







「ステータスがありますよ」  
それを断定する三好に、美川は思わず食ってかかった。

「それはあなたの思いこみなどではなく」  
「挙手、質問をお願いします。次の方」

美川が訊こうとしたことは、科学系記者全員の疑問だった。

「東京TVの養村です。  
三好さんの仰るステータスは、  
存在が証明されたものですか？」

「世間の研究がどうなっているのかは知りませんが、  
それがあることは事実です。  
弊社の開発では、様々なイノベーションを予定していますが、  
その第一弾は——  
三好がここそばに溜めた。狙ってやがったな、あいつ。」

「——ステータス計測デバイスです」  
「ステータス……計測?!」

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**“fay çe que vouldras”**

—— *Gargantua et Pantagruel / François Rabelais*

## **§081 Prologue 12/28 (Fri)**

### **— Harbor District - Daiba —**

"Thank you very much for giving me some of your time today." A pleasant, well-dressed man bowed with a smile as if to hide the exhaustion on his face in one of the smaller conference rooms of JCTV. "You have heard the outline from Takanawa, so now I would like to propose a dungeon exploration TV project."

'My hands were tied here since I had some spare time before the end of the year by chance, but for him to show up here with a presentation during a last minute appointment just when I wondered whom NHK's Takanawa had introduced to me yesterday... Is he in some kind of hurry, or maybe he gets things done quickly...? Yoshida Haruki, eh? Wasn't he a TV star in the past?

While absent-mindedly pondering about such things, Producer Ishidzuka listened to Yoshida's explanation.

'Sure, he's not wrong there. Starting with the skill orb auctions, there was that sensational video, and also the publication of that Heaven's Leak-something site, so there might be enough of a foundation to gather public attention with content related to dungeons again. Moreover, as it's treated as half-past its prime in the media, the other outlets are rather slow on the uptake except for a minority group of journalists still focused on it.

'But, people are drawn to the unknown.

'Dungeons being treated as past its prime as content for TV stems from it having lost its freshness as all the information that could be obtained safely while drawing the viewer's interest has already been used up. Though it'd probably be a different matter if miraculous phenomenons or the worlds found within movies and anime were to appear in reality.

'Of course, I doubt it'll be possible to avoid the risk of casualties, but that'll also be fine as long as the story sells. If something happens, it'll be just fine if all the blame falls on the guy in front of me. In this business, everyone, to a greater or lesser extent, grabs the best parts out of the good stuff. Someone limiting themselves from doing that simply isn't suited for this kind of job. Even if it's going to get regulated later on, it's first come first served in the end.

"—So, after having heard the project's details, what do you think about it?"

"Hmm..."

'『Live News』 are going to be majorly reorganized into a unified format starting with the first half of next year at JCTV. It should also be accompanied by a corresponding shuffling of the program schedule for the late night time slot.

"It depends on the content, but we could insert a special TV show during the blank when we're replacing our programs. If it's received well, it might be possible to aim for something along the lines of a 3% share in the late night time slot. Nowadays many companies also sell products using dungeon materials. If it's a show pretending to be somewhat hard news, it could possibly draw some sponsors as well.

"I've understood the concept. Assuming it'd get a GO, it might possibly start as a special show during the next program switch. However, since it's content we haven't done before, I believe the production team is going to hesitate with nothing concrete in hand."

"You mean you want me to prepare a pilot?"

"I won't tell you to try the impossible since there's not much time left, but——"

"No, please leave it to me. I will present you something by the beginning of next month."

"I see. I'm looking forward to it then." With those words, Ishidzuka held out his hand.



Having finished the meeting with Yoshida Haruki, Ishidzuka went down the stairway in front of JCTV's building, which was illuminated by bright sunlight shining through a gap between buildings, while pondering in detail about the programs in the late night variety show format which would likely get terminated, and the size of that format.

"Hmm?"

Taking out his mobile phone as it had started to vibrate interrupting his train of thought, he checked the caller's name, just to furrow his eyebrows and take the call while leaning against the handrail.

"Yes, Ishidzuka——"

"I quit."

However, what he heard from the other end of the phone line was an unexpected, short and angry declaration.

"Wha-? Himuro, my friend? Just when I thought that I haven't heard anything from you for a while, you're saying something like that out of the blue? What's wrong, buddy?"

"Just about everything, I'd say? Dude, you never told me that I'd have to deal with such a monster!"

Due to Himuro's all too sudden outburst, Ishidzuka had absolutely no clue what he was talking about.

"The only possibility coming to mind would be the matter requested by my bureau chief the other day, but did he get some complaints by Saito Ryoko's production company or something?"



"No, wait a sec."

"Stuff it! Anyway, I'm——"

Ishidzuka reflexively held the phone away from his ears as Himuro continued to scream something in an excessively loud voice, and clicked his tongue with a frown on his face.

"Hey, Himuro buddy, calm down a bit, will ya?"

Although he pressed the phone back against his ear when the voice on the other side of the line toned down a bit and tried to soothe him, it only caused Himuro to start yelling again, talking about nothing but incomprehensible stuff such as Duranta flowerpots and message cards. With things going like this, even Ishidzuka started to get irritated and raised his voice.

"I told you to calm down, didn't I!? Goddamn it!"

The many people going up and down the big stairs all reacted to his loud voice with a start, staring his way. He put on a gentle smile as if to tell the people that everything was alright, rushed down the stairs with the phone at his ears, and quickly walked towards the western promenade which had few pedestrians.

"So, Ryuuji, just what the hell happened?"

Just how he had talked with him as a friend during their university days, Ishidzuka addressed Himuro with his old nickname. Himuro's name was Takatsugu, but those close to him called him Ryuuji.

After staying silent for a while, he muttered intermittently, "...I-I should have t-thrown it away."

"Thrown away what?"

"That's...without me realizing, in my room...it even came with a message card!"

"Okay, but what?"

"The flowerpot! The one with the Duranta!"

"Duranta?"

Going by flowerpot, Ishidzuka guessed that it had to have something to do with flowers, but being told Duranta without knowing what it was and what meaning it held only deepened Ishidzuka's confusion.

"...They're taboo."

"Huh?"

"Now listen closely, Mako, I'll give you advice as your old university friend. Stay away from them."

"Them?"

"The ones you told you told me to investigate! Them!"

"Were you told something by Saito Ryoko's office?"

"No!"

Listening to Himuro frantically trying to explain that he wasn't talking about something so ordinary, Ishidzuka recalled the time when he covered obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD).

"Hey, Ryuuji, are you alright? A doctor——"

"Why don't you understand!?"

"Understand what?"

"I'm telling you! They, who live in that place, are not humans!"

"..."

No matter how and what Ishidzuka asked, he could only conclude that Himuro was suffering from OCD. Still, Ishidzuka couldn't make head out of tail what happened for Fireball Ryuuji to become like this.

"I got it. My bad, okay? You can stop working on this cas——"

"It's already too late."

"——Too late?"

"That's why, withdraw from this right away so that at least you can live on. Understand?"

Once Himuro said this with a voice sounding as if it came straight out of the netherworld, the phone went silent.

"...Hey, Ryuuji?" The instant he asked this, the connection was cut, only leaving the disconnect sound behind.

"So that I can live on, he says?"

The bright sunlight had vanished behind clouds at some point, and a stabbing cold wind caused his skin to shiver.

"So what the hell happened in the end!?"

Even if he got warned just now, this matter had already proceeded by him even using his connections to the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communication.

"Come to think of it, recently I kinda feel like being watched by something..."

Ishidzuka quickly lifted his face, scanning his surroundings. All people had vanished from the western promenade with him remaining all alone here, as if being the last man alive in this world. In spite of such a feeling welling up within him, it felt to him as though some kind of being was even now watching him through some window.

He looked up to the room where his chief should be, and started to regret having accepted this request as he hoped that he hadn't been roped into some kind of preordained accident.

— Ichigaya - JDA Headquarters —

Around lunch time, Naruse Miharuru visited the PR section of the Dungeon Management Department.

"Oh, what's wrong, Miharuru? The section chief isn't in right now, you know?"

"Eh? Really?"

"He seemed awfully busy for some reason or another since morning, running around between the departments." Miharuru's female coworker brought her face close, further whispering, "Isn't this kinda weird for our section chief who hates meetings like the plague?"

It was common knowledge that Saiga hated to attend meetings, but that didn't mean that he was uncooperative. After all, some egoist would never get promoted into management. He simply hated pointless meetings.

"Calling him a meeting hater is a bit unfair," Miharuru answered with a laugh, but she had an idea as to why he was running around since morning.



"They want to rent the big meeting room?"

"Yes."

The gate of Yoyogi Dungeon had been built quite a distance away from the actual dungeon entrance, resulting in the part referred to as the dungeon to encompass a fairly big space around the dungeon's real entrance. A building with special rental places such as locker and shower rooms had been erected on those grounds. The big meeting room was a fairly spacious room on the first floor of that building.

"If they want to rent it, it'd usually be more than enough to just hand in a written application form, wouldn't it?"



"No, it looks like they want to book it exclusively."

"Exclusively?"

The Dungeon Management Department certainly offered a service to lend out rooms for a set period of time, but the meeting rooms were ultimately shared facilities. They hadn't been set up under the assumption that they'd be lent out to someone for a long period of time.

"I'm told they're going to start a training program for explorers and want to use our facilities for that sake."

"What's up with that? Something like a training camp like athletes do every once in a while?"

Coaches, who heard that you could boost your abilities by working as an explorer, would sometimes hold training sessions in relatively safe areas of the dungeon, believing that the dungeon might have some influence on the athletes. If you were to give it a name, it'd be a dungeon version of high-altitude training. But then again, Saiga had never heard any reports that doing this had yielded any measurable results.

"I don't know the details yet, but it seems to be something for the sake of elevating the abilities of explorers over a short period of time. Ms. Miyoshi dubbed it 『Bootcamp』."

"Bootcamp?"

Bootcamps originally were training facilities of the US Army for new conscripts. Then again, nowadays this term was used to describe all kinds of military-styled training. Short-term, concentrated exercises becoming famous as 『Billy's Bootcamp』 had probably been the impetus for the term to become commonly known in Japan.

"So you mean a training facility for new explorers?"

"Going by the vibes I got from her talking about it, it sounded like it's going to be aimed at explorers above average..."

"Raising the abilities of such explorers over a short period? Is something like that even possible?"

'It's considered that explorers keep raising various abilities over a long period of time by killing monsters inside dungeons. As a matter of fact, physical examinations and body measurements carried out on explorers have shown results supporting that theory. However, it's not like measurable results appear after a short time.

"I have no idea, but they appear to be confident in the success of their idea."

Saiga leaned back into the chair's backrest, and folded his arms, revealing a brooding expression.

'It's something they wish to do, so they must have some kind of reason to believe that it'll work out. It definitely sounds interesting. However, the problem is going to be providing the shared space.

"That's why, chief..." Miharū hesitantly began to speak.

"What's wrong?"

"Umm, that is...actually, I've got a verbal message from Ms. Miyoshi..."

"Verbal message?" Saiga asked while sensing trouble brewing from Miharū's reserved attitude.

"She says, 『If you could arrange that room for us, we might be able to be on time with the device you asked for』."

"What!? Device means..."

"The D-Card Checker, right?"

Saiga groaned involuntarily.

"...That's how she's going to play it, huh?"

Saiga was certainly aware that he had been rather pushy in regards to this matter. Believing that he now reaped what he had sown, Saiga picked up the internal phone with a sigh.

"Saiga speaking. I'm sorry, but please tell me next year's bookings and the operative state of the meeting rooms."

Miharū watched her chief while feeling somewhat awkward. She knew the occupancy rate of the meeting rooms. The small and medium rooms were used quite frequently, but the big room was almost never used outside of bigger events. The one who had recommended Miyoshi to go for that room during their discussion was Miharū herself.

"Got it. Since that room is going to be used for another purpose from now on, cancel all of next year's bookings please. Yep. Yep, that's right. Okay, I leave it in your hands then. Thanks."

After putting down the receiver, Saiga looked at Miharū, and said, "We'll provide the room at a reasonable price. In exchange, I'd like them to push the D-Card Checker through as fast as possible."

"I'll inform them of this. It looks like they've planned to have a meeting with the manufacturer tomorrow morning to work out the supplied numbers, etc."

"You're saying they're going to work at full force over the New Year's holidays?"

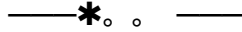
"Maybe."

"This sounds like it's going to get expensive..." Saiga smiled feebly.

'It doesn't seem like a good idea to be in D-Power's debt, but under the current circumstances, it's unavoidable.

"Then I'll tell them that the debt will be paid with the room."

"It'd be wonderful if it worked out like that."



Miharu and Saiga had such a conversation yesterday. Miharu suspected that her chief was now running around to arrange the permission for the usage of the big room and to prepare everything for the D-Card Checker.

"So, why are you here, Miharu?"

"Ah, I just thought I'd update the site while also reporting to the section chief."

"Eh? You mean the news department? Are you possibly talking about <Mining>?"

Miharu nodded lightly.

"So the verification has already finished. Or rather, did we actually dispatch a verification team in the first place?"

"Well, something like that."

"Something like that? Isn't secretiveness recently spreading in this department like a wildfire? I mean, there's the matter with our chief's busyness today. You mentioned giving a report, so you got to know something. Right?"

"Even if you ask me... Look, so far as it goes, I'm working as an exclusive deputy chief, so it's not like I'm aware of all that's going on around here."

"I see, I see. And you think I believe that? It's totally suspicious."

"There's nothing suspicious about it."

The voice of her coworker said, "Reporting, contacting, and consultation sure is important," into Miharu's back as she had started to walk away while waving a hand with a laugh.

"The D-Card Checker matter should be especially urgent. After all, today is the last work day of this year at the JDA. If everything that's possible isn't handled by today, the next steps will need to wait until the 4th January of next year, or if things go badly, until the 7th. Even if they start moving by then, I can't believe that they're going to be in time for the National Center Test.

"Miyoshi said that they'd go to discuss the number of devices, which could be manufactured, in the morning, but..."

When Miharu had stopped by, Ayesha was apparently still asleep, but the D-Power's duo was preparing to go out. Asking them why they were eating so much and charging so much electricity



for tomorrow, Miyoshi cracked a joke, telling her, "In reality we want to laze around, but thanks to the JDA, we've got to work like package mules from early in the morning," but Miharu had bitterly smiled at that since she knew that half of it was said seriously. This matter had suddenly come up in the evening of the day before yesterday, so Miharu already felt thankful for them accepting to deal with it at all.

Watching Ayesha's guards moving about very busily while making phone calls all over the place, Miharu had asked what was going on. In response, Miyoshi said with an amused twinkling in her eyes, "Those men are going to be in a huge predicament tomorrow early in the morning."

Because they had said that they'd go out somewhere tomorrow morning, Miharu believed those to be preparations for that outing, but as they were wrapped up by an abnormally frantic atmosphere, Miyoshi wondered whether working as VIP escort was such a difficult job.

