This translation is modified from the official English translation provided at https://digimon.net/digimonseekers/ Its only purpose is to perhaps provide a little more readability. I will try to update as regularly as possible, but they may be sporadic. Please continue to show your support to Digimon Seekers by viewing the official site! -@onkeikun

CHAPTER 1 - Eiji: Wolf of ninth avenue

Chapter 1-1

A wireframe T-Rex is running.

The Tyrannosaurus rex -- a carnivorous reptile that reigned on Earth during the Cretaceous Period about 67 million years ago. The largest ever to be recorded was 13 meters long and weighed 9 tons.

A dinosaur -- but what was running here was a slightly different creature from what paleontologists had theorized based on fossil findings.

This creature is much smaller than the T-Rex. And yet its forelegs are remarkably developed, and its three claws are sharp enough to tear apart its prey's flesh.

--- Tyranomon. Adult-level. Dinosaur type. Data species.

Its wireframe 3D body is covered with skin textures, mapped to bring about additional texture.
The pseudo red T-Rex creatures run.
They were herding their prey together. One chased, another stalked, while the last one laid in wait... It was a highly intelligent coordinated group hunt.
Gradually, their prey would be trapped, drawn deeper and deeper into the tunnel.
When the claws of the approaching Tyranomon were finally about to capture its prey...

POW!

ROOOAAARRR... With an ear-splitting roar, a huge square object passed by them at breakneck speed.
It was a subway train – a wireframe train.
The Tyranomon, forced to pull back to dodge the hurtling subway, could only see vermillion, the color of its tracks marking the route. The train's destination display showed a mysterious string of characters in a language that looked both familiar and unknown.

They were not in a jungle of ancient times, but a concrete underground constructed with line drawings.

The three Tyranomon resumed chasing after their escaping prey. They turned off at a branch in the tunnel and went deeper underground.
SPLASH!

The sound of feet slapping through water.

This road led to a vast sewer system. It was so dark that nothing could be seen, not even the tips of outstretched fingers.

But the Tyranomon were aware of their surroundings.

The stench of filth from stagnant winds, the footsteps of prey fleeing through the channel... They could sense the very air around them.

Graaarrr!

The Tyranomon lying in wait screamed.

A tornado suddenly formed out of nowhere, and the column of water sent the Tyranomon flying.

Thrown off-balance, the Tyranomon fell on its back into the waterway, its belly exposed.

FUSHAAA!

The shockwave that followed came from close range, delivering an unexpected but powerful finishing blow.

The Tyranomon was silenced by its prey's retaliation, and static around the wound on its red skin spread.

——————⬢——————

A pop-up billboard with a 3D advertisement. The store's mascot, a Kabuki-like character with its face covered in heavy Kumadori makeup, was jumping out into the street, advertising a new burger with four times more meat than any other burger on the market.

"Wonder if there are any good part-time jobs out there…"

Eiji Nagasumi took up a spot at the 2nd floor counter of the fast food restaurant, lingering there with a soft drink that he got with a coupon.

With smartphone in hand, he skimmed through the topics of the social networking site GriMM.

GriMM is a pan-global communication tool. In addition to basic short message, voice chat, video and live-streaming functions, it also maintained various communities based on group channels. GriMM probably had the highest number of users among all social networking sites. Its most distinctive feature was that it formed a single economic zone by serving as a financial tool with its own cryptocurrency DC (Digicoin).

However, it was also half-illegal.

"Tools cost a helluva lot of money, and I'm gonna have to learn how to actually code on my own rather than outsource. Oh shit… chip prices are rising again. Guess my business is about to go into red ocean," Eiji muttered something along those lines to himself.

GriMM is a must for freelancers like Eiji looking to make money, as it serves as a venue for information gathering, private sales, and crowdsourcing. GriMM is essentially a republic in the network that is based on an entirely new set of values.

…Without exaggeration, so to speak. The scale of its economy is such that it now threatens nations with major powers in the real world.

"A breeder… is a bit too much for me to handle. I guess capturing for collectors is the quickest and easiest way to make money. But in order to be a full-time hunter, I'd need a sales channel with customers... A Black Agumon? 100 million DC for its capture?!"

