limited to 20 meters?"

"Most of the requested examinee seat numbers are issued as serial numbers, so it's going to be quite difficult to guide them to their seats... The number of venues capable of separating eight people by more than 20 meters is quite limited, isn't it?"

If one were to consider the telepathy between child and parent parties, this plan would become even more unrealistic, but they didn't know about this as of yet.

"What if you check afterwards, and penalize people if the score is obviously odd?"

"If you know the information of the seats as they were assigned by the examinees' seat numbers, it'd be very likely possible to suspect possible irregularities. But, that won't serve as much of a proof."

"But look, unlike the regular tests at school, it's going to be a university exam, right? Is there any reason to allow others to get high scores even though it's an exam with the aim to defeat your peers?"

"Well, there are social power relationships, and...also, I don't really want to consider it, but I suppose money could also play a role."

"A doctor wanting to make his stupid soon pass with the help of a student that's guaranteed to pass...yep, that sounds very feasible."

"It's a lot safer as an option than using back doors, and it's going to be difficult to suspect illegal actions. But then again, since the number of people choosing such a method will likely be very small, I think the impact on the exams will be rather low. To put it bluntly, it's nothing we'd need to concern ourselves with."

"I feel sorry for the other examinees, but I guess that means we won't notice anything if the range of illegal stuff remains small."

They only regarded this duty as part of their work, and usually didn't think about the worries of individual students. They would always choose the method that would avoid them being criticized, if possible.

"But, I believe this might be a bit too much of a wishful thinking."

"We're talking about the university exams here. In other words, an exam which could possibly influence an examinee's entire career. I think anyone would want to use a cheating method where they know that it won't be exposed."

"In the first place, what department would be responsible for this case?"

"It seems like it's going to mostly affect operations and general affairs."

"General affairs?"

"If it comes to collaborative research with the JDA, they'd control the costs for the research and support, right?"

"Even the Supplementary is merely one month away, you know? Is that a time to carefreely talk about some collaborative research?"

"But look, we won't get anything resolved unless we start somewhere."

"Okay, that makes sense. Haah...it sure sounds like this issue will keep us quite busy. But, we can't deal with it if the plan hasn't been decided, can we?"

"I'm pretty sure they've already contacted the JDA."

"So we have to wait for their answer, huh?"

"Correct. Maybe their side already possesses a device allowing them to detect such things, right? And even if not, they might be able to judge whether someone owns a WDA Card through information like age and address."

The men entered the multi-floor building with hanging shoulders while full of gloom due to the huge problem that cropped up at a time when they'd be busy even under normal circumstances.

— Ichigaya - JDA Headquarters —

"They want to identify D-Card holders?"

An inquiry had been delivered to Saiga, section chief within the Dungeon Management Department at JDA's headquarters in Ichigaya.

"Yes. The University Entrance Examinations Center has asked whether we know of a method to tell if an examinee possesses a D-Card at the examination venue."

'Going by the timing of this inquiry, their contact must be about the telepathy matter. I had expected them to turn up sooner or later after the party system was published yesterday, but their response is

quite fast, I gotta admit. Well, no wonder with them having the entrance exams around the corner.

"Got it. Please inform Legal and System-management of this, and catch us a meeting room."

"Understood, chief."

'In any case, countless exams and tests exist in this world. If we don't get this resolved properly, this matter is explosive enough to blow up our social system.

'Even though it's an occurrence everyone expected to take place immediately after the publication, it doesn't look like we'll be able to dish out some kind of countermeasure as JDA right away. After all, the JDA isn't in charge of handling the influence of dungeons on society. At most Public Relations might have something to do with it, but this matter clearly got nothing to do with them. If you were to twist it around, it'd fall into the area of Legal's responsibility as a prevention of sorts, but that department basically has a strong connotation of dealing with scandals of employees.

"No matter how you think about it, in the end it's a matter that's going to end up with us..."

The Dungeon Management Department was a place where they only wanted to handle the management of dungeons, but the control of explorers also fell into the range of their duties. And anyone could perfectly imagine this matter being an extension of that.

"Though I kinda believe that it's the Dungeon Agency's duty to predict the influence of dungeons on society and keep those at a minimum..."



Three hours later, a meeting about the question whether the JDA could implement the measures requested in the inquiry was held in a small conference room. Because the same inquiry had also been sent to the Dungeon Agency and the Ministry of Education, all related departments attended the meeting.

"It'd seem that there's no legal problem divulging whether a person belongs to the WDA. In cases of dungeon entrances managed by someone other than the JDA, we can request them to show their cards to check their qualification to enter, so I believe we'll be able to handle it in correspondence to that." A member of the legal department said while looking at the document in his hand. "But then again, it's going to be an issue of what to do about the costs to handle this inquiry."

After all, anyone could tell that this inquiry would generate a huge number of identification requests over a short period of time. There was no way that any of the present organizations had prepared enough capacity to handle such inquiries, even during normal times.

Hearing that, a member of the system-management department raised his hand, he spoke up, "May I?", then continuing while looking at those present, "As is the case with all ID cards, the WDAID is used to manage registered people. Accordingly, it's quite difficult to determine whether a person has a WDAID, even though it's possible to determine the owner of an ID. For the matter at hand, we should be able to look up name and birth date, but it'll naturally cause an error if there's humans

who were born on the same day with the same family and personal names."

'After all, this matter relates to examinees. There's likely many cases with people having the same birth date. If we count in those repeating the exams, there's more than 1,500 people with the same birthday.

"If the registered address fits, you might say that you've got a match, but putting it another way, there won't be a match if the registered address and the current address don't conform, and of course there won't be a match either if there's some mistake in the registration."

There also existed the option of doing the checks through people while exposing all of the data resembling an address, but looking at it from the angle of privacy protection, it'd be impossible for them to develop such a UI. In addition, a registrant had to inform the JDA whenever there was a change in their personal information, but it wasn't as though the JDA would impose some penalty even if the registrant forgot to notify them about the change as it'd be no more than an issue of mails simply not being delivered anymore. Nowadays the JDA doesn't send any mails to their members, except for the first delivery of the WDA card.

In short, it was likely that there would be cases of people forgetting or not informing the JDA about changes in address.

While moving the fingertips, which were joined atop the table, as if being a neurotic, he declared, "In case we're really going to verify whether someone possesses an ID, it's going to become quite the strain. In the first place, checking on-site and moreover manually sounds rather impossible, doesn't it? For example, the admission tickets for the exams at the National Center Test for University Admissions only have the name, gender, birthday, and a photo. Something like manually typing in the address after asking the examinees would be an act of sheer madness."

'Depending on the location, there'll be more than 4,500 examinees present, even if you limit it to the Secondary Exam. When it comes to checking all of them manually, it's going to require 25 hours even if at a rate of 20 seconds per person. Doing this simultaneously in close to 700 places all over the country? That's next to impossible, just considering the costs for a moment.

"Realistically I can think of a system where the JDA queries the database after obtaining the necessary keywords for a search from the Center."

"Would it be legally alright to do something like that? Is it possible to directly retrieve the personal information from the Center without altering the admission agreement, and then pass the information back to the other side?"

The guy from the legal department had silently listened to the conversation, but once it touched upon legal matters, he raised his hand, and spoke up, "In such a case, the JDA would merely answer whether a person belongs to the WDA upon inquiry, so if we follow what I stated in the beginning, it's covered by the laws under the current situation."

"Though it'd be a huge boon if we didn't put a big burden on the system by preferably replying after receiving all the identification requests in a bundle when the application period has ended." A man of the system development department said while shrugging, obviously having resigned himself to his fate.

"But then again, this will be pointless if an examinee acquires a WDA card afterwards."

The trick of acquiring a D-Card on a day right before the exams, at a time when you could consider the identification requests to the JDA as having finished, would be an option as a one-shot.

"The biggest problem here is the D-Card, no? I'm sure there exist people who possess a WDAID but no D-Card, and the possibility of some people possessing a D-Card without being registered at the WDA is quite likely too, isn't it?"

'In the position of the JDA, the existence of such people is a problem, but the WDA was established after the appearance of the dungeons. So you can't clearly deny the possibility of Non-WDA D-Card holders existing. Having said that, I doubt that the Center would go this far with their demands. After all, the number of such special people should be quite low. But, there might be a lot more people possessing a WDA Card without ever having defeated a monster. Proving that a person possesses no D-Card despite possessing a WDA Card is going to be impossible with the method at hand.

"As expected, there won't be any choice but to have the examinees sign a personal statement."

"We can only make it common knowledge that lying in the statement will result in a penalty or disqualification when found out during a later investigation by establishing the proper rules."

"In the end, it means that it'll be difficult to check on-site, doesn't it?"

Saiga answered as if summarizing all the arguments so far, "Correct. Isn't it unrealistic for us to cope with it by preparing an API and service from our side in advance and allowing the other side to directly inquire about the identification as they like?"

'It'd mean that the other side would need to figure out how to use the point of contact we've prepared.

"If it's about something we can help with, I think it'd be to stop the issuing of WDA Cards to examinees during a fixed period before the exams."

'This is a measure to prevent examinees from acquiring WDA Cards after the identification request, in case we're going to adopt the method of investigating in advance. But, even if we do this, it might result in failure as long as the JDA can't access the Entrance Examinations Center's application information since we won't be able to turn down older examinees, who failed the exams before, due to age. And even assuming that we could access the information, it'd still be impossible to turn them down if they register under an address different from the one they used during the exam application.