"Ah, Mr. Sakurai!"

After spotting the person in charge of the net news, Miharu called out to him, handed him the memory card containing the information about <Mining>, which she had prepared in advance, and made sure that he'd get it published by today.

## **§082 Little Devils Do Little Traps 12/29 (Sat)**

— Yoyogi-Hachiman Office —

"I'm terribly sorry!"

What awaited us on that day, when we came back from the battlefield, was a sudden apology.

"No, wait a sec please. Even if you apologize all of a sudden, it doesn't tell us what's going on at all."

"Actually——"

She started to speak about the problem that had cropped up yesterday late at night. The origin of it all seems to have been a request for news coverage by the media.

"At first they asked to cover the explorer with the trade license that is linked to the orb auctions."

They were apparently turned down by the Dungeon Management Department without so much as a question asked, but it sounds like the TV station didn't give up, continuously asking for permission.

"Those requests completely stopped coming in a few days ago for some reason."

The people in charge over at the JDA were delighted that they had finally managed to get the media people to understand. But yesterday, which was the last work day of this year, they learned that things in this world never work out so conveniently.

"As it's a request by the media, it's usually passed over to the PR section of the Dungeon Management Department, but it looks like they brought it up directly to a director of the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications..."

That ministry controls everything related to broadcasting and telecommunications. That's why it's not unusual for a TV station to have some kind of connection with that ministry, but...the JDA got notified by various companies asking for a press conference from D-Powers as if everything was already set in stone.

"Press——" "——Conference?"

Hearing that, Miyoshi and I reflexively looked at each other.

"Hey, Miyoshi, how did you finish off that Himuro guy after that?"

"Eeeh? This and that are different stories, no? That guy stalked Ms. Saito, you know?"

"Your trade license ID and the address of this place were recorded in his notes, weren't they?"

"Yeah..."

If I'm not mistaken, we caught his attention when he followed Ms. Saito, but he was investigating Ms. Saito's teacher and not her, wasn't he? Still, how would that link Miyoshi's trade license ID with our address?

"What's going on with the security over at the JDA?"

Using that as a great opportunity, I ask about the leak of private addresses linked to a trade license and the disclosure of information related to D-Card holders; something that had already bothered me before.

Hearing my question, Ms. Naruse looks surprised and promises me to investigate it.

"By the way, you mentioned a director, but don't tell me it's..."

"...Yes, it was Executive Director Mizuho." Ms. Naruse admits apologetically.

Again that old dude... But, it's kinda amazing that he seems to be forgiven with "Well, it's Executive Director Mizuho, so that's why," despite doing as he pleases to such an extent.

"Did Executive Director Mizuho originally come from the ministry or something?"

"I hear he's from the old Ministry of Posts and Telecommunication. That's why he has many friends in the industry."

"So you're saying he acted all cool because he was asked by one of those friends?"

"Very likely."

That's what you call an authoritative announcement. It seems like he created a *fait accompli* while we can only look on in blank amazement. Still, it's not as though he can arbitrarily decide on the date and time. If he sets a time we can't attend, it'd result in a complete loss of face for the ones organizing the press conference.

"So they told you to come here and ask us for a date and time suiting our schedule?"

"...Yes."

"Hmm, somehow this all seems like a major pain in the ass. Let's just ignore it altogether..."

Don't we also have the option to publicly embarrass him?

"Ah, how should I put it...? To get straight to the point, I can't really recommend doing that since he's the type of guy who holds a grudge."

"He sure gives that impression, yep."



No wait, Miyoshi, you might be stating your impressions here like it's someone else's problem, but you're one of the people concerned, you know?

"Senpai, in the end, the media people just want to cover the sensational parts like the orb auctions and the prices for the winning bids, don't they?"

"Probably. At least those are the parts that would draw the public's interest."

Nowadays, the value of dungeon news is low. It's pretty obvious if you consider that news shows haven't even picked up the progress of the dungeon captures, the developments using loot items, or something like the Evans capture which became a hot topic recently. It makes sense, seeing how explorations often end up tragic, and even before that, it's a major issue that explorations are kinda plain since you can't obtain any nice, exciting pictures.

Speaking of pictures, the video of the 『Wandering Mansion』 the JDA uploaded on their site the other day seems to pull less attention after the initial flood of licensing requests.usage licenses. Well, it does have an impact because of its sensational content and numbers that are easy to understand.

"I think another reason is also the matter with Heaven's Leak."

"Huh? That's completely unrelated to us. We just applied for the domain as proxies."

"The other party is a ministry controlling Japan's electrical communication services, you know? If they feel like doing it, they should be able to find out everything they want."

"Eh? But, wouldn't that be a leak of confidential information?"

"That's why I said 『if they feel like doing it』, didn't I? But, in the end, we're only the owners of the domain and the server hosts. As that doesn't say anything about the translator, it's easy enough to stay evasive."

"Senpai, you're really clumsy at such things. Or rather, you pointlessly end up taking responsibility for things."

"It's because I'm an honest person! I'm pinning my hope on you, Miyoshi, when it comes to such things."

"Eh? Doesn't that make me sound like I'm a black-hearted schemer?"

"No, no, no, not at all, Miyoshi-kun! You're a splendid——"

"Splendid what?"

Seeing Miyoshi smile cheerfully, I quickly surrender, and avert my eyes. As soon as Miyoshi has dealt with me, she turns around to Ms. Naruse, and asks for confirmation, "Ms. Naruse, ultimately the JDA wants to hold a press conference with D-Powers, right?"

"Yes, that's correct."

Hearing that response, Miyoshi cracks a happy smile, "Kukukuku, senpai, let's take the opportunity to use this farce to the maximum."

Wait, girl, you are a black-hearted schemer after all.

"Use? Just what are you planning to do?"

"Well, you see, we'll get to do some great advertisement for our comp."

"Comp?"

Miyoshi nonchalantly answers, "Since they've simply asked for D-Powers, it won't be any problem for us to show up there as a company and not as a party, correct?"

Ah, pitiful ladies and gentlemen of the media, you'll be forced to participate in an advertisement show without even being able to ask what you want to ask. After all, the one running the auction is the party D-Powers, the corporate body's...hmm? Wait a sec.

"Hey, Miyoshi, does that mean that our company is going to have the silly name of D-Powers?"

"Now, now, senpai. Isn't that what you call 'in for a penny, in for a pound'?"

"In for a penny, eh...?"

If you look at it like I think that it's fine since it's easy to understand, even though I'm flabbergasted by her excessive way of phrasing it, it's pretty obvious that I've been corrupted by her as well...

"But, even if they're talking about news coverage, they're still free to not use it in the news. There isn't a saying that things will go as you expect."

"Senpai, I think it'll work out just fine." Miyoshi declares with an expression that brims with confidence, "You know, there are situations where you cannot avoid showing it in the news. After all, we're outside any common sense."

Ms. Naruse vehemently nods at that line.

In the end, we decided to actually do it as a company. The application has already been submitted without me even knowing about it, so that we can announce it at the press conference. Therefore, we set a date and time.

"Are we going to cover the D-Card checker device and so on as well then?"

"No matter how you look at it, it's a company project after all. It'd be unreasonable to insist on a stats measuring device being a party project or part of the dungeon tax."

"Oh, right. What happened to that?" Ms. Naruse claps her hands together as if having remembered just now.

"Tentatively, we had a discussion about it yesterday."

Yesterday we decided to use the afternoon for sightseeing allowing Ayesha to rest up from the Akiba-Curry-Tour, and thus went to Ms. Midori's laboratory in the morning.

— **Edogawa District - Tokiwa Lab (Previous Day)** —

"So — just what are you people thinking?"

On that day, we visited Ms. Midori's laboratory early in the morning to explain the email we'd sent the day before. It's about the matter with the device for identifying D-Card holders.

Hence it's inevitable for her to be completely baffled, seeing how we've suddenly brought up a new device while still being in a preparation phase of a release candidate (RC) for the stat measurement device to go into production.

"Well you see, I guess you could call it the shackles of social obligations?"

"Social obligations...you people actually know that concept?"

"To some degree, a bit."

"Still, this circuit is nice. It's very simple. Moreover, it looks like it's going to sell like hot cakes, unlike the stat measurement device, Chief." Mr. Nakajima's eyes are sparkling as he's looking at the circuit diagram.

It seems he's especially keen on the prospect of its high demand. After all, its potential customers are everyone running exams all over the world. The demand is unimaginably high.

"Haah...that part's okay, but what are you going to do about the case? The case! You're running out of time, aren't you? It's more than questionable whether the mold will be done within a month after you place the order."

"There's also the option of producing it with a 3D-printer, but the production speed wouldn't be all that attractive. Even if you raise the output with a FDM (Fusion Deposition Modeling), the whole would definitely become wobbly and shaky." Mr. Nakajima folds his arms, putting on a deeply pondering expression.

In response, I wave off his concerns and mention the idea I came up with yesterday, "Nah, I think the case can be handled with a PP pack from a 100-Yen store."

PP packs are box-shaped, white semi-transparent containers made out of polypropylene. You can often see them in use with a soft, user-friendly polyethylene cover attached.

"Whaaat!? The polypropylene ones? The ones used for storing foodstuff?"

"Yeah, those ones."

"Haha, come to think of it, I used those during my junior high days. Electronic devices with PP packs or paper boxes as cases!" Mr. Nakajima remembers happily.

As expected, he used them as well, huh? The casing for my first electronic device was an empty biscuit box, wasn't it? Men building electronic devices as a hobby exist everywhere.

"For making openings in a germanium radio when you got your parents to buy you your first soldering bolt?"

"Back in those days, crystal earpieces weren't really available."

Ah, I totally get him. Yep. Also, if you didn't properly ground it, no sound would come out. How nostalgic.

"Look, senpai, I'm happy that you found an electronic device building buddy and all, but can you quit with the reminiscences for now?"

"What, you didn't play with stuff like that?"

"I didn't. No woman caring about fashion, make-up and so on would ever dabble in such hobbies, you know?"

"Eeehh?"

As if you'd care about fashion, make-up and so on...is something I mustn't ever voice out, even if I might think so. That's an iron rule of the universe.

Ms. Midori interrupts our conversation with a serious retort, "No, wait a sec, a PP pack casing...how many do you guys intend to produce?"

"Hmm, what's the price for the electronics?"

"Let's see...it doesn't need any communication parts, and the verdict can be shown through a green and red diode. A power diode and switch. As for the rest, I'd say a button to start the check. The only sensor needed is going to be D132, so...huh? D132?" Nakajima furrows his eyebrows while looking puzzled. "Excuse me, Ms. Miyoshi, about this circuit here...why is the sensor used here a D132? As far as I can tell from the documents, it'd be cheaper...if you used a SCD28."

"Nothing less of you, Mr. Nakajima. It's just as you say."

"Are you going to adjust it then?"

"No, I'd like you to produce it with a D132." Miyoshi smiles meaningfully.

"Huh? Going by cost and performance, the SCD28 would be better suited for this, you know? Moreover, the filter over here is meaningless..."

"You're absolutely right. You can immediately tell as much as long as you know the software used

with this hardware."

"Eeehhh??" Mr. Nakajima stares at Miyoshi as if not understanding left from right.

"Look, Mr. Nakajima, this is a product that hasn't been announced officially. Moreover, we haven't obtained a patent for it either."

"That's true." Mr. Nakajima nodded as if saying that all would be fine if we just got the patent as soon as possible.

Miyoshi turns my way, and starts to speak with a serious expression, "Senpai, don't you think this request is slightly weird to begin with?"

"You mean the stuff about insiders we talked about yesterday?"

"Insiders?" Mr. Nakajima latches on while looking confused.

"Please try to consider it for a moment. If you asked someone about a method to check the existence of a D-Card out of nowhere, you'd usually be told that it's unfortunately impossible, wouldn't you?"

"I see."

No matter how troubled they might be, they would be forced to give up as they wouldn't be able to do anything about something that has no solution. In the first place, the ones taking the entrance exams are hardly affected by the disadvantages brought about by this issue. Those who are intent on cheating anyway, would only laugh at this measure. The only ones at disadvantage would be the students taking the exams seriously while liable to fail.

"Why are they so frantic about this issue despite there being no big disadvantage to those taking the exams?"

"That's because it's their job to guarantee fairness if there's a means to do so...I'd say?"

"True. But, even if the stat measuring device is able to identify that, it won't be in time for this year's Center Test, if you consider the product release schedule. In other words, you could actually say that a method to resolve this problem doesn't exist at the moment."

"Hmm, that makes sense."

"And yet, we suddenly received a huge amount of inquiries from institutes related to entrance exams from all over Japan. You can only think that someone induced or pressured them into approaching us." Miyoshi folds her arms, placing her left hand underneath her right elbow and raising the index finger of her right hand. "Wouldn't you say it's as if the goal is to distribute the device itself by making us produce it in a hurry?"

Hardly anyone knows about us having developed a stat measuring device. At most it's a few members of the JDA's staff. Moreover, we didn't publish a single piece of information about the details of the technology behind it. Mr. Nakajima and Miyoshi are the only ones on this planet who know all of the details. Even Ms. Midori and I only know the rough outline. Additionally, we



haven't even applied for a patent either.

"You're saying someone unconnected to us wants to obtain the technology?"

"Possibly."

Then Miyoshi looks back and forth between Mr. Nakajima and me, and while acting like a great detective, declares, "With that said, don't you think the information about this product is definitely going to be leaked to the outside?"

I feel like Miyoshi is worrying way too much, but she's certainly right that the request and all the inquiries have come very quickly. I mean, a mountain of emails were delivered to Miyoshi the very next morning after JDA's Section Chief Saiga brought up the idea with us.

Assuming someone leaked the information, although I don't know from where, it'd be only logical to assume they'd include the information on the device.

"Since that's how it is, I'd like you to use D132 for the device this time with a heap of filters that'll mess with the software. They should be extremely expensive and unsuited for this task. And it'd be ideal to use parts where only one, declining company holds the intellectual rights with the patent lock still being in effect for a long time to come."

Watching Miyoshi add, "While at it, it's important to go with filters and other parts that have been removed from the stat measurement device," Mr. Nakajima comments, "Ms. Miyoshi, do you hail from a family of strategists?" with an evil smile.

"Ms. Midori, is it really alright to leave these two to their own devices?"

"Be my guest and try to reign them in. I'll immediately employ you as a manager."

I glance at the two, who act like they're cooking up evil schemes in a secret hideout, and shake my head, "Impossible."

"See?"

Sure, even I'd be pissed off if there's really someone who's making us dance on their palm. But, watching those two, I can only feel something like pity for them..

"—Anyway, if you use a PP package as a casing, the cost per device should be something between 4,000 and 5,000 Yen. The rest would depend on how much you have to pay as wages for assembling it."

"Okay, that's going to set the selling price at 100,000 Yen, I guess."