Eiji looked hungrily at this job request.

Agumon is the name of a data type that was traded by code crackers like Eiji – undocumented workers in the network community – who frequented GriMM.

--- "Agumon, Black." - "Must be alive and unharmed."

The dinosaur-shaped silhouette was accompanied by details and a note in the job description.

100 million DC is more than 100 million yen, right…? That was more money than Eiji could imagine, probably enough for him to live for 10 years without working.

However, as he perused the replies of the original post, he immediately deflated. All of the comments were either filled with abusive words, prankish, or plain begging for money...

GriMM was a lawless place. It was the network equivalent of a garbage dump.

"Ugh, this must be some kind of urban legend or something. There's no way that 100 million is real, and besides, it wouldn't be called Agumon if it was black… What the! My Tyranomon #3!"

He raised his voice without thinking.

A group of high school students on the same floor glanced at Eiji.

Until last year, Eiji had been wearing a high school uniform just like them.

Like them, he'd lived a life of mindless ease, chatting about nothing important, with no goals in mind, no worries about the future. Fun days with no real sense of purpose…

Eiji stopped swiping his phone and used his other hand to touch another gadget on the table. It was handheld sized, with a monochrome LCD screen and control buttons. At first glance, it looked like an electronic toy.

On the screen was a pixelated character, looking like a tiny dinosaur-like creature.

--- Tyranomon.

Its name was displayed, but this one had fallen to the ground and had X's for eyes.

"I was so busy looking for a job that I blew all my money away! Stupid, stupid, stupid!"

Eiji hit his own head repeatedly.

The other two Tyranomon, #1 and #2, looked at him from across the tiny black-and-white screen. They appeared troubled, as though awaiting instructions.

"Please, you gotta do this! I'll go broke otherwise!"

Eiji used the gadget to replace the downed Tyranomon with another one.

"If you don't capture the target, you get no food! Or rather, if you don't capture it, no food for me for a month!"

The high school students must have thought he was a weirdo that got too serious about video games. They raised their eyebrows and left their seats to get away from him.

But this wasn't a game.

This was serious business.

Eiji is a code cracker.

A hacker is someone who possesses outstanding computer skills, but code crackers are hackers who are willing to engage in "illegal" and "gray-area" activities. Code crackers were more of a jack-of-all-trades within network communities.

"Set tool settings to 'capture!' Reassign target to 'ModokiBetamon!' You're about to regret underestimating Cracker 'Fang,' AKA Eiji Nagasumi… Execute command and away you go!"

With a click, he pressed the "Execute" button. The Tyranomon on the monochrome LCD screen vanished.

They had a job to do. All that was left now was for the A.I. to capture the "prey" specified by the tool.

After downing his drink in the soggy paper cup, Eiji began to browse through GriMM again.

Character design/illustration: malo

Chapter 1-2

Tokyo Dennō University was established as a major government program to welcome and support science majors who would become responsible for the future of science, technology, and the nation itself.

Although relatively new, it boasted top-class research that was responsible for great strides in the field of computer science. It is located in the Denrin District, which has become the new center of the multinational city of Tokyo. The university's reputation as a good starting point for jobs with global companies and tech giants made it increasingly popular with prospective students.

Adjacent to TDU's Denrin campus, there is another facility.

Abadin Electronics Corp., AKA "AE."

AE is the leading company in electronic terminals, network equipment, and fabless semiconductors. The Abadin Electronics' Denrin Digital Lab (DDL) was the home base of AE's research and development team.

The first-floor lobby at DDL was simpler than Eiji had imagined.

All it had was a reception desk and a common-looking waiting bench. The large TV display on the wall didn't show any advertisements about AE. Rather, it showed scenes of prairies, dense forests, polar seas, mountain ranges, rapids trailing autumn leaves, the underground and caves... scenes of nature from each of the four seasons in an endless video loop.

"I guess that's because the Digital Lab is a research facility, and AE's headquarters is elsewhere."

The exterior walls of the lab were gently curved with green, and there was no company logo or sign to indicate what a prestigious place it was. Anyone passing by might think that this building was part of the University next door.

Eiji looked at his reflection in the glass.

He was dressed in his usual casual attire. Apparently, casual attire was allowed at the DDL.