"Understood. Having been able to get the opinions of all of you was a big help. I will have my department consolidate the particulars of the outcome, and send it around to all departments. If necessary, we might launch an official project, so I look forward to working with all departments." Saiga closed the meeting with those words.

The participants left the conference room while exchanging their views in private talks.

"But, at long last, a day like this has arrived, huh?"

"Looks like it. Well, I guess it'd be kind of pitiful if everything remains unchanged now that SF and fantasy has come true. The modern social systems won't be able to fully cope with it, so I think it'll require quite the transition phase in various fields."

"Hmm, okay, but we still have to avoid the normal citizens marching on us with torches."

"Please stop it. I'd hate the idea of being burned at the stake as a scapegoat."

Saiga, who had been listening in on them unasked, completely agreed with them in his mind. And then, once everyone left the conference room, he deeply leaned back on his chair, and gazed at the minutes of the meeting just now.

"If we only had a verification tool capable of spitting out the result on the spot, like D-Powers' measurement device..."

The research on D-Cards hadn't advanced much, if at all. Or rather, the research itself hadn't been performed publicly after learning that the materials used for the card were commonplace. There were no clues about its existence as it was way too much of a fantasy item. On top of the inability to use the card itself, the research had lost its merit now that the WDA Cards had spread all over the world. But then again, the publication of the party system might actually revert that development.

'A device capable of determining the existence of a D-Card would go beyond our wildest dreams——

"Wait a sec..."

"Thinking about it now, I feel like Naruse mentioned something about the shortcomings when she informed me about the measurement devices..."

Saiga swiftly stood up, and left the meeting room at a quick pace, heading for the lobby. Over there he took out his smartphone, and immediately called Miharu.

"Yes, Naruse speaking."

"Hello, it's Saiga."

"Oh, chief?"

"Naruse, the other day you mentioned the shortcomings of D-Powers' measurement devices, didn't you? Look, I mean the part about what they show when measuring non-explorers."

"Ah, it sounds like the measurement devices can't measure the stats of a person who doesn't possess a D-Card. Rather than a shortcoming, it simply stems from people without a D-Card having no status to begin with."

"That's it!"

"Huh? What's wrong, chief?"

"Ah, no, forget it. I'll explain later. You've been a big help."

"I see. I'm happy as long as I was able to be of use. Goodbye."

Saiga returned to his own desk, and immediately began writing a document related to the inquiry. Since it revolved around D-Powers, he had no choice but to do it himself. And when he finished writing it up, his work hours had already ended.

"Which reminds me, those guys don't even bother looking at the Emails sent to their public address, do they?" Saiga muttered, and sent the document to Miharu's mail address.

"If this works out smoothly, they might actually become modern world messiahs.

"But, even when just considering the Secondary, there's only a month and a bit left, huh...?"

"Then again, even if all of this went perfectly, I'm pretty sure they'd flatly refuse being called messiahs." Saiga smiled cheerfully while imagining the reluctance showing on their faces.

— Yoyogi-Hachiman Office —

It was around two hours later that Ayesha came back to our office after checking out of her hotel.

『I'm back. What have you been talking about?』

She literally came right back when I was talking with Miyoshi where we should guide her to, but as might be expected, immediately leaving would be quite tough on the time and her stamina.

『Well, we've just been wondering whether there's any place you want to go to in Japan, Ayesha』

『A place I want to go to?』

『Look, I mean stuff like Kaminarimon, Ginza, Toyosu, or the Sky Tree』

『Hmm...Akihabara?』

Akiba? That one was completely off our radar.

"Well, you could describe it as a tourist attraction representing Tokyo, so far as it goes."

I'm sure this city is the only place in the world where you can find a townscape with huge banners of beautiful 2-D girls boldly crowding the walls of multi-floor buildings. Though I feel like their numbers have drastically decreased recently.

"Rajikan, Bandai, and UDX?"

"Shouldn't we go deeper into Akiba, like the Junk Street or some such?"

"Curry, I want to go."

"Curry?"

『I've heard that it's the district gathering the most curry restaurants in Tokyo』

Now that she mentions it, the area east and west around the station, and also up to the point where you cross the southern part of the Kanda River, is certainly teeming with curry restaurants. Though I don't know whether it's the place with the highest density in Tokyo.

『But, isn't Japanese curry completely different from Indian curry?』

『I must check out the Japanese curry as Indian person!』

"Curry, eh...?"

"Huh? Senpai, did you hate curry or something?"

"No, that's not it. I can tell when a curry dish tastes really bad, but I don't quite know what actually makes a curry dish taste delicious..."

"Ah, you're right, it's hard to rank curry dishes."

"I feel like all the curry dishes that aren't nasty pass as reasonably okay."

"That's a food universally loved by all people for you."

"What? No good?"

『No, we've been talking where to find some good curry. I mean, which restaurant would work』

『Obviously all of them!』

『All of them? You mean as in all restaurants?』

No, no, wait, there's no way that she can eat this much, no matter what. She's got no idea how many restaurants are around there.

『There's no chance for me to eat at all of them, if I go around by myself. It's clear that I won't be able to continue after two places, right?』

Obviously. But, there's more than ten curry restaurants in Akiba, you know?

『But, I'd like to try getting a taste at all places!』

When I try to ask her where this wish stems from, it appears that she's been inspired by an

American nerd, who used to be her online friend, telling her that Akiba got all kinds of fun curry places. Back then she gave up on the idea of eating there, but it looks like Ayesha was slightly envious of her friend.

『That's why this opportunity is a manna from heaven』

While grinning broadly, Ayesha points at Miyoshi and I. Don't tell me——

『You're telling us to go around together and order one plate for three people!?!』

Otherwise we'll never be able to visit all the restaurants. We'd probably be on the verge of death when we tried to pull off a moving story similar to One Bowl of Kakesoba at some place, and if we do it normally, it'd result in us getting in the way of their business.³

『Senpai, Hinduism pays attention to the impurity of food, so wouldn't it be shoddy to go around and eat?』

Hearing Miyoshi, Ayesha laughs and says, 『We're rather lenient in that area』.

『Hmm, won't it be alright if we have Ayesha taste it first then? I mean, it'd be a tall order to tell the restaurant to give us one plate since we're going to share the food with three people...』

『Let's sneak in our own spoons!』

"But, isn't that kinda like messing with their business?"

"If we do it the normal way, it's just as you say, but——"

"Do you have some kind of idea?"

"Please leave it to me! I've got a way to resolve it which perfectly fits Akiba!"

Haah? A way to resolve it which perfectly fits Akiba?

Miyoshi browses online with a face full of confidence, and begins to make phone calls all over the place.

『Azusa, what are you doing?』

『I'm just preparing a secret technique that'll allow us to walk around and order one plate for three people』

"Oohh, a Japanese higi!"⁴

Ayesha joins her hands together in front of her chest, as if praying, while being deeply moved.

³ One Bowl of Kakesoba is a movie from 1992. Here's a summary: <https://mydramalist.com/26343-one-bowl-of-kakesoba>

⁴ Higi = secret technique



"Okay! Here I've got parkas, plain T-Shirts, and stencil sheets which were cut with a laser."
Miyoshi returns while carrying a heap of luggage, and presents those items to Ayesha and me while taking them out of a bag. "In addition, acrylic paint—— and this here is the key player this time!"

What Miyoshi takes out next with a "Tadah!" is a bottle with a white, murky, semi-transparent liquid.

"What's that?"

"A fabric medium."

Medium is a component for the sake of adding various material feels while mixing it with paint. A fabric medium is used to mix it with acrylic paint for coloring cloth. It raises the paint's attachment to the cloth, and apparently prevents the loss of color during washing.

"Then, we do this..." Miyoshi affixes the stencil sheet on a T-Shirt, and smears the combined liquid of medium and paint on it. "And it's done!"

A very lame "Gothic" typeface 『Curry Emperor』 is written on the chest part of the T-Shirt Miyoshi is holding up. The hell...

『Say, Kaygo, what's written there?』

Come to think of it, Ayesha can't really read kanji.

"Umm, 'Curry the Great', I think."

"Senpai, that makes it sound as if we're talking about a king called Mr. Curry. Isn't it 'Great King of Curry'?"

"That'd be King of Curry then, no?"

『Let's see. Curry Daiou is written there. It means...hmm, something like a king who loves curry?』

"Oohh, Curry Daiou!"

『But, king is a male term, you know?』

『All as planned』

With those words, Miyoshi writes 『Princess of Curry』 on the next T-Shirt with the same method as before.

『This is?』

『It means a princess who loves curry』

『No matter how you look at it, anyone would say that it talks about a princess of a country called Curry, right? Moreover, it's smells like a rip-off』

『It's the taste of Akiba!』

『Please stop since that's going to invite misunderstandings』

Hearing that, Ayesho gets all excited, squealing, "Akiba taste! That's great!" and similar.

『So...you're surely not going to tell us to go eating curry while wearing those, are you?』

I can't believe at all that doing this would actually warrant us eating from one plate with three people.

『Not quite. This is the finisher!』

She randomly sticks a small stencil on the back of a parka, and smears paint on it. After she's done, 『Pray! A pilgrimage of all Akiba Curry!』

"I feel like I've seen a sentence like that somewhere else..." [efn_note]It's a line from Fisherman Sanpei, a manga by Takao Yaguchi.[/efn_note]

"The residents of Akiba love events. I'm sure everyone will go along with this. Also, look, if we avoid the busy lunchtime, it'll be regarded as joke material."

"But you see..with this it looks like we're going to start blathering, 『Fufufu...I don't have any interest in festivals. I'm a guy who loves eating in silence by himself』, at any moment while holding a whiskey bottle in one hand."