Hearing that, Ms. Midori and I immediately blurted out,

"100,000 Yen? That's twenty times the production costs!"

"No, you people are screwing around here, aren't you? I mean, it's 100,000 Yen for a set of three

LEDs, two switches, and a PP pack casing. Are you sure that's going to fly?"

"The circuit board for a 140,000 Yen CD Player is the same as for one that costs 200,000 Yen. You hear such stories more than often enough, don't you? But that's not what matters here." Miyoshi berates us with a smug expression.

However, I feel like only the processing of the digital components was the same in CD players. Either way, she's correct about that not being the part that matters.

"Senpai, in a case like this, most of the cost goes into finishing it as fast as possible. Look, if things go badly, Mr. Nakajima will become unavailable to do the work at Midori's place for a while."

"Eh? I-I will leave? Due to this?"

"How about a back margin of 20,000 Yen per device?"

"Please count on me!"

Having watched that exchange, Ms. Midori massages her eyebrows, and says with a fed-up voice, "Now listen..."

Mr. Nakajima, who has guessed that she still wouldn't turn this down, immediately spreads out the order sheet, and asks Miyoshi, "Since there are no rare components among the parts, it won't be much of a problem to order what we need, but how many devices do you plan to build?"

"The question would rather be how many you can build, no?"

"It'd also be possible to outsource the ordering to a company that can produce circuit boards in small numbers."

"That'd be a bit too revealing."

Since it'd be the same as asking them to steal our secrets, I suppose anyone sensitive to information leakage would be wary of this.

"In-house then, huh? It won't require any soldering if we use a breadboard, but I'm worried about the connections falling out from vibrations. Since it's faster to just solder it together if you're used to it, I'll handle the main circuit...I think ten per hour should be possible for starters."

"Huh? That many?"

"It's based on the premise of having an assistant who prepares the components, and someone else who runs the final tests on the last assembly and the device, but if all goes according to plan, 200,000 Yen per day...err, I mean around 100 devices per day should be in the realm of the possible."

Hearing that, Ms. Midori comments with a truly broad smile, "Nakajima, keep in mind that this money counts as income of the °company°, okay?"

"Uug...o-of course, Chief!"

While sighing at his response, she further adds, "Well, you can look forward to an extra bonus."

And on that occasion, she hits Miyoshi who teases her with 『Aww, your affectionate side came out!』 after watching the two.

"No, Miyoshi, this is going to be Made by Tokiwa, right? Wouldn't that mean we need to pay production costs before worrying about back margins and so on?"

"As expected of you, senpai. It is as you say."

"No, that's kinda obvious..."

"The only one who regrettably hasn't noticed that part is Mr. Nakajima, I think..."

"What about my share then?"

While flashing a bitter smile at Miyoshi's way of phrasing, Ms. Midori whispers, "We'll treat the back margin as expenses, and do fifty-fifty for the rest."

"Well, I suppose that's fair."

"Come one, you girls...did you offer the back margin like a carrot towards Mr. Nakajima?"

"Listen here, there's no way I'd entrust the management of money to a guy who doesn't feel a sliver of doubt about sinking cash into performance improvements under the premise of only making a profit when it fits, is there?"

Although her argument is very sound, the pitiful Mr. Nakajima seems to have his fate decided for him without having a single say in it. Mr. Nakajima himself is currently drawing up a schedule while sorting all the problematic issues, and apparently hasn't even realized the evil intrigue going on over here.

"The assembly could be handled by part-timers. But, I don't know whether any decent people would actually show up. Also, various information is being leaked by recruitment sites nowadays."

"It looks like we won't have any choice but to do it ourselves, if push comes to shove, right senpai?"

"Huh? Me too?"

"Obviously."

"Well, for the time being we'll build a stock of circuit boards."

"Please take care of it. Also, please order enough parts for 1200 devices based on a rate of 100 per day, starting tomorrow. I don't care how much you have to pay to speed it up."

"Starting tomorrow!? Hey! Today is the 28th, you know!?"

"Originally we had planned to have a company vacation, starting tomorrow. What are you going to do, Nakajima?"

"I'll order right away and then I'm going to head out and grab all the parts I can get my hands on! Akihabara has plenty of places that are working until the 30th. Since the missing parts will make their way to us after the 3rd, I'll make everything that can be made this year, and then, once I run out of parts, I'll take a holiday until the 3rd." He says while bracing himself.

In the meanwhile I admire a strange part about him; the liability of people working in the science field to fall prey to exploitation.

"Well, we had originally planned to go on vacation for six days after tomorrow. I'd love to tell you to do as you please, but—" Ms. Midori says with a difficult expression, "—if I have you work on that job during your holiday, it's going to affect the revenue of our company, right?"

That makes sense, in a way.

"Alright, I'll treat it as working on a day off and will prepare a compensatory holiday."

"Eehh? Chief, even if you regard this as simple holiday work—"

"That's a no."

"Uugghh...well, it's a job derived from the stat measurement device, so I guess it can't be helped." He readily yields, and immediately starts ordering the necessary parts from the makers.

"Midori, there's something else."

"What, you weren't done?"

"It's about the matter with the company we talked about before—"

"Aah, that matter, huh?" Ms. Midori stops folding her arms, and thrusts a hand into a pocket of her white robe. "Since it also affects gramps, I discussed it with my family just in case, but—"

She must be talking about the family meeting Ms. Naruse had mentioned. I guess it was about this joint business after all. Me not having heard anything out of her mouth in regards to the details is probably because it's her little sister's project.

"—Sis was really hyped about it."

If it's Ms. Naruse, she would know that a big story like this, which would make anyone doubt its credibility, isn't a scam or anything like that, so I doubt that she'd be against it. If I had to name a worrying aspect, it might be the fear that her sister's company might be absorbed by us, but after consulting with Miyoshi, they made it a rule that we wouldn't be involved with the current management. Well, because of that, we're struggling with the method of how to finance Ms. Midori's company, though.

"What about the matter of building a factory then?"

"As for that— Nakajima."

"Ah, sure. Just give me a moment— alley-oop." Apparently having finished the ordering for the time being, Mr. Nakajima fetches a big paper roll, and heaves it on the table.

"This is?"

"It's something like a blueprint for the mass production version of the stat measurement device. By the way, could you please name that thing? We have modularized the components into various sections, and designed it so that the manufacturers can deliver them as disassembled pieces." After unrolling the paper, Mr. Nakajima thoroughly explains all the details while pointing at the respective sections with his finger. "And it's planned for all the modules to be assembled over here. Since it's not like it's a device necessary to everybody, mass production through automation doesn't have much of a benefit in proportion to the costs."

"In short, you're saying it probably won't sell that well?"

Hearing my blunt retort, Mr. Nakajima scratches his head with a wry smile.

"To be absolutely honest with you, yes, I think so. The main customers are going to be professional explorers, so I believe it'll be impossible to treat it like a large household electrical appliance."

If we say we're going to sell this for several ten thousand Yen, some people might buy it out of pure curiosity as well, but this device won't be cheap by any standard.

"That's why I think it might be smarter to only produce the box, and otherwise set up a place where we can assemble the contents in an assembly-line system relying on the old-fashioned method of human labor."

Ms. Midori supplements Mr. Nakajima's words, "Look, we've still got gramps' factory, right?"

Originally this place was the location of Ms. Midori's grandfather's city factory. Her laboratory was erected on a part of that factory's parking lot. The main part of the old factory still stands without having been demolished. Or to put it in other words, they were too stingy to pay for the demolishing.

"If it's just the box, I think it'll be cheap if we use the factory after renovating it. On top of that, it won't take much time to get everything ready."

It's said that you need to count three months + number of floors x one month, if you construct an ordinary apartment building made out of concrete and rebar. Additionally, the local construction industry seems to be at full capacity thanks to the Olympics and the Tohoku earthquake. It's obvious that it'd be difficult to make them hurry up after appearing suddenly out of nowhere.

"I was told that one month would be enough to finish the renovation."

"That's just perfect then."



"How come?"

As the explanation will likely take some time, I cast a quick glance at my watch to check the time.

"Okay, give me a sec as I'm going to contact Ayesha."

"Oh, sure, please take your time."

I walk outside the room while waving my hand over my shoulder.

(PoV Change as Yoshi is gone, but I can't pinpoint who it is. Sounds like an omnipotent 1st person view lol...)

"Midori, the other day I asked you about the stock distribution, but it's possible to increase the capital, right?"

"Of course. Just in case we had decided to use the template of a private company when we set it up, the total number of shares we can issue has been set to ten times of what we've got right now, but..."

"So far as it goes, we want your company to stay a small enterprise in regards to taxes, so it'd be best to limit the capital increase to around a hundred million."

Companies with capital stock of less than a hundred million are defined as small to medium enterprises by corporate tax law, and such enterprises have the benefit of reduced tax rates. However, since having large capital stock is advantageous for attracting financing, it depends on the circumstances of the individual enterprise how they handle their capital stock.

"Ten times all of a sudden? Unless it's a stock with limited voting rights, the portion of shares I'm holding will go down to 6% with that."

"What are you talking about? Midori, you'll be the one increasing the capital with your own funds. In other words, you'll be the primary shareholder."

"Now listen...where would I get that kind of money?"

"That part will be covered by a loan!"

"A loan!?"

"Yes, I'll lend it to you."

"No, wait...I don't know how that'd be seen legally..."

The line separating lending and borrowing money between individuals is quite vague in its differentiation on whether it's a loan or a donation. In cases where it happens between family members, it's generally regarded as a gift unless you diverge from the common practice quite a bit. That said, the law is a bit looser when it comes to lending money between strangers. It may be a bit

of a gray area, though.

"For the time being, it seems like there will be various issues with the current scale of your company if it comes to receiving a large amount of money, whether it be through investment or loans."

"Large amount of money? From who?"

"An angel."

"And where would you find such a dreamy angel? The last time I looked, I couldn't find a single one on this planet, you know?"

After having run around all over the place, looking for investors last year, Midori can only titter sarcastically.

"There's definitely one among us."

"Haaah?" Midori raises her voice in shock, and stares at Miyoshi as if seeing someone without any common sense while saying, "Let me ask just in case, but how much money are we talking about here?"

"When I talked with senpai — Yoshimura, he told me that I can use 10 billion Yen."

"Pardon?"

"Ten billion!?!"

Midori freezes whereas Nakajima screams hysterically.

But, if we're going to genuinely start on the production of the D-Card Checker, it's set in stone that we'll need a big amount of money initially. Even if we were to outsource the production, it's obvious that it'll require an outrageous scale.

"Senpai and I have been considering various options for a while but, since he's tired of it, he told me to pump money into your company, Midori."

"What's up with that?"

"Senpai hates troublesome matters, that's why."

"No, saying he hates it...means he's going to push ten billion on others because it's troublesome? What kind of money sense does that guy have? He doesn't look like a rich boy."

Miyoshi breaks out into a chortle thanks to Midori's rude remark, and agrees with her, "He sure doesn't look like it."

At that moment, Nakajima reboots and starts to move like a broken robot.

"T-T-T-That m-m-means our research f-f-funds are going to b-be ten billion?"

"Stop dreaming!"

"Ouch!"

Midori mercilessly chops Nakajima's head.

"Anyway, it's planned for us to invest the necessary funds when we leave the production to you, but——"

"That requires an increase of capital, huh?"

"I'll get a professional to come up with a method on how we can legally invest a large amount of money without changing the right of management, disregarding common sense or whatever, but I've been told to ask you to increase the capital to the maximum for the time being."

It seems like a small company will face the issue of deemed gifts, if they handle things poorly. Because, at that point, the judgment depends on the whim of the tax authorities, it's a fairly complicated issue.

"That's as long as the decrease in voting rights to a tenth doesn't anger the other shareholders."

"Ah, no need to worry about that side, I think. All of them are my relatives. Even the university with its 5% probably cares more about the future capital gain and their share objectives than their voting right. They'll greatly welcome it if the stock value goes up thanks to the increase in capital."

"The official stance will be that it's an investment for the sake of the device production. However, you don't really need 10 billion Yen to manufacture the stat measurement device, do you?"

"I don't know how many units have to be produced, but under the current circumstances, I don't think that we'll need that much."

The D-Card checking device will be handmade at first, so it won't require a huge amount of funds either.

"That's why it's also fine for you to use it on the equipment at your place, or so he says, Midori."

"D-Desceeeeeeeeeended!! An angel has descendedddd!!" Nakajima, who suddenly jumps up as if there's no gravity, mumbles with an ecstatic expression, "Ah, that function and this function...everything we gave up on due to budget restraints..."

"No, calm down, Nakajima. Let's stop with the grand amendments to our methods so far, okay? Okay?"

"Fu fu fu fu..."

"The ROMMEDICA starts on January the 11th, doesn't it? Osaka's Medical Show Japan begins on the 30th June, and there's also MEDICAL TAIWAN starting on the 27th June, right? Hey! Give it a

rest and wake up, I'm telling you!! Damn it!"

"Gafuuh!"

Midori's punch hits Nakajima magnificently in the jaw, causing him to totter and then topple over.

"Pheew...still, where's all that generosity coming from?" Obviously exhausted, Midori sits down again, leaning deeply into her chair.

"Hey, Midori, are you and Mr. Nakajima a couple?"

"...Ah, come on, what are you asking all of a sudden?"

Love stories don't pick a time and place. Seeing Midori being more flustered than she had expected, Miyoshi suspects that she might have nailed it by chance.

"I mean, you don't hold back on him at all."

"That's, well, we've been hanging out together for a long time now."

Hearing that, Miyoshi looks towards the other side of the table, where Nakajima is lying unconsciously, and comments, "Mr. Nakajima sure is an excellent person. He doesn't look like it at all, though."

"Well, he's been handling all of our hardware, and all the essential parts have been built by him. But then again, that senpai of yours is the same when it comes to not looking like it at all, isn't he?"

Miyoshi recalls the face of Yoshimura, who's talking on the phone with Ayesha, and answers with a wry smile, "You've got a point."

Afterwards they discussed the general company decisions, the price as calculated from the estimated production costs, and the production schedule.

(Back to Yoshi PoV)

"Hey, Miyoshi. Things will get hairy if we don't leave soon."

Just when our talks had reached a stopping point, our appointment with Ayesha was nigh. We bid farewell to Ms. Midori and Mr. Nakajima in a hurry, and left the research facility.

"Oh right, Ms. Miyoshi."

Moments after we left through the entrance door, Mr. Nakajima called us to halt, apparently having remembered something.

"What is it?"

"It's about the stat measurement device. I've removed all the unnecessary functions based on the data you gave me, and finished a RC1 with an adjusted precision——"

"Huh? Already?"

"That's because it's easier to remove things than adding them. I also chose some suitable product design. Anyway, I mentioned it earlier, but please choose a trade name."

"Trade name?"

"Yes, I've been thinking about ordering a casing over at the designer who designed our devices, but it still needs a logo."