The people who worked here were supposed to be the elite, the best and finest minds of the field. It wasn't the place for a freelancer who was fresh out of high school.

Regardless, Eiji walked to the reception desk without hesitation.

He was here to work.

"Hello..."

Eiji calmly greeted the receptionist.

"Huh?"

She looked at Eiji with eyes that clearly wondered what this suspicious-looking kid was doing in here. Since he wasn't wearing a square backpack, he obviously wasn't here for a food delivery.

Oh, I see… There must be college students or passersby who occasionally enter the lab by mistake. She must have drawn the conclusion that he was one of them.

"I have an appointment. Do I type into this tablet?"

A research facility is bound to have trade secrets. There were several buff guards stationed at the gate on the other side. If this were the United States, they would be carrying handguns.

"Yes... Of course..."

Even her hesitant voice was cute.

She had short, voluminous hair tucked in at the collar. While she wore a plain outfit in the style of what was to be expected at a laboratory, she had a small face and a slender neck and shoulders. She was the type who was bound to attract attention just by sitting there.

"---Do I put my real name where it asks for my full name? I tend to use an alias at work."

"Excuse me, but are you a writer or in show business?"

"Neither."

It was not a stage name or a pen name. Eiji, like most code crackers, used his alias for job functions.

"Please use your real name then, if you don't mind."

"Eiji Nagasumi then… Phone number, appointment time… and the reason for the meeting, would that be enough?" Eiji took a look at her nameplate. "Hatsune-chan."

"Please don't get all casual on me."

"Okay then... Hatsune-cchi."

"...!" A muscle twitched at Hatsune's temple. "If you're here on business, then put your company's name here..."

"I don't have a company yet."

"Oookay..."

"But my occupation is... Wait, what was that guy's department again? Oh, whatever, this is such a pain in the neck."

Eiji took out his smartphone.

— Tomonori Ryusenji, professor.

Tapping on the contact, he sent an "I'm here" and decided to wait in the lobby.

There were several other guests there, all of them receiving guest passes from reception. None of them looked like businessmen, but rather like academics who had just stepped across the campus buildings of TDU.

(...)

Eiji looked at the object in the center of the lobby.

Three spheres floated in the air. Each sphere had a distinctive mark engraved on it.

They formed a circle with each other, more or less, rotating as they overlapped each other. They were like three globular clusters gravitationally pulling each other in space.

(Did I see those here before...?)

Eiji went to take a closer look and pulled back in astonishment.

"This is a three-dimensional image... A Hololize!"

"---Hey, Fang!"

A voice from the other side of the gate called out his codename.

At the same time, the three circular objects collapsed, disappearing without a trace.

Eiji turned around.

The man was about 170 centimeters tall, a chiseled face with a touch of gray and a slight Caucasian look to him. He should have been in his 60s, but his gait and posture made him appear much younger.

The majesty of his presence was more apparent in the reactions of those around him than in the man himself. The eyes of everyone in the lobby trailed after him at his unexpected appearance.

"Hello, Mr. Ryusenji… I mean, Professor!"

Professor Ryusenji was one of the co-founders of Abadin Electronics.

An extremely wealthy man, he still owned more than 20% of AE's shares, which have a market capitalization of more than $100 billion.

He was called a professor because he also happened to be a university professor. As the boss of Ryusenji Laboratory, which is well known in the industry, he was also currently a professor emeritus at Tokyo Dennō University. He had built his company, which had started up as a university-launched venture, into the world-class company that it was now known for within the past 10-20 years as one of its top executives.

"This is my first time meeting Cracker Fang, but it certainly doesn't feel like a first time."

In terms of social status, the man was untouchable. Under normal circumstances, Ryusenji would not be someone with whom Eiji would feel at ease.

"Well, we're always talking through voice chat. Oh, my name is Eiji Nagasumi," Eiji said, introducing himself properly.

"Well then, Fang– or rather, Eiji-kun, let's get going. Sorry for all the trouble we put you through. Which reminds me… A guest pass for him, please," Ryusenji said to reception.

The suspicious-looking kid had just so casually summoned the de facto boss of Japan's AE that the receptionist, Hatsune, became increasingly nervous and flustered.