"It's going to be alright if we hide our faces by putting on sunglasses."

A pair of shady, sunglasses-wearing man and woman, who're taking a dark-brown beauty around, are going to walk around while eating curry and wearing parkas telling others about some pilgrimage, eh? Moreover, ordering one plate with three people...

"I feel like this is definitely going to end up as a topic on SNS."

『Kaygo, Kaygo, is it going to be OK if I wear this?』

『It'll be perfect!』

『I wonder...』

Looking with a sidelong glance at the two girls who are in high spirits, I can't get rid of the feeling that we're overlooking something.

— **West Shinjuku** —

When she received the email, Naruse Miharu was on her way back from the office of a patent attorney in West Shinjuku. The intellectual property rights concerning dungeons were altogether managed by the WDA while cooperating with the patent office-like organizations in the respective countries, but after being asked by Miyoshi, Miharu had investigated the details of the formalities related to the intellectual property rights.

"Eh...?"

The mail, which she opened in a place where she wouldn't stand in the way, asked her whether she couldn't request D-Powers to produce a device for the sake of differentiating D-Card holders, based on the JDA's schedule.

"Moreover, in time for this year's university entry exams!?"

As far as Miharu was concerned, it was a schedule she could only consider to be totally absurd, but the email finished with, "I leave everything in your hands, so please persuade them somehow!"

"Now listen, even if you tell me to somehow do something about this..."

It didn't take Miharu much of a time to label this schedule as impossible. D-Powers still hadn't applied for the intellectual property rights for their status measurement devices. Miharu knew this with absolute certainty since she had just now visited a patent attorney with the goal of finding out about the formal methods to get it patented.

When it came to making such a device with this schedule, it'd be set in stone that the device would be put to use before getting its patent accepted.

"It's very unlikely that they'll go along with this, isn't it?"

Having said that, this was her job. Miharu sighed in resignation, got in a taxi that had just arrived, and told the driver to take her to the Yoyogi-Hachiman Intersection.

§077 Schemers afoot? 12/27 (Thu)

— **Yoyogi-Hachiman Office** —

"Mornin'. You're early."

"Good morning. Well, a bit, yeah."

"What about Ayesha?"

"She must be tired as she's still asleep."

"Hmm, okay, the curry shops in Akiba open past noon, so I suppose it's fine either way."

"Anyway, senpai, what do you think about the matter brought up by Ms. Naruse yesterday?"

"You mean the D-Card Checker?"

"Yep."

"I mean, even if you ask me about my thoughts on this...putting aside the development issue for a moment, is it actually possible to produce enough of them?"

"It'd be a different matter if we were talking about a part, but covering the entirety of the National Center Test for University Admissions? That sounds quite difficult, I'd say."

There's close to 700 locations for the final exam of the university exams all over the country. If you exclude the examination grounds with the Braille tests, the number of examinees per venue widely differ, ranging from a hundred to more than four thousands to begin with.

"If we're just talking about the total number of examinees, it's more than 570,000. Even if we were to prepare just one device per hundred people, we'd still need 5,700 devices."

"The university exams this year take place on January the 19th and 20th. If you take the preparations and distribution of the devices into account, I think you'd be left with roughly two weeks for the production."

"The fact of you not accounting for the New Years holidays makes you sound totally exploitive, you know senpai?"

"No wait, that's just normal in an emergency situation, isn't it!?"

"Even then, it's wrong. O-Bon and New Years are special. But leaving that aside, what's your take?"

"We don't know how long the manufacturing might take, so it'd be safer to stay clean of this, don't

you think?"

Even the JDA should be well aware that they're asking the impossible here.

"Usually I'd agree with you."

Usually? That's a rather ambiguous way to put it.

"Now then, next is this, senpai. —What do you think about this?"

In response to her question, I approach Miyoshi's seat, and notice that a mail program is open on her screen. It shows the arrival of more than 500 new emails from last night until now.

"What's up with that? Spam? Set the filters appropriately, and get rid of them."

"That's after I've done what you said."

"Wut?"

"It means that these are emails sent from proper email servers. Moreover, they've all been sent to our party account that's linked with the trader's license. Oh by the way, our email address is private."

"Meaning?"

"That we can't ignore them, unlike on some random free email address, since they've arrived here as important notifications. Moreover, since our accounts use meaningless character strings, it can't be a dictionary attack either."

In short, the delivered emails couldn't have been sent without knowing that address. Furthermore, it means they're mails requiring a proper check.

"So, what are they about?"

"Who knows? I'd really love to have the email senders to at least write a proper subject!"

Half of the emails have meaningless subjects — "Nice to meet you" and "Hello" are still part of the better ones, but there's also pointless, generic stuff like "Inquiry" written in some of them.

Miyoshi quickly scans them, and starts getting rid of some, declaring, "People believing the subject to be the first line of the text body are quite retarded."

"Whoa, let's calm down and stay away from such remarks that would earn you a shitstorm." I say with a wry smile, but I can totally understand her feeling of wanting to delete them, if you see a huge number of emails with such subjects all at once.

Moreover, a third left the subject line empty. Some of the email programs for smartphones don't even allow you to write a legit subject in the first place. They immediately direct you to the input for the main text body. It might be inevitable for them to have skipped the subject line, if they used

the email program all of a sudden without any previous practice. In addition, ten percent have only "Re:" written in there. They've probably written the email after pressing the email program's reply button, but Miyoshi flew in a rage, crying out, "You think that tells anyone what you want, or what!?"

If it's a few emails, you can usually endure it, or rather, ignore it without bickering, but I can totally feel with her getting mad over having to deal with several hundreds of such emails. I mean, the senders should be at least resolved for the processing of their emails to be put off.

While opening the mails with decent subjects, Miyoshi grumbles under her breath, "Adding long-winded seasonal greetings to emails is utter bullshit, geeze!" Uh-oh, she's totally pissed.

Even if it can't be helped since it's part of the enigmatic domain called business etiquette, it makes sense for her to wish the emails to be kept concise and on the point for a quicker read.

"So this is the reason why you looked sullen when I came downstairs, huh?"

"You got it. As far as I can tell from the few emails I read, and the subjects, all of these emails seem to be inquiries about a device to distinguish whether someone possesses a D-Card or not."

Given that the senders appear to be people from the University Entrance Examination Center and entrance examination offices of various universities, I guess all of them are about the exams, as might be expected.

"But, isn't that weird? We only heard about this matter from Ms. Naruse late in the night yesterday, right? Why would they approach us directly about this issue? Moreover, this address is private, right?"

"It likely means that the possibility of us possessing a means to check D-Card holders might have been leaked somewhere. If only that, it could also be Midori's place, but if you consider the timing and address, it's pretty obvious that the leak originates from the JDA."

"No way, you mean Ms. Naruse?"

"She's involved too deeply with us as we even made her use <Different World Language Comprehension>, so I don't think it's her."

"Too deeply involved...now listen...but, wait!?"

This is a request we'd usually turn down. But, what if all universities all over Japan were to beg us?

"I mean, can you actually turn all of these down?"

"That's the point."

No matter what claim we might use, if we watch from the side, we'll simply shut our eyes towards the collapse of society. Above all, it's **become known** that we've got a means to help. If things go badly, it's quite possible for us to get treated as villains who allowed society to break apart.

"If the JDA foresaw us rejecting the request, and leaked this information and our email address to prevent that, they're quite the schemers——"

"No, if there really is someone like that among them, they're no more than an idiot."

"——As expected."

I mean, to be honest here, we won't have any problem with being hated by the universities and the Ministry of Education. Furthermore, it's not like we're telling them we won't build a D-Card Checker. It's just that we can't build one right away. I think there's no doubt that we'll make one sooner or later. After all, such a checker might sell much better than something like a status measurement device.

"When we built a device like that, the world won't have much of a choice but to buy it anyway, right?"

"I don't think that they'll be able to find an alternative method easily."

In the first place, if they had an alternative plan that's possible to realize with realistic costs, there's no way that they'd have crowded us with such mails.

"Ms. Naruse's sob stories seem to be quite effective. Especially on you, senpai."

Ugh, I'm not that... But, if she puts it like that, I guess I'm an easy guy.

"As a matter of fact, if it's just a check whether someone holds a D-Card or not, you can just follow up on a specific sensor's values and check whether someone can have their status measured, so I think the structure of the device would be quite simple."

"The problem is the number of required devices, huh?"

"There's that as well, but the acquisition and application for the dungeon patent likely won't be in time. If we're forced to do this, the product will appear on the market before the patent is certified."

"Hmm? But, as long as we've applied for it, the first patent is going to be regarded as proper, even if another application is put in by some late comer, right? Wouldn't it be kinda difficult to file a formal objection if our product has come out first?"

"It's as you say when it comes to the patent. But senpai, depending on the situation, don't you feel like this whole deal smells like insider?"

"Insider?"

An insider is an illegal act where, for example, an employee of a company obtains information that will have some major impact on the stock rate, and trades those stocks before the official announcement by the company.

"Isn't the timing for the information to be spread and the part about us being forced into turning it into a product by creating a situation where it's difficult to refuse somewhat shady, to say the least?"

"Well yeah, it does align all too well..."

"Wouldn't you be pissed off if this wasn't some coincidence but actually planned out by someone?"

"Eehh? Sure. If it's like you say, and assuming there's some guy thinking about how to manipulate us to dance on their palm, I'd definitely spite them, but..."