A name, eh...? To be honest, I don't think that we've got much of a naming sense. After all, we ended up with a party name like D-Powers. It's a truly dumb name. Moreover, it's true that it even has something I like about it.

"Okay, I'll contact you later."

"I think I'll be completely occupied with the D-Card checking device for a while, and since the designer probably isn't working during the New Year's holiday, it's nothing that urgent, but it'd be great if you could pass me a name at the beginning of the new year."

"Okidoki."

And then we left Tokiwa Lab.

"This puts us in a bind."

"Sure does."

"Can't we use the ultimate skill of outsourcing for this?"

"If it's an entire promotion campaign, we could leave it to an advertising agency, but...if it comes to just a name..."

"Makes sense. There's no money to be earned with that."

In the end we got stuck worrying about a truly pragmatic problem.

### — Yoyogi-Hachiman Office —

"It's based on the premise that they grow accustomed to it, but they mentioned that they might be able to produce a hundred devices per day."

"Eh? Seriously!?"

Ms. Naruse takes out her own tablet, and checks the same document Miyoshi had examined the other day.



"There are 693 venues for the final exams. The one among them with the biggest number of examinees is Mie University with 4634 examinees. Three other places are going to have more than 4,000 examinees: Hokkaido University, Tokyo University, and Niigata University."

"Even if you check one person per second, it'll still take more than an hour, huh?"

"Since they might also move around between classrooms, I think the average is going to be five seconds, no matter how much they hurry."

The number of examinees has dropped this year in comparison to last, but it still seems to amount to 576,830 people. Even if you plan on checking before the exams, one hour is the most, I reckon. Assuming a check is going to take five seconds per person as Miyoshi said, it'll be possible to check 720 people in an hour with one device.

"Going by the numbers, the check would be done in an hour if roughly 800 devices are available."

"No, I believe 1000 devices is the minimum." Miyoshi objects while scrolling through the document she borrowed from Ms. Naruse. "I mean there's plenty of venues with less than 720 examinees."

"But, if it's 2,000 devices——"

There's approximately 20 days left until the Center Test. With 100 devices per day, it's going to be 2,000 devices in total. The possibility of them being able to somehow weather through this predicament has come into sight.

"Tentatively they told us that they're going to try securing 2,000 devices, but we don't know whether they'll really be able to produce as many."

We'd be troubled if the JDA would proceed while taking this as granted. After all, those devices are currently splendid home-made handicraft, and Mr. Nakajima will run into many unknown issues once he actually tries building them.

Having heard my words, Ms. Naruse apparently sends an email to someone.

"Rather than that, Ms. Naruse, nothing has been decided about the supply process and budget for this whole project..."

After receiving a request that they want us to somehow do something about it, we started to move on our own volition since there's no time to waste, but it's not like we've received a formal order to begin with, and even the budget hasn't been clarified. I wonder whether it's truly okay to start production under such circumstances.

"We've heard that time is running out, and yet they're going to waste six days doing nothing just because it's New Year's holiday..."

"Senpai, senpai, if you take paid leave on the 4th, you'll get nine days off in a row!" [efn\_note]The 4th Jan 2019 was a Friday.[/efn\_note]

Obviously an organization with no clear hierarchical structure has a low sense of impending danger. Because of that, it's usually the subcontractors and the lower ranks in the company that will have the blame shifted on them in the end. That's the typical beginning of an exploitive company.

"If they're going to decide on that by the 7th, I don't really know whether we'll be able to provide 1,000 devices, let alone 2,000."

Ms. Naruse had listened to our forced conversation with a bitter smile on her lips, but once her smartphone vibrates, she immediately excuses herself with her eyes, and answers the call.

"Yes, Naruse speaking."

I'm pretty sure the caller must be the boss she had contacted earlier.

"Is he a guy putting a lot of emphasis on formality?"

"Probably."

"But, if I remember correctly, that man was a section chief, wasn't he? It was the same back when we made the deal for storing orbs, but he sure makes prompt decisions. Does a section chief hold such powerful decision rights within their organization?"

"I'm sure he's a clever guy who went around in advance and got the budget approved."

"He didn't look like that type of a person to me, though." I tilt my head in contemplation.

But, it's also true that you shouldn't judge people by their appearance. Assuming he's successful within the organization, it might be as Miyoshi says.

At that moment, I hear Ms. Naruse raise her voice in surprise, "Eeehh!? Yes. Okay. Understood. Then, please have a good New Year."

Have a good New Year, she says...are they really planning to ignore this matter until next year?

Ms. Naruse sighs deeply after ending the call, turns around towards us, and asks, "Around how much are you going to charge for that device?"

"U-Umm..."

Having expected her to give us a run-down on the situation, I end up lost for words when she throws a question at me out of the blue. Well, it's mostly because the thought of whether we can seriously sell an item that's like a PP pack toy for 100,000 Yen occupied my mind for a moment there.

However, Miyoshi says with an unconcerned look, completely lacking any hesitation, "It's planned to cost 100,000 Yen per unit."

So she didn't mean it as a joke after all... Is this really going to fly?

"Understood. Since there won't be any problem with that, please provide as many of the devices as you can."

"Eeehh!?" I reflexively cry out in shock at Ms. Naruse's instant decision.

If it's 100,000 per device, 1,000 devices are going to cost 100 million, and 2,000 devices twice that. I can't believe that they gave Ms. Naruse the authority to place such an order on the spot.

"Does an exclusive deputy chief have that much discretion!?"

When I ask Ms. Naruse while feeling like the JDA is quite an amazing organization, she clears up the riddle with a wry smile, "As a matter of fact, Saiga told me, 『Since we can't turn it down anyway, just have them name whatever price they like』."

Usually doing something like that would be tough, but this year the Dungeon Management Department has raked in some good profits that would be completely eaten up by taxes if left alone. The handling fees for our orb auctions have played the main part here. Even if this order wouldn't be approved, they're going to somehow handle it with the Dungeon Management Department's discretion, so in short, we are to proceed as planned, according to Ms. Naruse's boss.

"Senpai! I made a huge blunder! Damn it, why didn't I say one million per unit!?"

"Now listen, that's way too greedy no matter how you think about it."

"Make a profit whenever you can is the motto of any trader! But now the horse has bolted anyway. Let's at least not include the taxes in the price." Miyoshi adds while acting vexed in a theatrical manner, but a company is excluded from taxes for a year after its establishment either way.

Ms. Naruse stands up her tablet, takes out a portable keyboard, and begins to draw the contract right then and there. It looks like she just has to enter the necessary details of the contract into a template.

As I'm watching her do that for a while, she suddenly stops and lifts her face, "By the way, is this sale or rental?"

Ms. Naruse knows that we haven't applied for a patent for this device. For this reason, she must have the danger of the JDA compelling us to hand over the device in mind.

"I don't mind going with what the JDA prefers, but...senpai, what should we do?"

Having suddenly the conversation tossed at me, I can't help smiling wryly in my mind. After all, her 『what should we do?』 should actually have the meaning of: Don't you think they won't fall for the trap we've especially set up if we go with sale here as it'd be kinda too obvious?

"You're asking me...? Isn't it just fine to ask the JDA what they prefer?"

If we do it like that, it'll ultimately give people the impression that we've chosen the method on the JDA's request.

Miyoshi nods her agreements, and says towards Ms. Naruse, "In exchange, please add a clause obliging the JDA to their utmost to strictly manage the devices, and not expose any information about the device to third parties."

"Huh?"

Forbidding a disclosure and doing your utmost to avoid it are two different pairs of shoes. The former will result in a contract breach in case it's disclosed, but the latter has no consequences.

"Are you certain that you want to go with this? I mean for us it's a very welcome approach, but..."

Considering the situation here, it's one of the opportunities where you'd impose some kind of penalty if it's disclosed. And yet we're choosing good faith in their best efforts. Obviously that's super fishy. But, no matter how you think about it, no one would usually suspect this to be Miyoshi's crafty trap. I'm sure that this girl just wants to get the JDA out of the line of fire because of the trouble that's bound to happen.

"It's because you've always taken such good care of us." Miyoshi shows a truly nice smile.

"You know, lately you've totally turned into a devil."

"Eh? A little devil, you say?"

She acts kittenish while pressing her index finger against her lips.

But didn't you just add "little" on your own accord?

"Okay, the contract is written up. There's still the matters as to whether it's going to be a purchase or rental contract, and whether the contractor D-Powers is going to be a corporate or party, so please let us finalize the contract as early as the beginning of January after the JDA has worked out those details."

"Okay. We'll mass produce as many devices as possible during the New Year's holiday."

Well, Mr. Nakajima is going to, but yeah.

"It's not like it's a compensation for this, but——"

"Hmm? What is it?"

"——it looks like we've got the OK for the room we talked about some time ago."

"Oh? Really?"

The building inside the dungeon grounds is quite spacious. Originally it should be quite difficult for parties and individuals to exclusively book the fairly big common-use room located on the first floor.

"So the debt got immediately returned, eh?" Miyoshi says while looking somewhat disappointed,

but she seems to be happy with the outcome.

"I'll inform Saiga. Also, when are you going to hold the press conference?"

"Hmm, the company is all set to go, but the project still needs some more time. But, that will also be settled early January. For the time being, we just agree to holding one."

"I understand. Are you going to be always in during the New Year's holiday?" Ms. Naruse asks while putting her tablet away.

"I'm not sure about Miyoshi, but I'll be here. What about you, Ms. Naruse?"

"I might go back home for a bit, but it's not far from here, and I'll make sure to be available if something springs up."

"Okay, I got it. Then please have a good New Year."

"Good New Year to you as well." Saying this with a wave of her hand, Ms. Naruse goes back home.

"Pheew. Senpai, in the end it means we've got swayed by Ms. Naruse's request, doesn't it?"

"Well, it did have a prospect that we'd be able to somehow handle it."

"We aren't completely unrelated to this mess either, but oh well. However, we've got lots of stuff to do over the holidays, you know?"

"I suppose we're simply workaholics."

"Though I've heard that working while others are taking a rest defines a sloth."

"You just made an enemy out of all people working in the service industry."

"No, that's a misinterpretation."

While having such silly banter, we return to the living room from the entranceway.

"To be honest, recently I've kinda lost any sense as to what day of the week it is. I don't really socialize with any of my relatives either."

"Neither of those applies to me!"

"Are you going back home to your parents during the holiday then?"

"Ugh, that's somewhat impossible. Didn't I quit my company?"

"You did."

"If I were to go back home now, I'd have to face amazing pressure about what I'm planning to do from now on."



"Won't it all be resolved in one shot if you show them your bankbook?"

I don't know whether Miyoshi is keeping book, but assuming she does, it should already contain cryptic numbers of digits which easily surpass the lifetime's income of a simple office worker.

"That's also a bit...I'll be troubled if my home goes up in flames."

"Ah, that often happens with people who won a big lottery, doesn't it? Though that's just my guess since I've never won anything."

It'd be anything but funny if all of Miyoshi's family stopped working, and acted like Miyoshi's managers or something like that.

"It's tough to be poor, but having too much money also comes with its fair share of troubles, I reckon."

"We're basically hailing from the lower middle class, that's why." Miyoshi shrugs her shoulders while placing her cup on the tray laying on the table.

"Because of that, I plan to deceive them with having started a business after the fact, once our company starts to rake in proper profit."

If you suddenly begin to talk about starting a new business after quitting the company where you found employment just recently, most parents would naturally be against it. After all, she shouldn't have shown an inkling of interest in doing that in the past, so it'd be inevitable for her parents to worry that she might have been tricked by someone.

"Even so, it'd be better if you at least contacted them once."

"Aye, aye sir." Miyoshi answers while not looking overly eager.

## §083 New Projects 12/30 (Sun)

### — Yokohama Sakuragicho —

Two men — countering the whole atmosphere of the cafe — were meeting face to face at a corner table of the Tsubakiya Coffee on the second floor of the Nouveau Mare<sup>[efn\_note]</sup>A change from Colette Mare which exists at the location. Btw, Nouveau means new in French, iirc.<sup>[/efn\_note]</sup>, commonly known as the Dungeon Building, which was situated in front of the JR Sakuragicho station.

"Ain't that just fine?" A profusely tanned man lifted his eyes from the documents he had been given, and combed up his unruly, short hair while giving such a comment to Yoshida who sat across from him.

After the meeting with Ishidzuka of JCTV the other day, Yoshida had run about day and night, trying to scrape together the staff necessary to produce a pilot as soon as possible. He had enough connections and acquaintances to find potential staff on the media's side of things, but when it came to explorers, and especially high-leveled ones, he pulled a complete blank.

Before talking about what to film inside a dungeon, the question of how far the production team would be able to advance inside a dungeon was far more crucial. No matter how wonderfully great a movie could be taken in the wintry scenery of the Himalayas, it'd still be impossible for an amateur to climb up there by himself.

"In short, ye gonna dive into Yoyogi with us, and then...what's it called 'gain? Ah yeah...film a pilot movie or somethin' like that, right? And then ye gonna turn it into a TV show, ye said."

Yoshida had made an appointment with an explorer, who had been doing media stuff, for the sake of filming the show's pilot, but being addressed by the guy in a weird Kansai dialect with a strangely open-minded approach about this whole project bewildered Yoshida.

"I mean it sounds fun!"



The Yokohama Dungeon had appeared inside a certain, biggish commercial multi-store building, which was still under construction at that time, in front of Sakuragicho Station. Just like The Ring it was the type of dungeon that had transformed already existing underground facilities into a dungeon, which made people believe that it might have nine floors in total.

At one point in time the construction of the building was frowned upon, but with the underground part being physically isolated through the dungeon, the part above the second floor was finished as planned. The aspect of starting a shrewd business model by slapping the tag 'Dungeon Building' on

it was probably one of Japan's terrible points. But then again, the first floor was equipped with facilities to manage the dungeon, never opening to the public.

Because the parts belonging to the dungeon had become indestructible, the city justified the construction with something along the lines of "You just need to regard it as the building's foundation having become extremely sturdy," which earned the mayor of Yokohama back then a shitstorm on Twitter.

As the dungeon had used the existing building's structure, it wasn't as big as Yoyogi, and the reason why this urban dungeon, which supposedly had no more than nine floors, hadn't been cleared so far stemmed back to a certain special characteristic.

All the underground parking floors, except for the first underground floor which was equivalent to the dungeon's first floor, were boss rooms, and defeating those bosses would reliably spawn treasure chests. Furthermore, even the treasure chests of respawned bosses had an extremely rich variation of loot, which earned the dungeon the title 『GachaDun』.

Boosted by that easily understandable gambling nature, this dungeon was exceedingly popular for a time, but this hype quickly died down. And nowadays it has turned into a dungeon with almost no explorers entering it.



There existed two reasons why people avoided this dungeon. First, the bosses' respawn timer of four hours was slightly long. In other words, you'd need to wait for four hours if someone killed a boss. And even if you tried to kill some time by hunting small fry, no random trash mobs respawned in the boss rooms.