"Yes, sir! Right away…"

"We're going to D4, so he will need a Co-researcher Pass."

"What?"

"The board has given its approval… just this morning."

"Oh… Of course, sir, understood!"

Hatsune was surprised for the second time as she tapped the terminal to confirm this and issued his pass.

———◆———

As Eiji held up his special pass, he walked through the gate detectors as the guards stood by in rigid salute.

Just doing this made Eiji feel a bit more like an adult.

Employees and researchers passing by greeted Ryusenji as they walked down the corridors. Eiji stood behind him like glue, staring wide-eyed at everything and returning their bows.

It felt great.

"Professor Ryusenji, why are you called "professor"? Why not the president, or vice president, or board chairman?"

"Probably because 'professor' is what describes me best."

He must mean because he had the mind of a researcher. He had already left the management of AE to his former subordinates.

Eiji himself wasn't sure how to interact with a corporate manager, but he felt more comfortable talking to someone who acted more like a university professor.

"Before we go to my office, I'd like to stop by a place. There is something I want to show you."

"What is it? I can't wait to see!"

"This way."

They took the elevator to the next floor, where they were met by another heavily guarded gate.

The gate wasn't the same as the one in the lobby, a detection gate that you'd pass through in an airport. This one was a bulkhead. This area up ahead seemed to be completely isolated from the rest of the DDL building.

— The D4 Section.

"What you're about to see here is Abadin Electronics' top secret project. The core research that will determine the future of our company is being conducted here," Ryusenji explained.

The core of AE's state-of-the-art research facility DDL was in D4.

Eiji gave up his phone and personal belongings to the waiting security guard. He was also subjected to a rigorous body check.

"..."

"What is it?"

Ryusenji, who had passed through the bulkhead gate before him, looked back at Eiji.

"Umm, I'm not sure if I'm ready for this."

"I assure you, it's just an experience, that's all. Do you not like amusement park rides?"

"Huh? You mean the fun kind?"

"Indeed, indeed... Not that we're genetically engineering dinosaurs or researching a zombie virus."

"Now *those* sound like fun."

Relaxed by Ryusenji's joke, Eiji passed through the D4 gate.

And inside was—

Character design/illustration: malo

Chapter 1-3

It was a sea of networks within a dome-shaped theater.

Eiji stood in the center of the room as a schematic diagram constructed with wireframes was projected before him.

Floating on the surface of the Worldwide Web were the servers of nations, corporations, and research institutes. Their servers sat atop its surface like floating islands or ships on waves.

The projection then dove deeper beneath the network to a deep-sea region, where a completely different world unfolded.

— The Digital World.

A voice began to play within the dome theater, taking them through an audio tour.

The wireframe schematic was rendered into 3D and took on vivid colors.

"It is a world different from our world, the real world," the audio said. "One could call it a cyberspace that exists in the digital network."

The 'other world' that stretched out from beyond the network, the Digital World.

Such scenic beauty…

While the picture quality was poor, it had a clear and beautiful wilderness to it, much like the environmental images shown in the entrance lobby.

"Inhabiting this Digital World," the audio continued, "are these—"

The data became 3-dimensional.

It was Hololize, a technology that was spearheaded by TDU and put to practical use by AE. This technology was what was used in all of the 3D digital signage seen throughout the city.

"---Digital Monsters, known as Digimon!"

Something was Hololized.

At first glance, it looked like… a frog?

It was like a tadpole that still had a tail, but on the verge of becoming a frog. It had the color of a watermelon, green with black stripes. What made it distinctive were its dorsal fin that stuck up like a mohawk, the claws on its limbs, and fangs curled up into a cocky smirk.

—Betamon. Child-level. Amphibian type. Virus species.

The pseudo-frog's data was displayed.

"Digimon are information life forms that live in the Digital World," the audio explained. "An A.I. lifeform!"

You'd never find something like this in a school textbook.

(An A.I. lifeform…?)

Digimon of different motifs— like fish, amphibian, reptile, mammal, plant, insect, crustacean, mollusk, even machine and chemical phenomena, not to mention other phenomena like the myriads of mythological creatures, gods, and demons to exist— Hololized one after the other.