"Right!? You'd want to give them tit for tat, correct!?"

Looking at Miyoshi who smiles all over her face while boldly declaring that, I pray to no one in particular that all of this is just coincidence with no such person existing.

"...While we're at it, may the world stay at peace."

Either way, we decide to work out the rest with Ms. Naruse later. Of course we ignore replying to the mails. For the moment, that is.

『Mornin'』

In the meantime, Ayesha has woken up, and come down to our office.

『Morning. Did you sleep well?』

『Yep. What's the plan today?』

『It's the day for Akiba's curry tour, right? We'll walk around Akihabara in yesterday's cosplay outfits』

『Okay! I'll get ready!』

The three of us went in high spirits to Akihabara, but immediately found out that there's few curry dishes with no meat, which forced us into a truly tight spot. And, on that day we also became stars of Akiba.

§078 Forum 【We'll Divulge the Secrets】 Heaven's Leak 1 【of Dungeons】

1: Nameless Fan ID:P12xx-xxxx-xxxx-0133

Various mysteries take place in the world. Look, can you truly believe that the information, which requires a 400 Billion Yen orb to be read, would be published for free? It's a present from God that was delivered on Christmas 2018.

Now then, is this the real deal!? Just two people on this planet can tell apart whether it's true or bogus! Ultimately it depends on you whether you believe it or not!

The next thread will start at 930

2: Nameless Fan

Thx > 1

3: Nameless Fan

Started one right away, eh?

4: Nameless Fan

He nailed the timing for it.

5: Nameless Fan

I just read it briefly. It said something about telepathy.

6: Nameless Fan

It's been already confirmed manifold on reddit and similar. It's a "fact" > 5

7: Nameless Fan

Won't a D-Card become essential to keep on living with this? If you don't have one, you're going to be left out from the class' telepathy network, right? Isn't that the same as if being told to go die?

8: Nameless Fan

Since a party can hold 8 ppl at max, you can't form any big groups, can you?

9: Nameless Fan

There's talk about the possibility of forming child parties.

10: Nameless Fan

Child parties?

11: Nameless Fan

Wait a sec. You're saying you can create an infinite amount of parties? Like a child of a child.

12: Nameless Fan

The era of 100 million telepathics has come!

13: Nameless Fan

No, that's kinda impossible since the distance is limited to 20m lol

14: Nameless Fan

If not for that restriction on the range, someone would be already whispering inside your head while you're lying in bed at night.

15: Nameless Fan

A classroom in school had 7 x 9 meters in the past, and seems now to be 9 x 10 meters at the least, so can't you talk with the neighboring class during lesson? Or do walls matter?

16: Nameless Fan

It sounds like the telepathy ignores almost all obstacles > 15

17: Nameless Fan

Whoa, that's amazing > 16

18: Nameless Fan

That would move the cheating issue into the focus though.

19: Nameless Fan

Well, you'd still need at least one smart guy.

20: Nameless Fan

Somehow all of this resembles the internet a bit. The ideas of one smart guy spread all over the place in no time, allowing everyone to become kinda like that one person, in a way.

21: Nameless Fan

But, stuff like assisting on an exam through telepathy without needing to become a double sure sounds like it could become very profitable...

22: Nameless Fan

That's a crime > 21. Reported.

23: Nameless Fan

I think it'd be difficult to look for customers? Also, there's the obstacle of having to at least be in the top 100 of the nationwide mock exams...

24: Nameless Fan

An occupation for the chosen ones! > 21

25: Nameless Fan

More like the ones taking the entrance exams would become a much better source of money than those enrolling at university rofl > 21

26: Nameless Fan

Won't this develop into a major issue if they don't put up some countermeasures against this as soon

as possible? Oddly, the National Center Test is being held next month, you know?

27: Nameless Fan

I'm sure the examinees are desperately trying to get their hands on D-Cards around now lol

28: Nameless Fan

But that only works if they find someone cooperating with them, right?

29: Nameless Fan

Some places like prep schools could try to monopolize an examination venue by sending their students over all at once to get sequential examinee's numbers. Stuff like gathering those aiming for difficult universities, having them take the exams with everyone...and fix the university entry results in that way...might actually happen in reality, no?

30: Nameless Fan

Well, they could get those with very good results at the prep school to train how to obtain D-Cards lol

31: Nameless Fan

That's not funny as it looks like it's actually happening already.

32: Nameless Fan

For real!?

33: Nameless Fan

Naturally, that training course is actually for the sake of acquiring D-Cards, and not taking exams, but somehow I feel like the implications suddenly changed here all of a sudden.

34: Nameless Fan

I think there exist only few senior high school students about to take the university entrance exams while having already acquired D-Cards at their age, so wouldn't the JDA be able to prevent all of them swarming into the dungeons to get their D-Card by banning the acquisition of D-Cards until March?

35: Nameless Fan

How are you going to distinguish those people? By age? > 34
If you did it like that, you'd actually treat students, who failed the exams once or more, favorably. In reality, I doubt that there exists a perfect countermeasure.

36: Nameless Fan

Wouldn't all be fine by forbidding the D-Card acquisition for everyone?

37: Nameless Fan

What are you going to do about other countries then? Also, wouldn't that give those already possessing a D-Card an unfair advantage?

38: Nameless Fan

Even before that, it'd be resolved if you have everyone fail the exams by default and let them retake them next year, right?

39: Nameless Fan

That's...a great idea. But, would the administration be able to come up with some countermeasures if they got one more year to resolve it?

40: Nameless Fan

How? Isn't it way too naive to believe that something capable of telling whether someone is a D-Card Holder or belongs to a party could be introduced within a year?

41: Nameless Fan

That means people are going to have a big chance this year for stuff like qualifications for bar examinations and so on!

42: Nameless Fan

Couldn't you prevent such cheating by holding interviews?

43: Nameless Fan

Short essays would probably work as well. I mean, it's not like everyone could write the same text in an essay.

44: Nameless Fan

It'd still be possible for other party members to be outside the building if there's windows!

45: Nameless Fan

Lol, don't you think it'd be way too suspicious if there was some guy flipping through documents within the 20-m-range?

46: Nameless Fan

Telepathy definitely had a big impact, but Mining is nothing to scoff at either, you know?

47: Nameless Fan

But, that still doesn't tell us anything about what Mining is going to drop. Everything's going to depend on that, no?

48: Nameless Fan

Look at it like that: the 50th floor said to drop gold is far, far away. After all, Yoyogi's capture has only progressed down to the 21st floor (I think) so far.

49: Nameless Fan

But, I wonder, what kind of ores are going to appear?
If you obtain Mining, it'd be quite profitable just to keep hunting on the 20th floor, don't you think?

50: Nameless Fan

You'll be right if it's a precious metal, but since it could be all kinds of ores.... If it's stuff iron ore, I feel like it'd be a waste of time to even bring that stuff back up. > 49

51: Nameless Fan

Iron ore roflmao

52: Nameless Fan

Is the decision what's going to be dropped on a floor set up like gacha?
In such a case, the guy that makes it drop first would have a huge responsibility!

53: Nameless Fan

First we have to quietly wait for 49 people to get their hands on Mining at Yoyogi.

54: Nameless Fan

Yeah...just how long is that going to take...

55: Nameless Fan

Do you think that such people would be able to head to the 50th floor? > 53

56: Nameless Fan

Impossible (´•w•`)
But, one day, maybe! (´•w•`)

57: Nameless Fan

orz

58: Nameless Fan

Before that, we have to first find out what drops Mining...

59: Nameless Fan

And there goes the acquisition of Mining into the distant future...

60: Nameless Fan

Yeah, it's a lost cause

61: Nameless Fan

Leaving aside Mining, which we won't get our hands on anytime soon, is the story about the food for real?

62: Nameless Fan

Yep, it's true.

63: Nameless Fan

At long last...drops...on the n00b floors! wtkk! [efn_note]wtkk is JP internet slang for being hyped/excited[/efn_note]

64: Nameless Fan

But look...500 million people...when's that going to happen?

65: Nameless Fan

Probably in an instant.

66: Nameless Fan

Huh?

67: Nameless Fan

It was a hot topic on weibo [efn_note]Shinran Weibo is China's biggest SNS, basically the Twitter of China.[/efn_note] that something like a system to register all adults as explorers might be set up, or something like that.

68: Nameless Fan

Whoa, that fast! Was it already translated into Chinese!?

69: Nameless Fan

No, there's an English version of Heaven's Leak. So it apparently propagated through reddit, and spread in a flash.

70: Nameless Fan

What are they going to do when there's no dungeon nearby? China...discovered only one dungeon so far, right?

71: Nameless Fan

It appears they're going to ship entire villages to that one dungeon to get them registered.

72: Nameless Fan

Srsly?

73: Nameless Fan

Wouldn't they (China) be enough to cover it all by themselves?

74: Nameless Fan

True, China alone has enough people to reach the quota.

75: Nameless Fan

Going by what we're talking about here, India and Africa are going to follow as well, no?

76: Nameless Fan

No, no, no, no. Wait. Only 80 dungeons have been discovered all over the world. The current number of explorers should be around a hundred million, I'd say? If we consider that a hundred million people have registered within three years, it'd be more than a thousand per dungeon per day, you know?

77: Nameless Fan

Well, it was terrible at the beginning. Places like Yoyogi were every day as full as Comiket, weren't they?

78: Nameless Fan

Comiket pulls around 500,000 people in three days. If you look at pictures and videos of Yoyogi

back then, they do give such an impression.