Moreover the second, and major, reason was the monsters' strength. To put it simply, the monsters of Yokohama were ridiculously powerful. If you related it to the number of floors, you could say the monsters had pretty much eight times the strength of YoyoDun. In other words, the monsters on the second floor of GachaDun were as strong as those on the 16th floor of YoyoDun. The JSDF team, which challenged the dungeon first, was sent packing on its third floor.

There had apparently even been talks about driving tanks in through the gate for cars, but the battle vehicles of the Ground Forces were simply too tall for an ordinary underground parking lot.

Nowadays the car gate has been reinforced with a sturdy shutter possessing several thick layers, and access to the dungeon has been restricted to above B-Rank.



Yoshida thought that the man in front of him looked like he'd be the right guy for the task, but due to the guy's overly willing attitude, Yoshida ended up becoming suspicious that something might be wrong with him instead. However, Yoshida also knew that it'd be hard to find as good personnel as him.

Kunai Norihiro, 31 years old.

He had been obsessed with the Yokohama dungeon ever since it appeared, and was nowadays an explorer renowned as GachaDun Master Tenko among fans with his own blog called Real Dungeon Yokohama, and a YouTube channel of the same name.

However, no matter what Norihiro might be planning, Yoshida had almost no contact with other explorers. All the more so, if it came to high-leveled explorers. Thus it was necessary for him to somehow win over Norihiro for this endeavor.

"I was sure you'd understand! As a man continuing to dive into that Yokohama dungeon, you are of a different caliber!" Yoshida tried to suck up to Norihiro even while considering his own words shady as hell.

"Huh? Haven't been divin' recently or anythin'."

"Eh?"

"That guy's supposed to be enough of a Yokohama expert to even be called GachaDun Master, and yet he hasn't been diving? What kind of joke is that?"

"I've heard that you've been diving in Yokohama, or was that wrong?"

"Don't be silly, dude. I mean, look at this."

The rank written on the WDA card he showed to Yoshida clearly stated C.

"C-Rank?"

Yoshida had a hunch that his eyes must have turned into small dots. Seeing how Norihiro was active at Yokohama, he thought that his rank should at least be B-Rank. Otherwise, he wouldn't be able to even enter GachaDun.

"Aight. As GachaDun been limited, ye ain't allowed to enter 'less ye 're above B-Rank."

"Then, you being called GachaDun Master..."

"Happened before the restriction. I told ye before, though. Didn't listen?" He calmly explained with eyes closed and his arms folded. "Havin' become unable to get in there been a real blow, I tell ye."

In his mind, Yoshida retorted, 'Haven't you been posting on your damn blog that you've been continuously diving at Yokohama!?' "

"Well, ain't no problem, is it?"

Yoshida thought, "No, it is a bloody problem," but at this point, it was impossible for him to simply scoot.

'In the first place, Yokohama's first floor is no Gacha floor. Because he's called GachaDun Master, he should have at least been to the second floor, so he gotta have enough ability to dive down to the 16th floor of YoyoDun,' Yoshida reconsidered.

"The issue's the content anyway. Like what are ye aiming for."

"That's why I'm planning a pilot to figure out the show's outline."

"Ye got me wrong. What floor are ye aiming for?"

"I don't care about the floor as long as we can film some material with great impact."

"How wishy-washy, dude. Impact, eh? Sure is easy to say."

'Going by the information on Yoyogi, the tenth floor might provide us with great material. As long as we avoid battle and use the adaption potion, we should be able to film some of the wandering undead swarms. Currently, a movie of the genômos on the 18th floor might become a hit as well. It's just rumors, but I've heard the elites of various nations have been gathering at Yoyogi, too. I dare say that well-known explorers can be found among them, too.

"If ye bring someone like the Witch of Campbell 'long, she'll give you nicely flashy shots, I'm sure."

'She's a famous light magic user. Since she seems to be specialized in offensive spells affecting a wider area, I've got no doubt that filming her would turn it into a movie that wouldn't even require

adding any special effects. But then again, I don't know whether she'd allow us to film her while she's fighting. You won't find any explorers among the top ranks who would deliberately leave behind records of their skills.

"I wouldn't be in a pinch if I had such a budget available." Yoshida replied with a bitter smile on his lips.

"Then it'd be the 10th and 18th floor, eh?"

"If that works, I'd of course love to go there, but..."

'What matters most when aiming for the deep floors is the quality of the explorers, but moving all the batteries to power the equipment around is an issue of almost the same gravity. At the very least, it'll likely be difficult to continuously provide bright lighting. Even if we use LED lighting as it doesn't weigh as much, a single battery can keep running for three hours at most. When it comes to video cameras, the consumer ones are already pretty decent if the battery holds for two hours, and even if we take a business camera, which weighs more than two kilograms, it would run on a battery for five hours tops.

Yoshida pinched the handle of the Blue Fluted Plain cup [efn\_note]This is a major porcelain set of Royal Copenhagen. Tsubakiya Coffee uses this set. You can look up the set on the site of Royal Copenhagen.[/efn\_note], lifted it up, drained down the remaining coffee in one go, and said after having resolved himself, "If possible, I'd like to get some shots of the mansion."

"Hah? With mansion ye mean the one publicized by the JDA. The one teemin' with eyeball monsters?"

Yoshida nodded silently.

'If I could install cameras all over that mansion, I'm sure it'd be more than enough material for at least a half year's worth, let alone a cour [efn\_note]A cour covers one season. For anime it's 12 or 13 weekly episodes.[/efn\_note]. Of course the climax would be full of unbelievable takes. If we came back alive, that is.

No matter how easy-going and willing Tenko might be, he couldn't help but to knit his eyebrows at this story.

"A man like you knows about the value of information, don't you?" Blinded by excitement, Yoshida tried to persuade Tenko, using suggestive wording.

"Value, ye say...ain't worth shit when ye don't survive, right?"

A veteran explorer could tell his own limits. As far as he could tell from the published video, he'd merely throw his life away if he tried to enter that place.

"Of course. So, how about challenging a place that won't put our lives at risk too much?"

"Haaah?"

Tenko thought that there would have been no need for Yoshida to call out to him, if something like this was possible to begin with. Thus he couldn't quite grasp what Yoshida was talking about.

"If ye have an idea, ye gotta gimme the details."

"Do you know the condition to make the mansion appear?"

"Killin' 373 monsters of the same kind within a day, no? That's way impossible for normal people, ye know? I mean, ain't like ye goin' to always encounter the mobs ye need either."

'You have to tirelessly kill one monster every 90 seconds to achieve that in ten hours. And just finding the monster type you need will be quite a hassle too.

"What if you could do it from a relatively safe spot?"

"As if such a convenient——"

A place with many of the same monsters, and relatively safe. Following that logic, only one place would qualify in Yoyogi.

"No way...ye mean the first floor?"

Hearing his question, Yoshida directed a broad grin at Tenko, but seeing that, Tenko felt uneasy whether Yoshida had actually ever dove into a dungeon himself.

'I mean, sure, if it's the slimes on the first floor of Yoyogi, there's a ridiculously high number of them 'round. After all, you'll see slimes camping the whole area if you just head a bit deeper into the floor. However, it should take quite some effort to defeat slimes with physical attacks. I can't imagine that you'd be able to defeat one every 90 secs. Even if there's a fire mage among the party members.

"Sounds amazin'. The members goin' to include a fire mage too?"

'Even if we had one, they can't continue to cast magic for eternity anyway. Sooner or later they'd run out of MP, to put it into game terminology.

"No, it's going to be a cameraman, me, and maybe a porter."

"Nah, I'm talkin 'bout the guards, not the fimlin' crew."

The instant he heard that, Yoshida fell into silence.

"Ye gotta be kiddin'——"

"It'd be a big help if you could arrange for the rest of the guards from your side."

"That won't fly, dude."

'In short, he hasn't even considered some strategy either.



"Wait a sec, dude, how have ye been plannin' to kill the slimes anyway?"

"Slimes can be defeated even by beginners, no?"

"Sure, if it's just about bein' able to bring one down, that's no problem. Though that changes when it comes to doin' it in a short period of time."

'If one tries to somehow get it done by just beating a slime, even a serious attempt would likely take 'round five minutes. Smashing the tiny core is far more difficult than ordinary people expect it to be.

"I'll figure something out."

"Something, huh...?"

He had been reluctant to be open about it, but Tenko was quite interested in this job. One reason was the accumulation of stress over a long time after he'd become unable to enter GachaDun, but another aspect was him having no way to keep diving into Yoyogi instead of Yokohama as GachaDun Master. He'd be approached by his regular viewers about what he was planning to do about Yokohama, and confessing that he couldn't get in there because he was a C-Rank would be the worst way to go about it, even if he embedded it into a joke.

The project planned by Yoshida would provide him with a great excuse to hunt at Yoyogi, and he honestly welcomed it as a decent opportunity when it came to publicity and his own position.

"But okay, I guess we should give it a go at least one time."

Yoshida nodded at his reply while feeling slightly relieved.

'At any rate, it means he hasn't declined outright, so I reckon I can label this as success for the time being.

"In that case...tomorrow I've got something planned, so let's go diving the day after tomorrow?"

"Day after tomorrow? That's New Year's Day, ye know?"

"Isn't it great that few people will be around then? Or do you have something else planned?"

"Plans...if it doesn't take longer than a day, nothin' comes to mind. If that's cool with ye, we should give it a go."

Tenko was flabbergasted when considering what the staff with family was supposed to do, but he didn't have any objection to get things done quickly. He also believed that it was better to not be too hasty, but that was nothing he had to wrack his brain about. He decided to concentrate on how to deal with the slimes for the time being.

"Alright, it's set. We meet at Yoyogi's entrance at six o'clock on the 1st."

"Six o'clock!?"

Yoshida felt like it was a fairly early time to start, but he was told that the early time period with few people was better for filming around the entrance, seeing how they wouldn't have the authority to limit the flow of people flow, unlike with an official filming permitted by the JDA.

While smiling wryly at Yoshida who was all gung-ho about the filming despite them only checking out the location as a test, Tenko told him something he had to say no matter what:

"Can't be helped. In exchange, I'm gonna have ye pay me a nice and shiny bonus."

— Yoyo Dungeon —

"So, why have we come to a place like this?"

Although we should be busy as is, we've come down to the second floor of Yoyogi, heading to the farm field we've rented from the JDA.

"Doesn't that simply mean we've got spare time in the midst of busyness? Look, it's not like it's untrue either as long as we don't go to help out at Tokiwa Lab, right?"

The service industry works during the New Years holiday, but normal companies and organizations are closed, so it's kinda hard to get things organized. Among those working with us it's only Nakajima who's really running about, I think.

Even if we were to go over to help out, we'd only be able to cheer him on since he wasn't able to get his hands on any parts other than the mainboard. And I'm not sure whether you could really call that help.

"Besides, since they're going to spout soon, we have to move forward with the checks over here as well."

"Now that you mention it, the JA lady (Japanese Agricultural Cooperative) mentioned that wheat would require around ten days to bud, didn't he?"

Usually, you can only buy wheat species for cultivation through the JA. At first we headed over to the JA in Shibuya to obtain the seeds. I don't know whether Chieko said that there's no agriculture in Shibuya [efn\_note]This is a reference to a book by Takamura Kotaro called "Chieko's Sky." Chieko was his wife, and he wrote those poems for her. They're fairly well-known, both the poems and his wife.[/efn\_note] , but the JA under the jurisdiction of the Shibuya District "didn't exist" whatsoever. It's a quite miserable circumstance if you consider that two branches exist within the jurisdiction of the neighboring Meguro and Setagaya Districts. Shibuya seems to have been left out by the JA.

After having run around all over the place, being at a loss, we eventually obtained Yanagikubo Wheat seeds at JA Tokyomirai.

"No, I mean, this was the only place listing wheat on their website," Miyoshi argued after investigating it online. I guess the JA isn't all eager about selling wheat in the center of the city. But

I suppose that makes only sense.

The JA Tokyomirai lady, who misunderstood us as wanting to run an elementary school experiment, taught us various things such as the sowing period for wheat being in late October, and that you'd scatter an amount of around one soup bowl per area of two square meter.

Certainly, it's totally bonkers for us to buy seeds if you consider the season, but there are no defined seasons on the second floor of Yoyogi Dungeon. I've got no clue what's going to happen with the seeds, but for starters we set up a small field and sowed the seeds in several ridges as we had been taught on the 19th.

"Still, we were told that the regular sowing period for wheat lasts from late October until early November. Are they going to spout inside the dungeon that doesn't really have any weather changes to speak of?"

"Senpai, it's pointless for you to bring up such a fundamental question at this point in time."

While chatting, we arrive at a small hill located close to the furthest edge of the second floor.

Over there, we prepared a small patch of land by marking off a space of almost four square meter with a three meter tall acrylic plane fence. If it had been a wire mesh, goblins would have likely scaled it. Movement sensors and shower pipes, which have the function to spew Alien Drool, had been installed as a countermeasure against any approaching slimes. Of course we'd have no chance if a monster were to suddenly spawn inside the demarcation, but we had no choice but to leave that part to luck.

"Now then, let's have a look how it turned out— Oh, they've budded." Miyoshi declares while pointing at two ridges after opening the door and quickly checking the field.

The wheat having spouted in some ridges while not having done so in others stems from us having sown the seeds in two shifts which were several days apart.

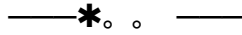
"So, how's the state of the seedlings?"

Our field has been divided into two areas — one for sown seeds and one for planted seedlings. Miyoshi squats down in front of the planted seedlings, and compares them with the picture she had previously taken with her smartphone.

"Hmm, I don't see much of a change." She mutters in disappointment, stands up, and claps the dirt off her knees.

"Looks like plants raised from seedlings won't work, huh?"

It takes time if you raise a plant from a seed. We've been checking whether the plants grown from seedlings respawn by cutting off one each time we came here for the sake of experimentation, but not one of them ever respawned.



With an experiment using a tree that grew nearby, we have pretty much confirmed that plants respawn in the same place. The branch we cut off as a test was back before we knew it. Getting carried away, we tried to fell that tree, but astonishingly the tree stood there just like before after a short while as if he hadn't done anything to begin with. However, when we removed it completely by even going as far as digging out its roots, the tree didn't revive.

"So they won't respawn if completely removed, eh?"

"I think they might respawn, just not at the same place anymore. But...that's hard to prove."

It's not like monsters respawn at the spot they've been killed. In other words, it's likely correct to assume that objects capable of movement will respawn at a random location.

"A comparison by recording all objects on a floor sounds like a bit of a steep challenge."

"It sure is impossible in Yoyogi."

Either way, it seems like the vegetation inside a dungeon is going to respawn in the same place as long as you don't completely uproot them. Hence, the condition for this project's success is to find a method to make the dungeon identify grown plants as respawnable objects.

However, that didn't work out so easily.