The discovery of the Digital World and research about its history.

The identity of Digital Monsters, known as Digimon.

The evolution of Digimon (Baby, Child, Adult, Perfect, Ultimate-levels).

The three basic attributes of Digimon classification, etc…

These explanations came along with the images of the Hololized Digimon.

"That's the object I saw in the lobby…"

A video of the object that Eiji had seen before emitted a tri-colored laser show, illuminating repeatedly over Eiji as he stood in the center of the dome theater.

"It's the motif of the three attributes that form the basis of a Digimon's taxonomy— 'Virus,' 'Data,' and Vaccine,'" Ryusenji explained.

"Digimon are the fruition of mankind's efforts, of our successful contact with a new world – the Digital World – in the network!" the audio cried. "Digimon have revolutionized human society. By using and applying Digimon A.I. as tools, it has led to remarkable discoveries in various areas of study such as software development, cryptographic security, and A.I. drug development. However—"

It is still a secret to mankind.

A majority of people in the world still don't know that the Digital World even exists.

Suddenly, the image was disrupted.
The dome theater vibrated.

— And even if they did, they wouldn't understand it anyway.

The tone of the dialogue changed at that last line. It sounded like it had been processed through a machine.
"---There is the ethical and non-ethical. Digimon can be misused as tools of cyber-terrorism. These instances are known as 'Digimon Crimes.'"
The video abruptly jumped to a scene in the real world.

It was… the passenger cabin of an airliner.

The plane's wings could be seen outside a window. The roar of its engine jets was audible as the plane flew above the clouds at night.
The video was being taken by one of the passengers filming the cabin with his smartphone.
Sleeping next to him, under a blanket, was either the photographer's wife, lover, or daughter...
—BOOOHHH!
A realistic roar of wind deafened Eiji.
The world was flooded by static and then… silence.

—ROOOOOOAAAAAARRRRRR.

Without warning.
Their vision went dark. The angle of the video was disturbed. An alert. Oxygen masks came down in the cabin.
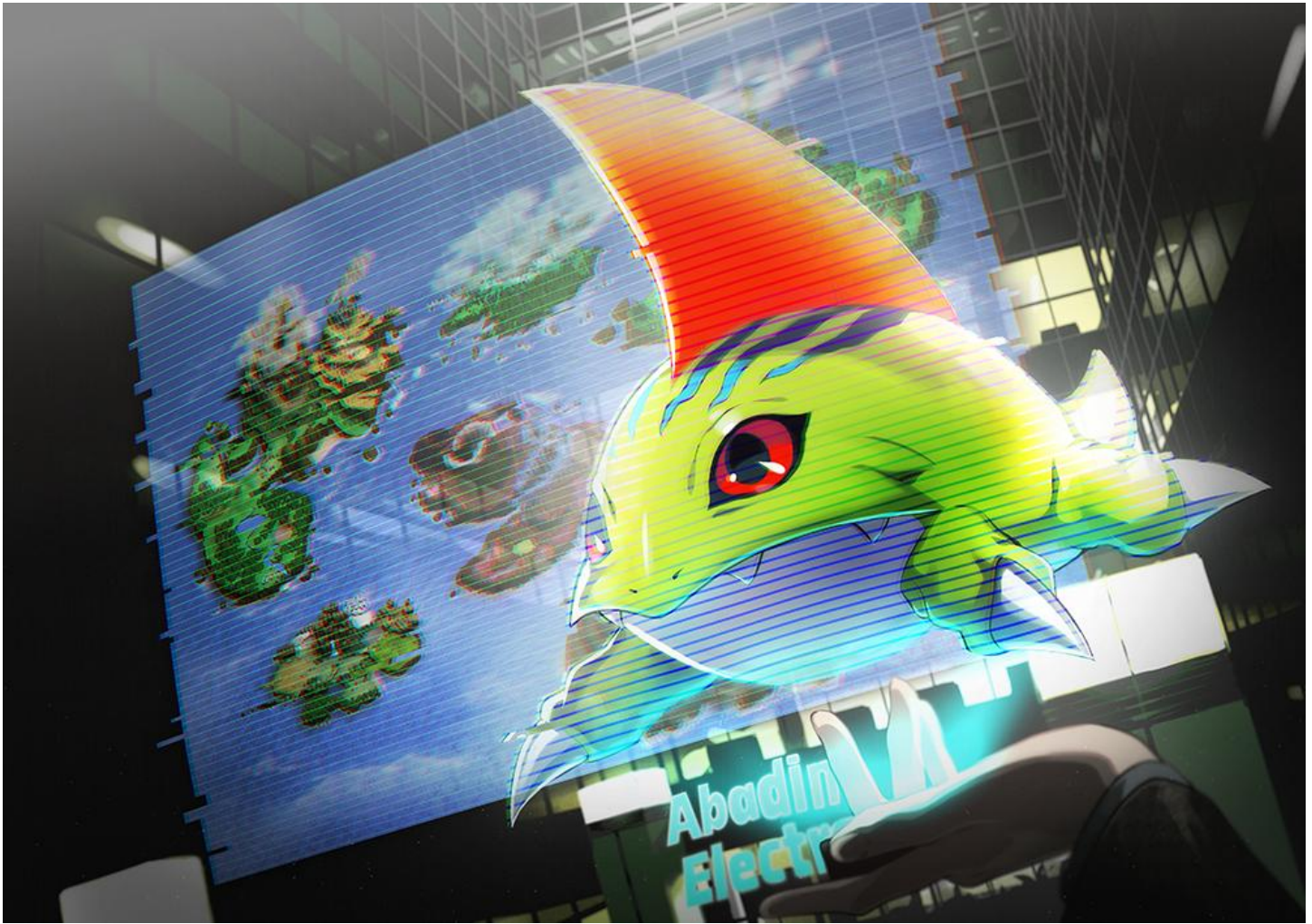Screams.
Confusion.