79: Nameless Fan

If we go with 400 million people spread over 80 dungeons, it's going to be five million per dungeon. Even if 10,000 people register every day, it'll still take close to two years. Assuming just China does it, they'd need 400 days if they went at a rate of a million registrations per day, and eleven years if they lowered the rate to 100,000 registrations per day, okay?

80: Nameless Fan

Makes sense. I suppose it's an issue of time and efficiency, even if you set a fixed rate.

81: Nameless Fan

That's why I'm saying: No matter how much effort you put into this, it'll take at least 1~2 years, won't it?

82: Nameless Fan

If you put it like that, it sure makes sense. And here I had my hopes up a bit. For some drops on the n00b floors.

83: Nameless Fan

I can fully understand that notion.

84: Nameless Fan

In short, the explorations will focus on the search for Mining for a while then, I guess?

85: Nameless Fan

Right.

86: Nameless Fan

Afterwards, a search for safe floors and safe areas, huh?

87: Nameless Fan

Yeah, I mean it'd rock to build a frontline base over there if you spot one. Though it's not clear how big those safe areas would be.

88: Nameless Fan

Yes, the early bird gets the worm, eh?

89: Nameless Fan

It looks like the JDA is going to announce some rules about land use in dungeons, though.

90: Nameless Fan

Wouldn't it be OK to occupy the land before their announcement? Japan doesn't allow retroactive laws.

91: Nameless Fan

Even if that's true for Japan, the rules inside the dungeons fall under the control of the national DAs.

92: Nameless Fan

Something like retroactive laws by modern states and organizations — ah...no, nothing.

93: Nameless Fan

Still, those safe areas only start to appear on the 32nd floor, don't they? Yoyogi's capture is still stuck at the 21st floor, right?

94: Nameless Fan

Well, it'd be a huge bummer if Yoyogi only had 31 floors.

95: Nameless Fan

Seeing how the top explorers of the world have gathered here, won't the capture of the dungeon advance with ease?

96: Nameless Fan

That was an effect of Different World Language Comprehension, no? Haven't they gone back home by now?

97: Nameless Fan

You're right. > 96

We'll need to have our JSDF teams do their best.

98: Nameless Fan

What a carefree reliance on others roflmao.

99: Nameless Fan

But, honestly, who translated Heaven's Leaks?

100: Nameless Fan

What's the point in asking at this point in time?

101: Nameless Fan

If you consider it logically, it's got to be Russia or the USA, but...

102: Nameless Fan

There's like no way that people like them would go out of their way to reveal their translations to the public on an extra domain, is there?

103: Nameless Fan

Even if they had done it, the US would have likely used the .gov domain.

104: Nameless Fan

Well, I can assure you that it wasn't me.

105: Nameless Fan

This great me neither.

106: Nameless Fan

't wasn't me either

107: Nameless Fan

Give it a rest already, guys rofl

§079 Comiket 12/29 (Sat)

— Koto Ward —

"Look, Miyoshi, no matter how much you insist on a very Japanese place; are we really going to enter here?"

"Of course, Isn't this place the very definition of a typical Japanese place, in a certain sense?"

The instant we left the station of the Rinkai Line where a faint smell of salt hung in the air, we encountered such a huge crowd of people that I physically felt the pressure.

『Kaygo, what's that? It's full of people...』

Although there's still time left until the opening, a huge throng of people, which caused me to wonder just where they had all crawled out, has lined up in front of the Yagura Bridge.

『It's a comics-related festival in Japan gathering tens of thousand people』

『Hee』

『Yep, the holy land of all otaku on this planet, and the pride of Japan, Comiket!』

『I'm not sure what you're talking about, but it sounds amazing』, Ayesha says with her eyes sparkling.

Miyoshi keeps walking next to the queue, and turns to the left in front of the Washington Hotel after a backward glance at the huge crowd of people.

"Hey, Miyoshi. The end of the line is the other way, you know?"

"It's all cool. I got my hands on circle tickets."

Our destination seems to be Circle Entrance B on the East Hall side. Since we might have been barred entry if we had followed the Yagura Bridge a bit further, Miyoshi tells us that we'll enter from below.

"Isn't that against the rules?"

"Of course it's prohibited to exchange circle tickets for money or values equivalent to that, but it's a transfer based on kindness, and it's going to be okay anyway since we'll properly help out."

"Hmm, but I gotta say, you've got connections in the most weird places."

"It's thanks to a circle that gave me a really hard time at first."

"Circle?"

"Senpai, our university had plenty of people you could describe as maniacs, and if you just listened to their stories for a bit, they'd drag you around forever." Miyoshi shakes her head in lamentation. "In case of game circles, you'd further be forced to play them with no end. I was totally startled that they still had stuff like 14 inch CRT monitors with 4:3."

Oh shit, I've got no clue what she'd say if she knew that there's still a 21 inch CRT monitor with 4:3 in my old apartment. But then again, it's been like ages since I last turned on that thing, so I've got no idea whether it's still going to work. Getting rid of a single old TV is a chore in Tokyo, too.

"Anyway, they made me play Wardner or gather gold nuggets with Runner over there." While saying that you really can't look down on maniacs, she folds her arms, closes her eyes, and nods repeatedly.

"Rather, it sounds like you've been quite a gamer, Miyoshi. It's my first time hearing about that."

"I just did it back then. At the time when I finished Wiz and Roadrunner after getting caught during the circle solicitation, I couldn't run away anymore even if I wanted to... battle games⁵ were quite popular around that time. Well, I enjoyed them myself to a reasonable extent." The smile on her lips is slightly stiff, though.

Soon after we keep following the fairly wide walkway along the Yurikamome overhead structure, the characteristic building with its four, inverted quadrangular pyramids comes into sight on the right side. Japan's biggest, international exhibition hall, Tokyo Big Sight.⁶

"First we're going to go greet the circle that provided us with the tickets. It'd be great if we find our contact over there, but if not, we'll head over to the cosplay area. Please go around suitably and enjoy the atmosphere afterwards."

"I wonder whether we'll be able to..."

"It looks like it's going to be alright. See?"

Ayesha seems to happily flip through a thick catalog while walking. She shouldn't be able to read kanji, so is she actually fine?

『For there to exist so many people who draw comics...』

『Most of them are amateurs, though』

『Nowadays, this place is also full with professionals and companies』

『Wow! So, what are those people doing after gathering here?』

⁵ Battle games as in 2D for PS like Street Fighter n' stuff.

⁶ It really helps to open google maps or something similar and look for やぐら橋. Then you'll know the path they took.

『What, you ask...they sell their own creations, I'd say?』

『Huh? All of these many people have created their own books? On paper?』

『Well, I think that's about right』

『Whoa~』

Ayesha is greatly surprised, but she's got a point to be so. The number of paper books produced by individuals might be extremely high in Japan. Considering it now, I can't think of any other country that has so many.

"Currently, the number of books released in Japan apparently amounts to roughly 75,000 per year, but 35,000 circles participate in each Comiket event, and Comiket is held twice a year. If they were to release one new book on average, the total number would rival the annual amount of published books."

"That's amazing." Saying that, I draw closer to Miyoshi, and whisper, "By the way, what are Ayesha's guards going to do if we enter the venue through such a method?"

"For good measure I told them that they should be able to enter with one of the first groups, if they line up from around 4:30 a.m., though I warned them that pulling an all-nighter was no good."

"4:30 a.m.!? How many hours before the first train would that be?"

"There appear to be various options like staying at a nearby hotel or similar."

"Would they be able to find something like a free hotel room around here during this period of time?"

"Senpai, they are professionals, so you don't need to worry so much about them."

"No, look, they're professionals at violence, right? You'd also hate it if they got their hands on circle tickets through extortion or some such...no?"

"Ugh...I'd like to believe that they wouldn't fall back on such methods, though."

The common sense in the world of guards doesn't necessarily agree with Japan's common sense. Those guys give off an atmosphere that they'd do anything if it was for the sake of staying next to their protection target.

"Umm, the genre code seems to be 432, so they're going to be at East Hall 3."

The figures of men, who kinda look like Ayesha's guards, have been intermittently entering our visual field as we somehow manage to wrap up things at the reception just on time and enter the East Hall after receiving our stubs.

"Come on, they're already on standby!? Just how the hell did they pull that off?"

"Since I can't believe that they've entered through circle tickets, it's got to be directly through the organizers, or otherwise, through some company associated with Comiket. I don't know whether they got in as security or carriers, though."

Oh, I see. Security, huh? Sure, guards do qualify as security. It's just that they guard only one individual.

"Nothing less of professionals. Their approach to matters is completely different..."

If you consider it logically, their goal isn't to buy books, so they don't care about the means as long as they can somehow get in.

"Oh, senpai, it's over there."

Miyoshi blurts out and runs up to a booth manned by a small, somewhat fashionable woman with a short haircut of uniform length.

"Miyabi, long time no see. It's great that we've got nice weather today."

"Oohh, Azu-nyan! You're late! We're already done with setting things up." The woman called Miyabi lightly sticks her tongue out, putting her words into perspective, "Though we're just a puny circle, so we were done instantly anyway."

"Sorry, sorry. Also, stop calling me like that. So, what about Shii-yan?" ⁷

"Well, you see, as soon as we put out the samples, she immediately dashed for the changing room." She says as if it's the usual while shrugging.

Usually, the changing rooms for cosplayers are available after 10 a.m., but circle members can use them first from 7:30 to 9 a.m.

"Even though she's running a booth all by herself?"

"She told me that she'd leave the combined booths to me."

"That girl never changes!"