"The D-Factor might need time to permeate into a seedling. As of yet, it's only been 10 days."

"But senpai, assuming an object were to be labeled as respawnable by just staying inside the dungeon for several days, wouldn't people also respawn upon death by staying in the dungeon for the same amount of time?"

"Leaving death aside, assuming objects would respawn just because you take it outside a dungeon, a person would produce copies of themselves each time they left the dungeon. Though that would definitely solve any population problems." I crack a little joke, but Miyoshi retorts with something terrifying.

"Come to think of it, I hear there are doppelgangers in some dungeons, but I hope that's not the underlying cause of them, is it?"

"Give it a rest... Anyway, if you consider it like that, doesn't this mean that grown adult organisms won't be recognized as respawnable, no matter how long they stay inside a dungeon?"

"At least it'd be better for world peace if it's true." While giving such a casual comment, Miyoshi cuts several leaves off the sprout grown out of a seed, and makes a picture of it.

"If seeds turn out to be a lost case as well, it might become necessary to pollinate the plants inside the dungeon as a next step."

I think of it like a very natural flow of events, but if things work out by doing that...it'll lead to a truly, truly interesting situation.

"Hey, Miyoshi."

"What is it?"

"Look, it's just a hypothetical talk. But, assuming a plant that grew up from a seed pollinated inside a dungeon were to be recognized as part of the dungeon..."

"...Senpai, please be aware that your remark just now sounds kinda inappropriate."

"Huh? I mean, aren't you curious about it? Sex inside a dunge— uff!?" Miyoshi's elbow lands directly on my solar plexus with a dull thud.

"Senpai, animals — although it's humans in this case — require 5~7 days until an implantation into the uterine mucosa while hatching. It's not like anyone would do something like that over such a long period during a dungeon exploration, right?"

After coughing vehemently, "Gimme a break. How about saying all that before using an elbow strike...?"

"It's because you seem to be slow on the uptake if I don't let your body experience it through pain."

"You're terrible...just what army do you belong to, girl!?"

Having said that, it's very interesting as a mind game. If an implanted sperm is recognized as part of the dungeon, and if that woman left the dungeon...wait, since it's impossible for just the sperm to survive at the time of its respawn, I think it should result in nothing happening.

"Come to think of it, you reminded me when mentioning the army, senpai, but what are we going to do about the bootcamp instructors? It's going to be bad if we don't decide soon."

"Since it's a pain in the ass, how about having the JSDF or a certain Tanaka introduce some people to us?"

"I'm 100% sure they'd send in a spy."

"You think any would show up if we put up a regular recruitment?"

"...Being told that, it might still be better to avoid foreign agents to blend in among the applicants."

"Right. I don't think that we'll be able to expose them ourselves anyway, so how about simply choosing by appearance?"

"A handsome hunk or a beauty as instructors would likely be popular among the bootcamp participants."

"Not going with a gorilla-macho here?"

"If I had to choose, a middle-aged man with a sharp aura similar to a veteran..."

"That's your taste!? Oh, right! Won't spies and their ilk stay away if we restrain them with an official stance of 『Everything about you is going to be exposed to us』 due to your Appraisal?"

"Eeehh? Wouldn't that make me a clown if a second <Appraisal> holder appeared?"

"Nah, you'd just every once in a while smile at them with a look telling them that you know absolutely everything about them. Even a spy would feel a tremendous pressure from that, and for everyone else you'd just look like a sociable person."

"Nothing less of you, senpai. As soon as you're allowed to come up with something tricky, only a few can beat you at cunningness."

"Don't worry, one of those few is standing right next to me."

Either way, you could describe the instructor matter as urgent.

## **§084 Every Bootcamp needs a Drill Sergeant 12/31 (Mon)**

— Yoyogi-Hachiman Office —

"So for this reason, don't you have anyone strong and beautiful at hand?"

"Mr. Yoshimura, we are no temporary employment agency..." A certain Tanaka answers me, obviously bewildered, through the telephone.

I've directly reached out to him despite it being New Year's Eve, expecting him to get confused if I suddenly tell him to introduce us to someone and that he might pass the phone to someone else.

"It's just...wouldn't all kinds of people belonging to all kinds of countries apply if we recruit someone normally? Well, it's not like we'd particularly mind that though."

"...I cannot give you an answer right away. Would it be alright for me to contact you at a later time?"

"Of course. I'm looking forward to your contact then."

"Ah, one more thing. It has nothing to do with what we talked about just now——"

"Hmm, is something the matter?"

"Do you know the people who have moved in diagonally behind your office?"

"Diagonally behind?"

Come to think of it, I saw a mini convoy of moving vans the other day, didn't I?

"You mean the big mansion?"

"Yes, that is the one."

"No, I caught sight of moving vans carrying luggage out. Or rather, recently quite many people have left this area, don't you think? I wonder whether this place is cursed by something." I crack a joke, but his reply is something I haven't expected.

"You might not be that far off the mark."

"Eh?"

Mr. Tanaka is no one who would joke around.

"Aww, come on, is that some kind of revenge?"

"No way."

"So, is there anything wrong with the people diagonally behind us?"

"No, it's fine as long as nothing has happened."

"Eeehh!?"

"Okay, please excuse me then."

"Haaa..."

Once I put my cell phone away, Miyoshi comments with an amused look, "Senpai, you've started to improve on your impudence. Is it your grudge over Machu Picchu?"

"Only you'd hate someone over something like that."

I'm not all that eager to travel to secluded regions. Though I'd love to go to the Uyuni Salt Flat for a bit.

"Leaving that aside, what was the last exchange about?"

"Well, I didn't understand it quite well either, but—" I recount my conversation with Tanaka to Miyoshi.

"Cursed? Make sense, seeing how the mansion in the back feels kinda like it's haunted anyway." Miyoshi adopts the pose of a vengeful spirit floating about.

Still, it seems like many people are leaving this area as of late. Even though there should be lots for sale. And then, it doesn't look like anyone is moving in instead. It's a situation where it's only natural for rumors about ghosts appearing to crop up.

Then again, it looks like special people have been coming and going to those vacant rooms, and at the beginning some of them occasionally fell prey to Arthur's which resulted in us passing them on to Mr. Tanaka. But, since it brought no real harm to us so far, I've reached a point of not caring about it, especially for the sake of a peace of mind.

"Doesn't that mean the house diagonally behind us is just the same?"

"And yet, the way he's been talking about it so far..."

"Are we going to investigate it?"

"No, Tanaka's place will likely do something about it, and otherwise, he'll contact us if it becomes truly dangerous, I reckon."

The danger that we'll be discarded if something happens is not zero, but in such a case, I don't think that a man like him would waste his time with something as pointless as providing us with



information.

"Makes sense. Anyway, senpai, what are we going to do about the <Mining> auction?"

"There was that as well, huh?"

The information about <Mining> was published through the 『YoyoDun News Department』 in the evening of the 28th. Requests to allow entry to explorers apparently reached the JDA from all over the world before the information was released to the public, but around now all those times are probably heading for the 18th floor.

"Even though it's the New Year's holiday..."

"What are you talking about?"

"Ah, I just thought that explorers have it tough."

"Senpai, you do remember that you're an explorer as well, don't you?"

"Sure, a shiny G-Rank, that is." I take out my license card, holding it into the light. "The great G is completely different from your usual S-Rank."

"Yeah, yeah."

"So, are you going to put up orbs other than <Mining> for auction?"

The centerpiece this time is going to be <Mining>. But then again, this skill might become common across the world in the near future since its drop rate is so high, but if it's right now, there might exist some organization which wants to obtain it without putting any effort into it.

"Here, take a look. These are the orbs we possess right now."

Storage x 1  
High Recovery x 4  
Water Magic x 6  
Physical Resistance x 8  
Quick Growth x 1  
Immortality x 1  
Detect Life x 2  
Magic Resistance (1) x 1  
Mining x 5  
Earth Magic x 1  
Night Vision x 1  
Dexterity x 1

"They've accumulated quite a bit." Miyoshi says while looking at the list I've started to write after checking <Safe>.

"Well, we haven't used any ever since the time with the genômos. Any among them you want to take for yourself?"

"Not really. Though I think I'll appraise all of them, and summarize the results."

"Oh, yeah. We haven't done that yet, have we?"

If we draw up a document after frequently appraising skills and items, it should become useful when push comes to shove. In the current lineup of skills, <Immortality> could be counted as the worst.

"Considering our company's future activities, I think it'd be smart to keep <High Recovery>."

One of the major goals of our company is going to be support for dungeon explorations. When the explorers, whom we've trained in our bootcamp, challenge the deeper floors, we'll likely require a good chunk of skills to assist them.

"As a measure against unforeseen accidents, huh? For better or worse, quite a number of Potion (1) have piled up as well."

"Thanks to the skeletons. The number of magic crystals has slightly dropped though..."

"Because we've been using them as a reward for Arthur's. I won't complain since I've given my permission, but...wait, the crystals of skeletons still work for them!?"

"I can't tell since I don't have any means to measure it directly. I'll try asking Cavall next time."

"Please do. So, what are we going to put up?"

"For starters, two <Mining> orbs."

"Figures. Explorers obtaining them on their own might soon show up, but right now it should still be in demand. Also, we should keep a certain number of magic, resistance and recovery types as support skills."

If I put myself in the shoes of the military, I can fully understand why items and orbs found by the army don't appear on the public markets. But then again, we should still be able to obtain a reasonable number of those orbs we've currently gathered in numbers in the future.

"Are we going on an expedition, aiming for something specific, when we've got nothing to do at the beginning of the year?"

"That's totally the line of a workaholic, you know?"

"Eh? Isn't the number of people not taking a rest on the first three days of the New Year rather high?"

"Come to think of it, when are we actually taking a rest?"

"You could say Mon-Mon-Tue-Wed-Thu-Fri-Fri, or you could also say that every day's a Sunday for us..."

Even if the things we do don't change, I feel like it's work or holiday, depending on how you call it.

"A monotonous, unchanging life seems like a waste, don't you think?"

"Isn't that the kind of livelihood you like as freedom-lover, senpai?"

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

...I gave up on a livelihood of idling around without doing anything after three days.

"At least once, an extravagant vacation——"

"We could chart a mega yacht and travel around the world, if we feel like it."

Hmm, a cruise with no other guests...? Even if I were to try inviting someone else, I don't know anyone who could take such a long holiday, so in the end it'd be Miyoshi and me, huh?

"...I can imagine myself secluding in the cabin all day long to read manga on my tablet PC."

"It'd cause the staff, who'd call you over for the meals, to become completely flabbergasted, no?"

"If you think about it like this, Japanese suck at playing around, don't they?"

"No, senpai, you shouldn't generalize it just because you suck at it..."

"Okay, what about you then?"

"I'll be fine with eating, you know?"

"You call that playing?" I ask with a wry smile on my lips.

Oh well, it doesn't matter anyway as long as our ban on traveling isn't lifted, but...what do we have to do for that to be canceled?

"Hey, Miyoshi. What do you think we need to do to get the travel ban lifted?"

"Who knows? Wouldn't it disappear if the possibility of our traveling turning into a serious issue for Japan's security guarantee were to be gone?"

"I don't understand at all since this is way too broad of a condition."

"We were told that they'd send over personnel from the defense department when needed."

"A vacation while under surveillance? No thanks."

"Not surveillance, guards. Guards. Ah, but senpai, we might be able to use the power of the state to get all the restaurant reservations, which are usually super hard to get!"

I end up laughing as I imagine a certain Tanaka lamenting, "Mr. Yoshimura, I'm no concierge..."

"Wouldn't it be fun to go with something like <Quick Growth> besides <Mining>?" Miyoshi asks while pointing at her memo.

<Quick Growth> is an orb dropped by goblins, but its drop rate is 1 / 1,200,000,000. You could call it a quite rare skill, and we've confirmed its effect with Miyoshi's <Appraisal>, too. It doubles the SP.

"A doubling of the acquired SP, eh? But you see..."

Twice the SP is a considerable cheat, but the penalty or recoil is the major issue here.

"Isn't the upper stat limit of 60 way too tough?"

"Senpai, at present almost no one has stats at 60."

Okay, that's true as well. If you average 60 per stat, it's going to be 360 SP you need to acquire, and 720 SP if 50% is automatically assigned. Though it's a mystery for how long it'll work in a dungeon as you head deeper down.

"That's why I consider this to be quite useful."

We don't know the precise floor where it'll become troublesome, but it's definitely correct to say that it won't pose much of an issue for a while. I think it'd be best to mention this part in the description.

"If you could delete skills, it'd become a tremendously useful skill."

"In such a case, I'm sure its price would skyrocket as it'd be very popular."

"Any more orbs?"

Just when I ask this, our doorbell rings.

Miyoshi casts a glance on the screen that's showing the video of the intercom's camera.

"Senpai, Simon is here."

"Hah? Isn't he playing Rocky on the 18th floor around this time?"

"Maybe something happened?"

Soon after Miyoshi unlocks the gate, we hear a knocking at our front door.

『Hello, Mr. Simon. Is something wrong for you to come visit us today?』

『Yo, Yoshimura. Actually I've got a lil' request for you guys』

『A request...is it?』

『Whoa, wait, wait. You don't need to be so wary. As a matter of fact——』

According to Simon, an American bigshot is visiting our country and wants to experience New Year's Day at the Meiji Shrine.

『Haah!? New Year's Day? You mad?』

『Well, you can't really expect us to know how things work around here, can you? Though I've already heard that it's going to be pretty crowded』

『Listen, in this case crowded is a heavy underestimation...』

The masses pilgrimaging to the Meiji Shrine over the New Year's holiday can be described as a tsunami. Not to mention the entire temple compound, but even the rather narrow roads leading to the shrine are swarmed by three million people every year. If you want to say that 10 million visitors per year is amazing for a temple, it sure is, but if a third of them concentrates on visiting the place over the first three days of the year, it takes no genius to guess what's going to happen. Especially the two hours from 11 p.m. on New Year's Eve to 1 a.m. on January the 1st are swamped with so many people that it's highly questionable whether a visitor will be able to reach the front shrine in the first place.

『Since you're talking about sightseeing, your bigshot is aiming for the central area of the temple, right?』

The offering box of the Meiji Shrine on New Year's day is expanded to the left and right at a ridiculous size. Because of that people are usually instructed to spread out, but I'm sure that bigshot wants to take the center stage.

『I think it'd be best for a VIP to give up on blending with the common citizens』

It's going to be next to impossible to prevent an assassination in that situation. If things go really badly, he could actually get sniped by a 500-yen coin being thrown at him from behind.

I explain this to Simon, and add, 『Throwing small change at the heads of those standing in the front line is a kind of a custom over there』.

Hearing that, Miyoshi almost bursts into laughter, barely managing to stifle it.

『In short, it'll be impossible to guarantee your bigshot's safety. How about at least changing the date to early morning of another day?』

I don't think any government official would be so egoistic that they wouldn't yield when given such reasons. At least I'd love to believe so.