(..................!)

Eiji averted his eyes.
He couldn't stand to watch anymore, but there was also nothing that he could do.
The airliner suddenly nose-dived

and fell headlong through the clouds at an altitude of more than 30,000 feet.

Tomonori Ryusenji had always been the leading figure of the world in discovering the Digital World and researching Digital Monsters. He was the very reason for why AE's Digital Lab was located next to TDU.

There was no known precedent of a single researcher making such a significant contribution to a university's reputation and a company's business performance. The remarkable development of both the university and AE were all made possible by Professor Ryusenji alone.

"Magnificent!"

Ryusenji beamed with approval as he inspected the Digimon Dock, a gadget that Eiji used to deliver his goods.

They were in the DDL, in Ryusenji's office. It was a private room where one part of the wall was made of glass. It looked much like a university laboratory, with shelves crammed full of equipment, reference materials, and cardboard boxes.

Ryusenji connected the Digimon Dock to his lab equipment, and the Digimon that Eiji captured was Hololized.

It was a frog-like creature with a tail.

"It is indeed the ModokiBetamon that I requested! Just look at those gentle, beautiful curves!"

Ryusenji traced the outline of ModokiBetamon's image with his finger, as if touching something precious.

Among all of the data found in the unknown Digital World, these A.I. programs called Digital Monsters, AKA "Digimon," sold at a high price on the GriMM market due to their convenience, scalability, and rarity.

"It took me three Tyranomon to capture that one!" Eiji entreated as he set his bag down on the work desk. He'd had his personal belongings returned to him since they were no longer in D4.

"Wow, sounds tough."

Betamon have a habit of throwing their dorsal fins when they feel that they're in danger. However, ModokiBetamon emit a shockwave from their dorsal fin... That was how Eiji's Tyranomon (#3) was killed by its "Blade Fin" technique during its capture.

"Yes, it was! But Professor... I'm not sure how this ModokiBetamon is different from the other Betamon..."

"What do you mean?" Ryusenji looked offended. "Eiji-kun, can't you tell? Do you really not know the difference between Betamon and this ModokiBetamon?!"

Eiji was alarmed that he'd disappointed his client.

"Umm... Well, the color... is a little different?"

"That's right! The color of this ModokiBetamon isn't nearly as vivid! I knew you could tell the difference.. Eiji-kun, you can expect a bit of a bonus to your payment this time."

"Yes, yes, yes! Thanks for your patronage!"