"No kidding. So, Azu-nyan, who is that middle-aged guy over there and the beauty over here?"

"The middle-aged guy is my senior from my former workplace. Right now he is....I wonder?"

My face cramps up a bit over being called middle-aged, but I immediately pull myself together, and greet Miyabi.

"I'd say we're something like co-workers. I'm called Yoshimura. Thanks for the tickets today."

"Ooohh! Totally like a working adult! I'm Tasuku Sae. A friend of Azu-nyan's time at the

⁷ If you don't know, Azu~nyan is the nick of an Azusa appearing in K-On Bu

university."

Once I pull a confused face, wondering whether it's some kind of pen name as she had introduced herself as Miyabi at first, she tells me that it's become Miyabi ever since "Tasuku Sae" is misunderstood as "Tasukusa Miyabi" each time she meets someone for the first time."

"And so, over here we've got a genuine Indian high-class lady. She's called Ayesha."

"I'm Ayesha. Nice to meet you."

"Oohh, you speak Japanese?"

"Yes, a bit."

"English will work best with her."

"Don't ask me to speak a foreign language, okay?"

Ms. Miyabi throws her chest out, saying, "Japanese people just need to be able to speak Japanese!", but in the end she starts speaking with Ayesha in broken English. For some reason addressing others in crappy English despite knowing that Japanese will get through often happens with Japanese people.

"So, who's Shii-yan?"

"Orihara Shiori. She's the one scheduled to make 'that' for you, senpai."

"Hey, with 'that', you mean...No way! And on top of it, in this place?"

"Not a chance! It comes after you guide Ayesha, afterwards. She's a crafty one. So, please look forward to the finished product."

With those words, she asks Ms. Miyabi, who's got an incomprehensible conversation going with Ayesha, "So, is Shii-yan surrounded in the garden or something?"

"It's before the opening, you know? No matter what, that'd be way too early. The changing rooms are at East 8, and seeing how she hasn't come back here, she must be mingling with her cosplayer buddies at the truck yard over there, no?"

"Okay, I'll go take a look."

"She'll come back eventually even if you leave her alone. There will be an inspection."

"Well, it's a rare opportunity, so that's why."

『Ayesha, we're planning to head over to a girl doing cosplay for a bit. What are your plans?』

Since several Smiths have approached, it might be okay to let her do as she likes.

『Cosplay? I'll go, definitely! I've got to enjoy the festival!』

『It hasn't started as of yet, though』

"Oh, talking in English makes you sound kinda brainy. Azu-nyan, since when did you get so fluent in it!?"

"The latest science theses are almost all in English, so yeah. Anyway, we're off. See ya."

"Have a good time."

Once we enter the cosplay area, Ayesha gets surprised by the multitude of cosplaying and diversity.

『I've heard that such events are taking place in India as well, but as might be expected, we've got nothing on such a grand scale』

While scanning the venue, she's walking all over the place full of curiosity without a goal in mind, but since the swarm of Smiths seems to be sticking with her, we let her do whatever she likes as it's gotta be alright anyway.

"Oh, oh, Lady Azusa, it's been a long time ~ssu."

Once I turn around to the voice suddenly thrown in our direction, I spot a tall, well-proportioned woman with great style wearing a pink wig and a flashy, black goth costume.

Lady?

"Yoo-hoo, Shii-yan. You alright? Still, what's that outfit?"

"Kukukuku, I have arranged the ultimate Madoka of Mado ☆ Magi in gothic style. I have tried to go with black on purpose. Lady Azusa, your order seems to use the 25th anniversary public version as a base? At the same time it is a bit of a practice."

"Using a drape with a bothersome skirt. That's so you, Shii-yan."

"I can confidently say that it has come out well, but the problem is—" The largely-built woman says while looking dejected. "that no one realizes this to be Ultimate Madoka. *sob sob*"

"Shii-yan, someone like Madoka doesn't suit your character, does it? You've gotta go with a far more adult woman, okay?"

"Cuteness is justice, right!?"

"If it's got to be black, at least go with Demon Homura."

"It is somewhat unreasonable to use a gothic dress for that one."

While feeling like I've seen a completely new side of Miyoshi thanks to this conversation I don't get at all, the woman called Shii-yan suddenly turns my way.

"So, this gentleman over there is?" ⁸

Gentleman?

"Ah, nice to meet you. I'm Yoshimura."

She draws closer as Miyoshi nods, and starts to touch my body all over.

"E-Eehh!?"

"I see, I see. In contrast to your appearance, you have some nice muscles!"

(Hey Miyoshi, is this girl really okay?)

(That's her taking measurements. Please stay obedient and let her get her fill.)

(This would definitely be labeled as sexual harassment if the genders were swapped.)

Afterwards, she even jots something down in a notebook with a pen while thoroughly checking my body, but then she closes that notebook with a thud, stands on tiptoes while stretching her back to make herself taller, and looks up to the ceiling while spouting, "Mumumumu~! Creativity is welling up within me!"

"Lately it has been nothing but anime clothes. I have started to tire a bit of those!"

At that point, Ayesha returns, and happily scrutinizes Shii-yan's cosplay outfit while going around and around her.

"One of your acquaintances, Lady Azusa?"

"An Indian high-class lady, I'd say."

"Ooohh, a high-class lady ~ssu?"

"Yes! I became his queen!"

Ayesha did some cosplay - you could probably call it like that - the day before yesterday. She probably wanted to say that she became a princess of curry, but as a result of her mistaking princess and queen, it's taken on a somewhat questionable meaning.

"Haah? Umm—" Shii-yan looks our way. "—you've become his queen?"

Hearing that, Miyoshi spontaneously bursts out into laughter, just to hold her stomach to endure laughing any louder. Ayesha tilts her head to the side, confused about what's wrong.

⁸ This girl uses classic Japanese in her speech patterns. Probably imitating some kind of wannabe-samurai or something like that. Her usage of words reflects that since it includes classic/archaic Japanese, but also some weird accents. Unfortunately my English skills are too lacking to reflect this, if it's actually possible to do so in the first place.

『Ah, Ayesha, she thought that you've just now said that you've become my queen』⁹

『Eeehhh!?』, Hearing that, Ayesha's face turns bright red, and she flaps her hand while repeatedly saying, 『You wrong, you wrong, you're wrong』, in a fluster

"Haaah, so, Shii-yan, what are your next plans?" Miyoshi faces her while wiping a tear away.

"Well~ As might be expected, it's about time for me to retire as cosplayer ~ssu. It's the perfect opportunity since the Heisei era has just come to an end as well." Shii-yan says with her arms folded while smiling in a slightly sad way. "Fortunately, I have reached a point where plenty of orders are coming in, so I was thinking that it might be a good idea to open a sewing workshop for cosplay outfits."

"Huh? What about your company?"

"Well, stopping all of a sudden looks to be slightly unreasonable in regards to my funds ~ssu."

"Oh, that fits perfectly then, Shii-yan."

Miyoshi looks back my way, and once I nod lightly, I speak to her telepathically.

(Do it skilfully so that we can't be traced back as financiers)

(Gotcha. Since there will be a shutdown soon, please head back to the previous booth first, senpai)

(Shutdown?)

(It's something similar to a wait time before the opening. We'll become unable to leave the section)

(Roger)

Miyoshi calls her over to the edge of this area, and starts to speak about something with her. I can't hear what they're talking about, but once I see Shii-yan's surprised face, I can tell that it's very likely about the investment. Well, since it looks like it'd get immediately exposed that she's made 'that' for me if there's a connection between us and her funds, it'd be bad to handle it in the same way as we did with Midori's place.

『Kaygo, Kaygo, this is going to continue for three days? Even on New Year's Eve?』

『It seems the staff will change, but yeah』

『Eehh? All of those people at the desks lining up in rows?』

『Seems so』

『Hee~』

⁹ This is a Japanese word play. Kare means he/him, whereas karee is the katakana for curry.



As I'm watching people flooding the outer circumference after the opening announcement while feeling dumbfounded, Ayesha addresses me with a serious expression.

『Somehow, it's scary』

She's right. There's a kind of frenzied atmosphere immediately after the opening. But—

『There's not much of a difference to be chased by a cow, slide down a hill road on a big log, or having tomatoes and oranges seriously thrown at you』

『Really? I suppose that's the vibe of a festival』

『Festivals are originally events to pray and thank for a good harvest, that's why』

The harvest in this festival are booklets and goods, though.

『Oh, so this is a festival in modern Japan』

With those words, Ayesha heads over to a nearby booth to take a look.

"Senpai, somehow I get the feeling that Ayesha excitement is heading in a slightly wrong direction. Is it really going to be alright?"

"You know those mysterious stunts they do at teppan-yaki restaurants that claim to serve Japanese food in foreign countries? Just like those, it'll be fine as long as she enjoys herself, even if it's based on a lie."

"You sure?"

While casting a sidelong glance at Miyoshi's doubtful face, I pick up a book from Ms. Miyabi's stand for some reason, and flip through it—

"Bfft!"

I reflexively spit out, put it back in a hurry, and whisper to Miyoshi who's nonchalantly sitting there, "Oi, Miyoshi. Are the booklets around here possibly aimed at BL fans?"

"I think most of them, why?"

"What? Allowing Ayesha to look at such stuff—"

Just when I try to question whether it's okay for her to see it, a loud voice reaches us from slightly ahead.

『W-Wh-What is this!?!』

At that moment, a circular space forms around her as the Smiths go into action.