『Is it such an amazing crowd?』

『Well yeah. Besides, since the vicinity will be filled with ordinary people, you won't be able to simply mow them down either』

『Gotcha. I'll try to change his mind with that line of argumentation. Thanks a lot for the information』

When we've reached a breaking point in our conversation, Miyoshi uses the chance to bring up another topic with Simon, 『Look, Mr. Simon, I won't say that it's in exchange for that information or anything like that, but—』

『What's up?』

『Can you introduce a drill sergeant to us?』

"Huh?" I react in Japanese, faster than Simon could.

Miyoshiii~! What's the idea here!?

『Drill sergeant? What are you planning to do with someone like that?』

In response, Miyoshi briefly explains the new project we're going to launch.

『In other words, Yoshimura or Azusa, you're going to teach a method how to become stronger?』

『If we had a mock battle with explorers above mid-tier, we'd instantly turn into mush』

Miyoshi vehemently shakes her head, clearly telling him what a bad idea it'd be.

『Don't you have any decent personnel who can speak Japanese? As far as we're concerned, it doesn't matter whether they're still in active duty or already retired』

『You mean someone like Ronald Lee Ermey?』

『He had such dreamy eyebrows, didn't he!? Too bad he's already passed away...』

Ever since playing Gunnery Sergeant Hartman, he had stuck to roles with similar format. He passed away in the middle of April this year. Me having first heard about his death on Twitter is an expression of our current era.

『Though we'd like you to avoid going through your administration with this』

Simon folds his arms and ponders for a bit, but then relaxes his arms again, seemingly having come up with someone, and smiles so brightly at us that it's actually eerie instead.

『I know just the right person for the job. She's a Marines sergeant, so she's going to be perfect, right?』

『Eh? She's still in active duty then?』

『I don't have any idea to which military organization she belongs right now, but she should have initially been transferred to the DAD from the Marines』

『Is she in a DAD team then? Won't it be a problem if we headhunt her?』

『Ah, no need to worry. I mean, we'll be able to openly send a spy into the fishiest party in the world, right? I'm going to take any bet that the upper brass will cry out of joy』

『Now listen...』

『Well, leaving the jokes aside, she's a backup for our party, so she doesn't belong to any other teams. And she's quite competent, too!』

A backup from Team Simon? Wouldn't that make her a top explorer? Also, the thing with the spying didn't sound like a joke to me at all...

『That'd be really appreciated, but are DAD members allowed to get paid by other organizations?』

『Oh, a salary? Makes sense』 Simon furrows his eyebrows as if trying to recall the employment rules, but in the end gives a vague reply. 『Hmm...what were the rules again...? Ah, screw it, it's gonna be alright if we simply treat her instructor work as part-time job』

『What an irresponsible answer...』

I mean, is that really going to be okay for her career? I'd really hate to get into trouble with the higher-ups of the U.S. over this, honestly.

『Hey, Yoshimura, can we take part in that bootcamp of yours?』

Suddenly confronted with such a question, I cannot help but to retort in my mind, 'Soldiers don't need any civilian training, man!'

『...You have your own army drills, don't you?』

『Ah, I'm just curious. I mean it looks like you've possess some unique know-how』

『Huh?』

At that moment Miyoshi shows up, bringing us some coffee.

『Oh, those are great beans! Is that your taste, Azusa?』 Simon cheerfully praises after taking in the coffee's aroma.

『Yep. Yoshimura prefers Japanese tea. So, you were applying for our bootcamp?』

『That's the idea. Even for us the areas beyond the 20th floor of Evans were damn risky. To the extent that I'm willing to adopt any measure as long as it's a method allowing us to raise our levels』

Certainly, he and his party members should have amassed plenty of SP. Hence a strengthening in itself won't be much of an issue, but...I somehow feel like it'll be accompanied by quite a few troubles.

『Umm...we've got the regulation that you'll be obligated to assist in the capture of Yoyogi if you take part in our bootcamp』

I timidly bring up an excuse I've just come up with on the spot, and try to strongly emit an aura telling him that it's not going to fly for that reason.

『Sure, why not. We don't have any urgent orders right now』

However, Simon apparently doesn't perceive what I'm trying to tell him.

『Is it really okay for you to make such a promise so easily without deliberating it any further? You've got a lot of other duties like harvesting resources in America's dungeons, don't you?』

『That part falls into the DoD's jurisdiction. The DAD has clearing dungeons as its main objective after it was originally set up as rescue unit for The Ring』

The Ring - probably the most famous dungeon in the world that appeared at America's large accelerator testing ground. As the dungeon came into existence during a test run, the accelerator was destroyed while in use, almost causing a catastrophe that would have instantly involved a nuclear power plant. As a dungeon type using existing structures, the dungeon possesses a ring-shape, following the path of the accelerator. For this reason it was later dubbed The Ring, as far as I've heard.





Yoyogi Dungeon also almost caused a catastrophe by severing the Chiyoda Line, but I suppose it's The Ring where the appearance of a dungeon caused the worldwide biggest disaster.

Being at a loss, I signal Miyoshi with my eyes to take over from here. Please stop it somehow, Miyoshi!

She reassuringly stares back at me, telling me to leave everything to her. I'm counting on you!

『Very well. Once we've got everything ready, you're going to be the first one to participate in our bootcamp, Mr. Simon』

Wait, wait, you're fine with that!?

『No, you got me wrong. I'd like my entire team to participate』

『Ehhh? Your team had four main members, if I remember correctly? If even the instructor is a member of the DAD, it won't be any different from you training at your place, no...?』

『But, it's going to be your training program, correct?』

I weakly confirm, full of worry. At that moment, Miyoshi whispers to me with a devilish smile, "Senpai, senpai, having the best team in the world being our bootcamp's first participants will be the perfect advertisement!"

"Now listen..."

As I cast a sidelong glance, I see how Simon nonchalantly drains down his coffee, which is almost cold by now, obviously having completely finished with this topic.

『Is it okay for us to divulge that your team is going to attend our bootcamp, Mr. Simon?』

Simon lifts an eyebrow, but then immediately nods.

Accepting my fate, I sigh and say, 『Got it. We'll accept your application』

『Great, I'm going to immediately contact her. Is it alright for me to have her come here in person?』

『Please tell her to contact me first since we're going to interview her at a JDA meeting room』  
Miyoshi answers, and hands him her business card.

I'm also worried about what to do about a working visa for her if she's going to be called over from America, but let's trust that the other side will nicely handle it for us. I'm believing in you here, Simon!

...Somehow I feel terribly uneasy about this.

『Man, it's great that we had such a productive chat today!』 Standing up with a happy look on his face, Simon suddenly adds, as if having just remembered, 『Come to think of it, I hear Iori's team has cleared four floors in one go, arriving at the 25th floor. Somehow it looks like the <Water

Magic> they've got from you, Azusa, is doing wonders for them...but, I think they'll very soon start to hit a roadblock. If that happens, they might become your customers as well』

Hee, so they used that <Water Magic> orb on someone from Team I in the end. No surprise there.

『Well then, I've gotta get back to the 28th floor after turning down that selfish guy』

『Please be careful since the entrance to the underground got many narrow areas』

Hearing that, Simon points out with a self-satisfied look, 『What, so you guys went down there after all?』

『Ah, no. It's just something I've heard. Second-hand knowledge, so to say』

『Hoh』

There's just one more thing I gotta tell him no matter what, even at the cost of earning myself a retort.

『Also, about the mountain inhabited by the genômos——』

『Mountain?』

『——Make sure to stay away from the summit』

『You're talking about the blank area on the map that's off limits?』

『Yep, that one』

『Is something wrong with that place?』

I draw close to Simon, and whisper, 『The JSDF report doesn't mention it, but it looks like two troop members were instantly killed there. It seems like something a lot more troublesome than your average run-of-the-mill boss is lurking around there』

『Isn't that quite intriguing then?』

『You don't want to die yet, do you?』

Even the members of the JSDF should have been reasonably good explorers. Not only couldn't they do anything, but they didn't even know what happened. If it's Simon, I'm sure he'll understand what that means.

『Nah, I'm not going to imitate Dmitriy』

『Dmitriy?』

『You don't know him? Dmitriy Nelnikov, the world best explorer until a certain phantom showed up』

A man who's continuing to kill monsters as if haunted by something which earned him the alias "Pathfinder." It's said that his approach towards battle completely coincides with the way of a samurai. Despite him being a Russian.

『Hee』

『If he heard of this, he might immediately jump at the chance』

『That's...quite impulsive』

『So don't keep mum about it. Anyway, thanks for the update』 Simon salutes, does a thumb-up with a broad grin, and leaves like a gale, heading for the place where his friends are waiting for him.

"That guy is coming and going from the 18th floor as if it's 'round the corner..."

"The top-rankers sure are amazing folks."

"Which reminds me, Miyoshi, it sounds like Team I has been promoting <Water Magic> for us."

"I'd say the last orb for the auction is set then."

Well, we've got six of that one, so I guess pawning off one won't matter much.

We should have decided on the four orbs for the auction with this, but Miyoshi is still staring at her memo with a serious look.

"Is something the matter?"

"Senpai, how about we try launching a test balloon?"

"Test balloon?"

"Look, we haven't announced anything about the storage skills because we'd likely get used by various organizations as convenient tools, would be regarded as shady by society, and might be confronted with false accusations the instant we announced our possession, right?"

"Correct."

It'd be another matter if it was just limited to public institutions, but I'd hate to be abducted and then forced to cooperate with mafia cartels and their ilk. Also, it'd be a major pain if we were to be blamed each time a theft, which seems impossible under normal circumstances, occurred somewhere around the globe.

"If people are going to be suspected for just possessing something, you could simply point at any random couple walking around, claiming, 『They're about to commit an act of public obscenity, so why don't you arrest them?』, couldn't you?"

"Are you Jian Yong, or what?"

Jian Yong, who appears in the Annals of the Three Kingdoms, said the same to Liu Bei after seeing a man arrested for breaking the prohibition on the grounding of him possessing tools for wine brewing. He further explained to Liu Bei, who asked for the reason for his claim, that a couple possesses all the tools necessary to commit an act of public obscenity. After laughing at that line of argumentation, Liu Bei apparently released the man, but any modern would person would likely fly into rage about this being whataboutism.

"Either way being exploited right after an official announcement also applies to <Appraisal>, and we don't know how those, who'd falsely accuse us, are going to react as long as we don't actually give it a try."

Even if it'd trigger suspicions about a <Storage> holder being involved in smuggling, as no method to inspect the content of <Storage> exists, all they could rely on would be the testimony of the skill holder. Seeing how they'd have no choice but to tail the skill holder to arrest them at the moment of them storing or retrieving illegal items, I guess the authorities would fall back on plain surveillance. But that's—

"Not much of a difference to now either, right?" Miyoshi comments after I tell her my thoughts, casting a sidelong glance towards the mansion behind us.

"You've got a point there, but..."

I think the nature of the organizations requiring <Storage> and <Appraisal> is totally different, but if the aim lies with the abilities, it might be easier to deal with than some organization that tries to kill you by sniping you all of a sudden. After all such an organization will always be close by.

"The scary part are the underhanded tricks of such organizations."

Ah, stuff like having to do as they tell you because they've taken your family hostage.

"We won't know how much effort the police and other such institutions are going to use to prevent such things from happening unless we actually test it out, right?"

"You...don't tell me..."

"Accordingly, how about we release <Storage> to the world and see what's going to happen?"

"You mean like creating human sacrifice?"

"Please don't say something so ominous, senpai. If an adult uses it out of their own will, it's their own responsibility, isn't it?"

"And that's why a test balloon, eh?"

"Indeed. Besides, if we publish this, it's definitely going to be regarded as an item box, I'm sure. This is going to have the nice side effect that your <Safe> is going to stay under the radar."

Even if the lifespan of a skill orb is doubled, I doubt it's going to unravel the mystery of the three-

days bidding period.

"But look, won't we earn quite the shitstorm from all over if we suddenly put it up for auction?"

"About that...unlike with <Different World Language Comprehension>, it's not like <Storage> is directly related to a nation's security guarantee, so I don't think that it'll be necessary to give priority to the state."

"Figures. It's going to be organizations related to dungeon capturing and crime syndicates who are going to desire it like mad."

If we simply put it up for auctions, it's very likely that folks connected to crime syndicates are going to win the bid by throwing a huge amount of cash at it. I mean, as long as they have that skill, they'll be able to smuggle as much gold, drugs, and other illegal stuff as they want.

A seller isn't responsible for how a buyer uses the kitchen knife or metal bat they purchased, but it's still going to have a bad aftertaste.

"How about we first check the tidings by divulging its existence somewhere?"

"If we use our connections, it'd be the JDA, Mr. Tanaka-or-whatever, or Simon, huh?"

"We'll be stuck between a rock and a hard place if it turns into a tug-war by all of them, that's for sure."

"Yep."

"Okay, then how about we open up to our exclusive deputy chief and get her opinion, leaving aside whether we put it up for auction for the moment?"

"Makes sense. This skill might become indispensable if a safe area, as mentioned in the epitaphs, is going to be discovered. I suppose we can't shelve this issue forever."

Thus we've decided to throw another difficult problem at you, dear exclusive deputy chief. Yours sincerely.

"Still, I wonder what kind of person is going to show up."

"You mean the instructor? At least I'd like to be spared from some peaky, old hag."

"Won't she have a decent personality, seeing how positively Mr. Simon talked about her?"

No, Miyoshi. That was his smile that he's expecting something amusing to happen. However, the key point here is that it's only going to be amusing for Simon.

"Given that she's their backup, I think she's going to be skilled enough, but...anyway, we've got no choice but to wait for her contact, I guess."

"But before any of that, we've got to fabricate a believable program."

Come to think of it, we still haven't decided what we're going to have the participants do at the bootcamp.

"Miyoshi, do you have any knowledge in that area?"

"I suspect it to be at around the same level as yours, senpai."

In short, both of us are complete newbies.

"Then we might as well let them run around the outer circumference of the second floor all day long."

"That's going to be 31.4 km per lap, you know? Say whatever you like, but that's a bit over the top...though people at the level of Mr. Simon might have no issue with that."

"Okay, then let's go with one lap at full speed for starters. That should work with explorers above mid-tier, shouldn't it?"

"Mhm, I see."

"And then...for example, how about preparing around 1,000 sewing needles and having those who want to raise their DEX thread with those needles?"

"I wonder...won't they think that we're making fools out of them?"

"They might believe so, if it's ten needles, but it's going to be alright with a 1,000. Eventually they're going to become unable to ponder about useless stuff because of the overly simple work. It's going to give them the impression that it's meaningful in some way, don't you think?"

"Doesn't that register as brainwashing...or rather, won't we get killed right away if they find out that it actually serves no purpose whatsoever?"

"It's definitely bound to create truly ridiculous situations if they try to steal our program. It'd be even better if we give some plausible reason in advance, like there being some secret to the size of the holes or the thickness of the threads."

"Senpai..."

"How about going with the application of a ninja training by having them repeat jumping sideways to the extent that they'll puke, if it comes to AGI?"

"Okay, let's have them take yoga poses in the breaks in-between!"

"Saying that we're having their bodies absorb the dungeon's power or some such, yep, yep...no wait, we're in Japan, so we've gotta call it Zen, don't we?"

"Senpai, senpai, how about we have them drink something like vegetable juice in the breaks?"

"That's a great idea, Miyoshi. It's going to definitely look like it might have some effect."

Just like that, we continued to pan out a 『horrifying』 menu for our bootcamp.

"Ah, right. Senpai, I am truly sorry, but I have to leave now since I am engaged otherwise."

I spontaneously burst into laughter because of her shady, roundabout way of phrasing it.

"What's with the formal speech?"

"Completely unexpected, isn't it? Look, I've talked about the preparations for the press conference, haven't I?"

"Preparations, you say... it's going to take place in a JDA conference room anyway, no?"

"Well, you're right about that, but you see, if we leave everything up to the JDA, isn't it likely that all kinds of things could happen?"

This whole story stems from Executive Director Mizuho having pulled the wires in the back to begin with. She's right. If we leave everything up to them, we won't know what kind of scary press conference it's going to become.

"I kinda get the weird feeling that it's odd for things to be less of a bother if we do it by ourselves, but...you're talking about that director from before?"

"Senpai, you've been the one saying that connections exist to be used."

"Sure, that's not wrong per se, but..."

I don't really want to get involved too closely with someone of the mass media, or how should I describe it...

"It's going to be fine. I won't do anything unreasonable. It's okay to hold the press conference on the 6th?"

"I'll leave that part in your hands. After all, I'm just going to play a support role anyway."

"Gotcha."

Several days later we got a phone call from Mr. Tanaka-or-whatever, but at that point we'd completely forgotten about the request we made to him.



— **Port District** —

Himuro Takatsugu stared at his ringing smartphone with the eyes of a dead fish. However, even after the ringtone had played back ten times, his phone didn't cease to vibrate.

"Fuck!"

Bitterly cursing, he lifted the phone, and yet still hesitated for another three seconds before taking the call.

'If I continue ignoring her, it's possible that she's going to pop up in front of me all of a sudden. Just like in that nightmare at the hospital.

"Hello, how are you doing?"

"Please, give me a break."

"What do you mean? I just wanted to consult you about a little something."

"...Please..."

"Now, now, calm down. You'll only need to listen to me for a bit. Do you know a good place for us to meet up?"

"Pleas——"

"If you like, I'm fine with your place, too."

Being told so, Himuro jerked his face up, surveying his room.

"What's it going to be?"

Himuro dropped his shoulder, having resigned himself to his fate, and told her the name of a cafe near his company.



The cafe was old-fashioned with an air of retro. Even though it was the evening of New Year's Eve, the seats had filled up bit by bit with the customers apparently looking for a place to spend their time calmly away from all the hustle and bustle. The antique cups arrayed on the wall behind the counter spoke of the owner's refined taste.

As soon as Himuro opened the entrance door, an elderly man, who appeared to be the owner in question, called out to him, "Welcome. It's been quite a while since your last visit here, hasn't it?"

"Y-Yeah, well."

In the past Himuro had often frequented this cafe, but he had started to visit it less often after smoking inside was prohibited, even if this was the natural flow of the era, and as he himself became ever so busy, he finally stopped coming here altogether.

"Oh, how unusual. You're on a date?"

'Date?

He suddenly felt a presence on his right side, and hurriedly turned his head in that direction. The devil, who had driven him to the very bottom of dread in his hospital room, stood there while smiling broadly.

"Hello."

"H-How...?" Himuro squeezed out something that didn't register as much of a question with his mouth flapping like that of a fish.

"Oh my, it sounds like it's a bit more complicated than that. I suppose the counter wouldn't be the best choice then?"

"Thank you very much for your consideration. We'd like to take one of the boxes deeper inside."

"Please be my guest and choose whichever you like."

Miyoshi nodded at the owner's words, prompted Himuro who had frozen on the spot, and headed towards a free box.

Even as he sat down moments later, Himuro still acted like a fish that had just been pulled ashore, but once he recovered some of his composure after a while, he bent himself forward, obviously having made up his resolve, and asked, "So, what is it that you desire from me? Did you come to take my soul?"

"What's up with that? Do you take me for a person who would crack a boiled egg on a table with one hand, roll it around, and eat it after peeling the eggshell?"

"You're spot on. I'd love to turn into someone else through a ritual in order to escape your clutches."

The movie 『Angel Heart』 told the story of Johnny, a crooner who sold his soul to Lucifer in exchange for stardom, and later on attempted to renege on the bargain by becoming someone else through a Satanic ritual. The devil, who visited him to collect his due, ate a boiled egg in the same manner as described by Miyoshi.

"In that case, you've succeeded in the same way, haven't you Mr. Himuro?"

"Haah?"

Certainly, Johnny might have succeeded to some extent, but still had his soul taken anyway. Himuro flat refused sharing the same fate.

"As a matter of fact, I was thinking about requesting a little job from you."

"Job?"

"Mr. Himuro, you're a director at a TV production company, aren't you?" Miyoshi confirmed while looking at Himuro as if wondering why he was so slow on the uptake.

"Y-Yeah."

Nodding at his response, she requested for him to manage the press conference that was slated to be held on January the 6th.

'Of course, sometimes production companies also handle press conferences as a part of their work, but—

"No, wait a sec...the 6th, you say?"

"Yes."

"Today is the 31st, you know?"

"I do."

"...Now listen..."

Generally press conferences were held to announce something to someone. If the target audience was the media, it'd usually be necessary to pick a time and date that would make it easy for reporters to gather, and spread the news about the press conference well in advance. January the 6th was a Sunday. If you took the New Year's holidays into account, only one regular weekday, the 4th, would be available to set up everything. To Himuro it seemed as though Miyoshi didn't really have much interest in holding that press conference.

"It's just as you say. I'd have absolutely no problem with no one turning up at all."

"Why are you holding a press conference then?"

"I guess you could call it an obligation of my trade."

"Haah." Himuro couldn't help but only give a silly response as he didn't understand left from right.

'According to the devil in front of me, it seems of bigger importance to set up a place for the media to ask questions than actually announcing something at this press conference of hers.

"So it was offered to you?"

"Well, I'd rather call it forced on us."

"Is it possibly about the auctions run by you guys?"

"The folks, who schemed this setup, most likely want to question us about that, but we plan to use it for announcing the establishment of our company."

"Are you going to hold auctions at that company?"

"No."

"That's a devil for you. At this point I've got absolutely no clue what she's talking about."

"So the media companies are going to attend the press conference to do what?"

"To look stupid?"

Himuro sympathized a tiny bit with this devil.

"I'm quite aware that we've been overdoing it to such an extent that terms like media scrum came into existence. Then again, seeing how they're business rivals, it's impossible for the underlings to stop doing it out of their own will."

"So what then? Are you saying you wanna leave it to a guy who knows the ropes since you want to control the whole thing, seeing how the guys who brought up the story might do something unexpected, but don't have a clue how to actually do it?"

"You've got it. We wouldn't even know how to lead this whole show."

"Lead the show, you say...don't you just need to appear there if you want to establish the fact that you've done it?"

"If the whole press conference becomes flawed because of that, it'll be used as a pretext to have us hold another one."

"And that's where I come into play, eh?"

"Isn't that what you'd call 'even a chance meeting is due to fate'?"

"If possible, I'd've liked to be let off at the 'chance meeting' part, though."

Himuro drained his coffee which was about to get cold.

"I don't wanna get involved with this woman. But, abandoning everything and hiding myself is no option, and if I don't go that far, she's going to find me anyway. But, thinking about it, isn't this a great chance? There's no doubt that they've got some value. At least to the extent that Ishidzuka is obsessed with them."

"So this is what selling your soul to the devil is about, eh?"

"Huh?"

"In short, as long as I pass on the news about the press conference to related media folks while following regular press conference procedures, you don't care whether reporters attend the press conference afterwards or the target audience reads it later or not?"

"That's how it is."

Once he asked Miyoshi about further details, Himuro found out that not only the venue, but even the preparations for the moderator and interviewers had apparently been finished already.

'It looks like all I've gotta do is to pass on the information to the media, I reckon.

"I don't have an idea about the pay for such jobs, but how about this much?" The envelope Mioyshi presented him was quite thick.

'If it's filled with 10,000 Yen bills, it's gonna be more than a million.

"How about it? Are you going to take up the job?"

'The devil corrupts people with a bewitching smile. Come to think of it, Harry also made the mistake of not turning down the 5,000 Dollar, didn't he?

Himuro smiled in self-mockery, reaching out for the envelope.



なか じま はる おみ  
NAME: 中島 治臣

DATA: man / age 25 / 170cm

いい年をして一人称が「僕」の男はマザコンなどという不当なレッテルを貼られかねない時代だが、他人の評価などどこ吹く風で、一向に気にせず専門分野ヲタクの彼は、語り始めると長い。女性におだてられるとつい頑張っちゃうタイプで、総じて育ちがいいに違いない。常磐医療機器研究所のハードウェア開発を一手に引き受けている天才だが、手綱を握っておかないと、どこまでも無駄に高性能を追求してしまい、天災になりかねない、連続用紙LOVEな男だ。



なる せ みどり  
NAME: 鳴瀬 翠

DATA: woman / age 24 / 164cm

常磐医療機器研究所所長の彼女は、ベンチャーを立ち上げて成功しかけている才女で、親分肌だ。JDAの鳴瀬美晴の妹だがよく姉と間違われる。美晴が子供っぽいのか、翠が大人っぽいのかは謎だが。冷徹な経営者と、夢見がちな子供が同居しているのは、起業家の常だろうか。中島を憎からず思っているが、理系の男子は……とため息を吐くことも多い。夢食う虫も好き好き、破れ鍋にとじ蓋を地で行く人。

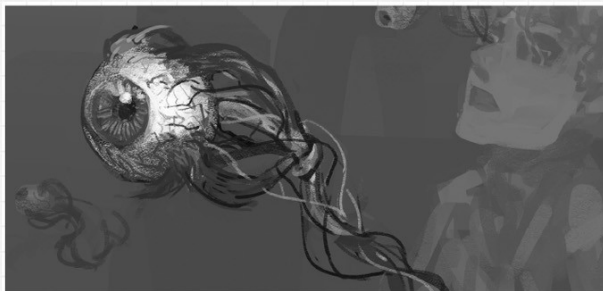
## バロウワイト

世界一有名なファンタジーに「塚人」の訳語で登場するも、映画からはハブにされた哀しいやつ。巨大な剣を引きずって登場し、それを物理的に振り回す様子はまるで塚人っぽくなく、むしろスケルトル・エクスキューショナー然としている脳筋なスケルトンだ。



## アイボール

製作者の間では婢妖<sup>ひよう</sup>くんと呼ばれていたが、耳はついていないのでセフセフ。初回は軒下にぎっしりと集まっているし、2回目はゴーストたちの眼窩<sup>がんか</sup>からずりりと滑り落ちて登場するという忤<sup>おそ</sup>ましさに館のトラウマの原因に大きな役割を果たした。



## ガーゴイル

本来は雨樋の機能をもつ彫刻で、口からごぼごぼと水を吐き出す様子が罪を外部へ吐き出しているとされることもあるが、大抵はただの雰囲気だけで特段の意味はない。周囲を睥睨<sup>へいげい</sup>する悪魔然とした石像が動き出すのはもはやファンタジーの鉄板だ。



## さまよえる館

サンタクルーズの近郊に建っていた18世紀風の古い建物。元はタイラー博士の母方のマナーハウス。

実物は、89年の地震で被害を受けた後売却されている。

また、この館については空間的にも混乱しており階や部屋、扉の大きさなどが見た状態と変わってしまうこともある。

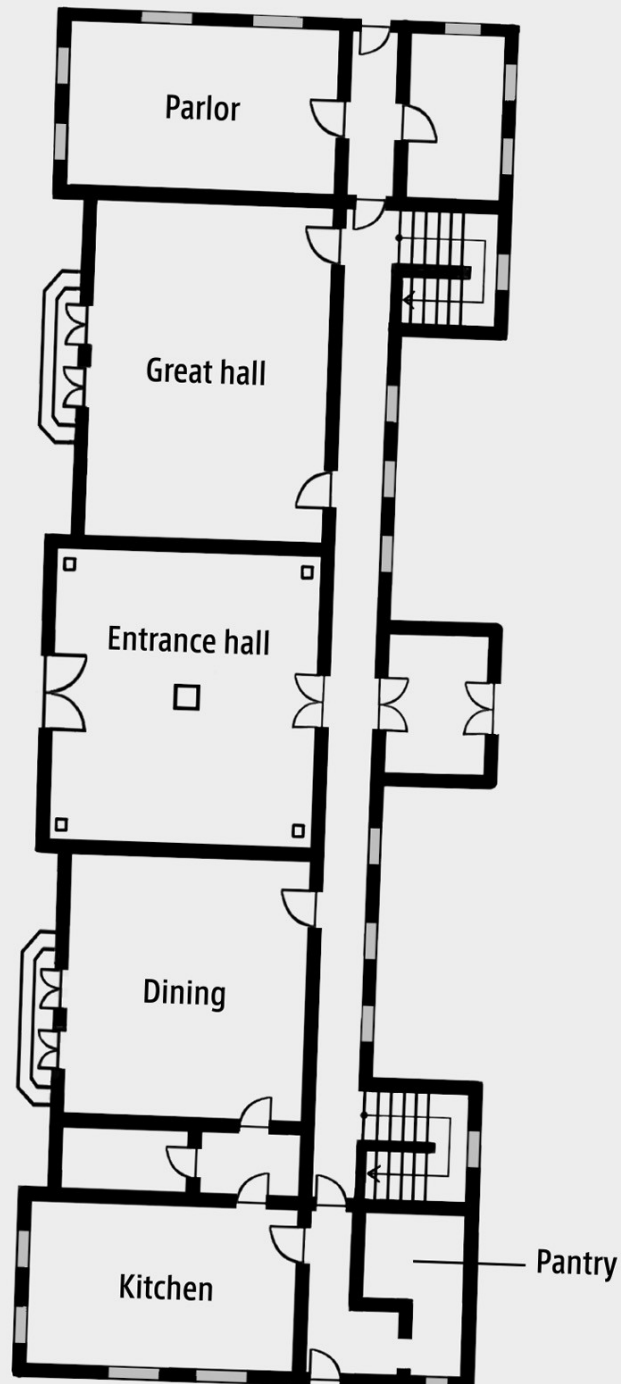




## さまよえる館 1階

2階は客間となっており、  
中央の玄関ホール付近に  
タイラー博士がいた書斎  
がある。

正面



裏庭