Even if she can't read kanji at all, the latent impact conveyed through the illustrations is nothing to scoff at. When it comes to how a sheltered high-class lady would react when reading a booklet aimed at BL fans—

"We didn't consider things up to this point, huh...?"

"Now it's too late, though."

Damn, this girl is treating it as if it's someone else's affair — I slip out of the circle's space in a hurry, and rush over to Ayesha.

『Ayesha, calm down!』

『K-Kaygo! J-Just what is this!? Ah, right, I must contact Papa and have him burn down this place!』

With a bright red face, Ayesha staggers as her eyes spin around.

『Wait! Wait, Ayesha! This is culture! Yes, it's because it's culture!』

『C-Cultureeee!?』

『I-I mean, look, it exists in your country as well, doesn't it? The sexual art of, umm, Kama Sutra, and similar!』

Kama Sutra is the most famous among the ancient Indian Sanskrit texts on sexuality. Its second book contains extremely open and detailed descriptions about sexual intercourse, but the author has clearly stated that it's not aiming for lust. But then again, my modern, corrupted mind asks itself why he wrote it in the first place then.

"Vatsyayana's?"

(Miyoshi, what's Vatsyayana?)

(The author, Kama Sutra's author.)

『C-Correct. There's also exist many maithuna statues, right?』

Maithuna are basically statues depicting sexual acts between men and women. To summarize them, it'd be generally proper to think of them as statues fucking each other in amazing positions. Having said that, their numbers aren't that high either...

『N-Now that you mention it...』

Yay, she bought it!

When I cast a glance around us, I see how the Smiths prevent people from turning their smartphones at us to take pictures by standing in the way and shaking their heads as we stand in the stage-like free space. Well, they've probably worked in places where their target might be shot by guns, so they should be used to dealing with such scenes.

Ayesha, who has apparently managed to calm down in the meanwhile, stiffly lifts her face, and declares, 『I-If it's culture, then it can't be helped!』

『Figures, right?』

『I-I must also study Japan's culture!』

"Hah?"

I don't get what she's trying to say there, but I'm immediately assailed by a very, very bad feeling.

(Is this going to end in the typical high-class lady template?)

(Hey, why are you acting as if it's got nothing to do with you——)

『B-Buy everything, from here to over there!』

Ayesha directs the Smiths while pointing from one end to the other of the tables. Probably because some of the people around us and at the booths understand English, they cheer as soon as they hear her say this.

"Wait, that sounds just like some oil magnate..."

I drop my shoulders in dejection in front of a mountain of booklets that gets piled up in no time.

"Senpai, that's bad. Ayesha is going back home today, no? If she comes back while carrying this many books, it'll be next to impossible to gloss it over, no matter how you think about it. If her Papa learns about us having taught her something like that, we're going to be erased, aren't we?"



Urgh! She's got a point!

"Ah, we'll send it to her later or some such..."

"Senpai, please look at Ayesha. She's definitely going to take them home with her."

"Yeah..."

A great amount of booklets loaded in a heap on her family's private jet. Ayesha's papa checks it, wondering what it might be. And his reaction when he finds out about the true identity of those booklets — just imagining it is already terrifying.

"Private jets almost never go through security checks. Since you can also say that CIQ (formalities for customs, immigration, and quarantine) is a non-issue in such cases as well, I don't think that she'll run into any problems there, but if her Papa finds those...I wonder, how he's going to view it in light of their religiousness?"

"No matter how lax he may be, these things are sometimes too much of a hurdle for Japanese people as well... Even if you call it LGBT, it'll probably not work out in the end, I think."

"It's basically yaoi after all."

"How is their side handling art or idolatry again?"

"The reason for idolatry being forbidden mostly stems from the Book of Exodus, so it's a no go in Judaism, Christianity, and the Islam. Hinduism should be no problem as it has statues of its gods."

"Huh? Idolatry is forbidden in Christianity? Despite the huge amount of crosses, paintings, and statues?"

"It doesn't seem to be the case with protestants. And with catholics, they label those as 『symbols』 instead of 『idols』."

"Hee?"

It looks like it's a 『symbol』 if you look at God himself through a statue, and an 『idol』 if that doesn't apply, or something like that.

"So you're saying it's a question of faith?"

"I guess?"

Then I suppose it'd mean that the great majority of people, who're probably regarding those as pieces of art, are worshiping idols which is a taboo according to Cristian rules... While it's not really my cup of tea, it makes me actually worry that the number of believers would fall drastically because of that. As expected, religion is way too difficult. It'd be completely impossible for me.

"If you look at the decorative ceiling paintings in the Sistine Chapel, even I feel like becoming pious, but——"

Ummm...I'm remembering it to this day, but my impression when I saw that for the first time was that Adam had a small dick. Back then I was still at the beginning of elementary school, okay? Okay!?

"—would a faith detection device sell if we made one?"

"Well, I'm sure it's going to disappear in the darkness of history, definitely. In the first place, how do you plan to detect something like that?"

"Wouldn't it be enough if the value is always 0?"

"Now listen..."

『Kaygo, Kaygo! I can't carry them! H-e-l-p m-e!』

『Come on, Ayesha. Just how many do you plan to buy anyway?』

『It's a research of Japan's culture! It's inevitable!』

There's like no way for us to store them in <Safe> or <Storage>. Since there's no helping it, we borrow the space of Shii-yan, who hasn't come back from cosplaying, to pile them up in the back. Given that it's half of a long table's worth of space, it's very cramped, but because most of her luggage is stored in the cloakroom, it somehow leaves enough room.

As the venue will be opened up for people to freely come and go as they please around noon, I think it'll be okay to have the Smiths carry her goods to the team's car parked outside.

"Senpai, I feel sorry for the for teppan-yaki restaurants, but I've got nothing to do with this."

"You know, you've been the one who brought her here while saying that you're going to introduce her to modern Japan, no?"

"...Let's consider it as being better than Big Sight being burned down then."

"...You're right, I suppose."

While chasing the Smiths busily buying up books all over the place, I'm assaulted by - how to call it? - a weird, abnormal feeling. Then again, this place is abnormal to begin with.

"Still, those guys look like simple cosplayers in this place, don't they?"

"They're merely men wearing black suits and sunglasses, though."

I try to ask Ayesha, whom I made sit down in Shii-yan's circle space as she's apparently calmed down at long last, what has been irking me. It's possible that I'll be killed by her Papa if this is a taboo topic, though.

『Hey, hey, Ayesha, it's considered culture here, but is Hinduism okay with BL?』

I've seen maithuna statues depicting 3Ps and 4Ps, but I've never seen man x man.

『BL?』

『Umm, how to describe it? Homosexual love?』

I somehow feel like it has a slightly different nuance, but I've got no better explanation.

『There exists things like Hijira, and I don't think that it's that much of a taboo. Leaving aside the past, the Supreme Court has ruled this year's summer that intercourse between the same sexes isn't illegal any longer』

Hijira is an androgynous being described as originally being bisexual. Nowadays, most crossdressing men seem to be affiliated with Hijira. But, I suppose these matters were contested at the Supreme Court...

『Hee』

"Unexpectedly it sounds like they're safe."

"Safe...? Those?"

It was only a little later that the people of distant stands started to come to Ayesha, who was treated as someone related to a real oil magnate because of the Smiths continuing to buy up everything, while carrying present books. Ayesha naturally bought them while looking very happy. But, did 'present' have such a meaning? And after buying up all the remaining books of the combined booth of Shii-yan and Miyabi, whom we had inconvenienced, at the end, Ayesha got their autographs, said 『I'll be back!』 with a satisfied expression, hopped into the big car that came to pick her up, and went home. Of course it wasn't a limo or a sedan since they had to store plenty of cardboard boxes onto it. The Smiths were a truly capable group of men.

After we saw them off with dry smiles, we left Big Sight as well. This place was undoubtedly one of the world's most intense places. People visiting this place without some kind of resolve will suffer crushing blows in various ways.

In the evening of the same day, we had some fun seeing SNS being flooded with titles such as 『The daughter of an oil magnate!』, but I got slightly surprised that they connected Ayesha, who was the centerpiece there, with the 『Princess of Curry』 who had appeared in Akihabara several days ago.

Miyoshi laughed at that, saying, "Nothing less of internet folks."

— **Yoyogi-Hachiman Office** —

"Pheew...somehow, it was a really amazing place...I'm completely pooped now."

"What's with you, senpai. You totally act like an old man. Everyone is visiting that place twice a year."

"That's the issue! It takes place way too often, no? In the first place, it's impossible to go around this damn huge venue in one day, wouldn't you say?"

"That's why people form minute plans on their schedule in advance with one hand always holding the catalog."

"What kind of war is that supposed to be...?"

Scared by the crowd of people, we gave up on public transportation, and splurged by taking a taxi from Ariake while completely exhausted.

"Huh? The lights are on in the office?"

"Isn't that because Ms. Naruse has visited?"

"Come to think of it, she didn't show up for a while after finishing the translations since Ayesha came over."

Even though we could have advanced our preparations thanks to the JDA having welcomed the New Year's holiday - despite having to work on the matter with the D-Card checker - we didn't get ready in any way to deal with them. Society isn't in danger of a collapse, is it?

"I had her investigate the registration of the intellectual property rights for the stat measurement device while we were spending time with Ayesha."

"Hee, that's an exclusive deputy chief for you. It's hard for me to imagine that the Dungeon Management Department controls intellectual property rights, but I suppose she'll handle such matters as well, huh?"

"Kinda like a concierge, right?"

"You're saying she won't turn us down, no matter what we might ask of her?"

"...Hearing this out of your mouth, it somehow sounds like the line of a perverted middle-aged man, senpai."

"How cruel!"

We get off the taxi and walk across the short approach while having such a silly conversation. I've never imagined even in my wildest dreams that I'd be exposed to something like this the instant I opened the door.

"We're home."

Once I climb the entrance porch and open the door, Ms. Naruse lowers her head with a force as if performing a dogeza.

"I'm terribly sorry!"

""Pardon?""

On that day, our party was forced to climb the stairway to the next stage.

§080 Epilogue

— Shibuya District - Jinnan —

"Haru~yan, this one's going to be difficult." A plump, bespectacled man tossed the proposal, printed on an A4 paper, on the table in a section on NHK's broadcast center.

"Why? Ever since that epitaph site has been published, stuff like <Mining>, safe areas, and not to forget, telepathy has become common knowledge, right? We're at the beginning of the dungeon era!" The man talking so excitedly while wildly flapping his hands without sparing his proposal even a single glance was Yoshida Haruki, a self-alleged dungeon researcher.

'Going as far as trying to call myself like that in an attempt to go along with the dungeon boom is fine and all, but despite business coming around to join the hype at long last, the term 'dungeon' has completely vanished from TV.

'Thanks to America's Team Simon having cleared the Evans dungeon the other day, TV stations have somewhat started to show faint hints of interest again. And the video of the 『Wandering Mansion』 uploaded by the JDA recently has an impact going far beyond everything Hollywood could produce. That's a gold cow. I'm absolutely sure. I wanted to ask for a collaboration of the video's filmer, but the JDA has been blocking, not releasing anything about them.

"I mean, look, this is going to be perfect for commercial broadcast if you put it on satellite television, right? It's somewhat out of our league." The bespectacled man comments while pointing at the proposal, "What if you bring it up with National Geographic, Discovery...or even better, Netflix?"

"Those would need connections. If public broadcasting is no option, I could talk with some commercial broadcast stations."

"True...let's see, I think Ishizuka might be willing to produce it. There was also the revival boom of Kawaguchi Hiroshi Tankentai. Wouldn't he consider it if you go at it from that angle?" ¹⁰

"Man, that's a story from ten years ago. Moreover, he didn't do any documentaries, but variety for heaven's sake!"

¹⁰ Ishizuka Hidehiko was an actor, and has been active as a solo producer since the late 90s. I'm not sure if he's meant here but since I couldn't find anything else fitting, let's spin with that. The Tankentai (Exploration Party) has English search entries. It's a TV show from the early 2000s and before, where some dudes go explore caves, jungles and deserts as some huge adventure production. If you want to know more, you can buy the DVDs :p

"Nowadays dungeon documentaries simply won't draw an audience."

'That's why I brought this proposal to you,' Yoshida clamped down on his teeth. 'With public broadcasting having a free license, they won't pay as much attention to viewers as commercial broadcasters. Currently there's little value to dungeon news. Even recently, with the clearing of Evans having become a hot topic, the progress on the dungeon captures, and the development based on dungeon loot, it remains a fact that most of the TV stations don't pick up on any of the dungeon-related information.'

'After all, explorations often go south, and it has the big issue of looking rather plain since it simply provides no nice pictures. If you add all of these together, it's bound to lead to the current situation.'

"Besides, are there any high-leveled explorers who would accompany such a troublesome project? Isn't it kinda impossible to employ them with a vague promise that it might be possible to earn some cash? I mean, the destination is the 10th floor and below, no?"

"I've set my eyes on a candidate in Yokohama."

"Yokohama?"

"Yeah, it's the one who always dove into GachaDun until it got regulated. Since they're working as YouTuber right now, they should have some publicity as well."

"Humph. Anyway, it'd be great if you could skilfully wrap them round your lil' finger."

"It'll be good to go with a special TV program in the beginning."

"In any case, it'd be best if you first prepare a pilot if you're going to suggest such a project."

"I know."

"I think a documentary is bound to fail, though. If you were to go with a mockumentary at least..."

A mockumentary was a production method where a fictional story was faked as a documentary.

"Leave it to me."

Yoshida listened to the other man's opinion while only getting angrier by the moment.

— India - Mumbai —

The sound of someone coming down the corridor reached Ayesha's ears as she seriously flipped through a booklet while gulping. In a hurry, she hid the booklet away, opened the book she had been reading the other day, and sipped on her black tea while pretending to be calm.

Ayesha greeted Ahmed, who entered her room after knocking to see how his daughter was doing, with a sweet smile, and asked him a question she had come up with in advance as he possessed a rather broad range of knowledge.

『Say, Papa』

『What is it, Ayesha?』

『Do you know what Attack-Only is about?』¹¹

『Attack-Only?』

'What could she be talking about? Maybe it's about earnestly keeping buying up without caring about interventions by your rivals?

He cast a glance at the book his daughter was reading. It was 『Fish and Dragons』 by Lithuania's Undinė Radzevičiūtė.

'If I'm not mistaken, it won a literary price in the EU in 2015.

He was doubtful whether such a term would show up in that work, but since he knew that the second part was written in a modern setting with three generations of women living in one apartment, he suspected that the author might have used that word somewhere in there. The mother was an erotic novel writer, but he couldn't imagine even in his wildest dreams that this word could stem from that direction.

『I'm not really familiar with it, but wouldn't it be about launching combined attacks from all kinds of directions?』

『Combined attacks?』

『Yes. Taking company acquisitions as an example: I'd say it describes the willingness to employ even methods such as leaking unfavorable information about your competitors, and legally pressuring them and the bank behind them before the trade, all to advance with the buy-out without a hitch. But, what about it?』

『It's just heard that people like you are attack-only, Papa』

'What's up with that?

『I've got that kind of an image? However, I do believe that I'm doing my best to keep the takeovers as fair as possible』

『Hee, just as I've expected from you』

¹¹ This is a BL term and localizes terribly since it's based on connotations in JP. Here a wiki excerpt so you understand the joke behind the following part: "The two participants in a yaoi relationship (and to a lesser extent in yuri)[94] are often referred to as seme (攻め, lit. "top", as derived from the ichidan verb "to attack") and uke (受け, lit. "bottom", as derived from the ichidan verb "to receive"). These terms originated in martial arts, and were later appropriated as Japanese LGBT slang to refer to the insertive and receptive partners in anal sex.[95] The seme is often depicted as restrained, physically powerful, and protective; he is generally older and taller, with a stronger chin, shorter hair, smaller eyes, and a more stereotypically masculine and "macho" demeanour than the uke. The seme usually pursues the uke, who often has softer, androgynous, feminine features with bigger eyes and a smaller build, and is often physically weaker than the seme."

She stood up and started to brew black tea for her father.

『Where is Soldea?』

Soldea was the maid taking care of this house.

『I wanted to be alone, so I had her step back after just preparing everything』

Hearing that, Ahmed nodded, and happily said with a bright smile, 『Ooohh, then I can look forward to tasting the tea you're personally brewing for me, right?』

『Mind though, Soldea is better at it』

『Still, I can feel that yours is going to be more tasty』

『Aww, Papa, you flatterer』

Ayesha's light laughter echoed throughout the room. Afternoon at the Jain's was filled with a calm and happy atmosphere, the room being wrapped up in a gentle sunlight. It even gave one the impression that it'd continue like this for eternity.

At least, as long Ahmed wouldn't try asking anyone about 『Attack-Only』...



NAME: ジョシュア=リッチ

DATA: Joshua Rich / man / age 30 / 188cm

He gives one a slightly cunning impression, but with his carefree smile, he's an excellent scout of Team Simon. While clad in a somewhat languid atmosphere as characteristic of rich men, he, who deals with women like a noble, seems to have had such a multitude of flashy love affairs that it regularly earns him Natalie's ridicule. You might as well describe him as the perfect example of a rich boy from a prestigious family turning into an adult while doing whatever he pleases.



NAME: **サイモン=ガーシュウィン**

DATA: Simon Gershwin / man / age 28 / 182cm

The ace of the DAD (Dungeon Attack Department) and a former member of the Delta Force. He has a light, jovial demeanor as it's characteristic of Latin people, and his brown eyes, who allow anyone to sense his humor, let others feel his friendless, but at the same time he can kill other people in cold blood. Even if he acts brazenly, like visiting D-Powers' office just to drink Miyoshi's coffee, he's the kind of nice guy who is forgiven as if it's the most natural thing in the world.



NAME: ナタリー=スチュワート

DATA: Natalie Stewart / woman / age 26 / 176cm

She's the lone woman in Team Simon and a skilled fire magic practitioner. Because her Papa was part of the marines, she was raised in Yokosuka until the age of 12. For this reason she speaks Japanese fluently. With her blond hair and blue hair, she's the typical Caucasian woman in the eyes of Japanese people. While possessing such alluring beauty, she also boasts of a terrifying career, seeing how she hails from DEA's FAST. It looks like Orient and Occident doubtlessly believe in the proverb that beautiful roses are endowed with thorns. Well, recently roses without thorns have been bred, too.



NAME: **メイソン=ガルシア**

DATA: **Mason Garcia / man / age 27 / 195cm**

Just as his name suggests, he charges at enemies like a spear. As front guard of Team Simon, he's a great guy who thinks about his comrades and is slightly delicate, unlike what you'd expect from his huge frame. He hates bothering himself with thinking about complicated stuff, so he completely leaves this part to his team mates. In this regard, you might as well call him a forest bear. The good part about him is that he doesn't eat others right away or anything like that when meeting them, unlike Joshua and Simon.