It seemed that his random guess was correct. Now Eiji could add pickles and raw egg to his beef-laden rice bowl for dinner tonight. The client seemed super pleased.

Ryusenji began to transfer the ModokiBetamon's data to his lab equipment.

"---Eiji-kun. What did you think of your experience earlier?"

"Earlier... You mean the video that I saw in D4? It was awesome!"

"It's a promotional video. Our company once had a plan to expand into entertainment. We were going to call it 'Digimon Land'..."

"Nice."

"Hmm."

"So you were going to sell Digimon as characters to the general public who don't know anything about the Digital World, huh? I especially liked the idea you guys had, that Digimon are living A.I. creatures. Fantasy? Fiction? If I were a kid, I'd be hooked."

Eiji let his imagination run wild.

"Digimon are alive."

Character design/illustration: malo

Chapter 1-4

"Digimon are alive," Ryusenji had said.

"---Well, it would be a lot of fun if Digimon were really alive!" Eiji said. "There are fanatics out there who keep Digimon like digital pets, and then there are collectors like you. But for code crackers like me, Digimon are like... a useful A.I. tool."

For Eiji, Digimon are valuable work tools. He favored using Tyranomon, a relatively common capture in the Digital World, which meant they could often be traded on GriMM.

"Hmm."

"So, when and where are you gonna have this Digimon Land thing?"

"It's been shelved for good." Ryusenji let out a sigh of disappointment.

"Oh dear."

"Realistically, it was hard to enforce. That's why the Digital World remains a secret to mankind."

At Ryusenji's words, Eiji flashbacked to the images of the plane crash that he had just witnessed.

"Yeah, I guess it would be, since there are people out there who use Digimon for crimes. People in the same business as me… Although they're more of the nasty sort."

While code crackers are generally in the gray zone, there are some even among them who weren't completely morally bereft… and some who were.

There were some who were gray, but close to white. Then there were those who were gray, but close to black. Some of them weren't so bad once you talked to them, while others were truly crazy, or flat-out criminals, or the enemy of all mankind.

Anyway—

Network failures, information theft through unauthorized access, and cyber-terrorism had been occurring frequently here and there in recent years, and Digimon used as A.I. tools actually had a lot to do with it. Like what Eiji had seen in that video, there actually was an incident of a terrorist using a Digimon to bring down an airplane.

That information, of course, had not been made public.

The general public did not know about Digimon or the Digital World. World leaders and international organizations were quick to cover up their existence.

Besides, it would become too great a scandal if characters at a theme park were used by criminals for acts of cyber-terrorism. Just imagine.

"If the public found out about the Digital World and Digimon, it would lead to revealing to the entire world the existence of Digimon crimes," Ryusenji said. "What do you think would happen if we did that?"

"Mass chaos."

"Exactly."

The media would probably come up with sensational titles for clickbait, like how Digimon were invaders from another world or something. The easiest and simplest conclusion that would be drawn from such an emotional state would be that the Digital World and Digimon are evil.

"A majority of mankind does not know yet about the Digital World. Even if they did, they would not understand it."

Ryusenji's words sounded genius and profound, and they were difficult for Eiji to understand.

"…"

"They would not understand that there lies another world beyond the network that is different from our world… and that Digimon are actually alive…"

Even if they knew about it, they would not understand it.

"Professor Ryusenji…"

Eiji felt as though those words had been said to him as a code cracker— as someone who used Digimon for his job in the Digital World.

Digimon are living creatures.

"Cracker Fang… Eiji-kun. Don't you want to know? About the real world and the Digital World… The truth of the two worlds? Don't you want to see what lies on the other side of it?"

"Well… Of course I would!"

Eiji was immediately excited.

"---I mean, I know nothing about it! The Digital World to me is nothing but the information on the black-and-white screen of my Digital Dock. But the world that you're seeing… the world that you *saw*, Professor, it's different, isn't it... Like what I saw on that video—"

That sea of networks, the real world, and the Digital World.

And glimpses of that world that lay beyond the static…

"Do you know why that video in D4 is top secret?" Ryusenji asked. "Why it's kept secret from the public?"

"Because," Eiji had a flash of insight. "It's real?!"

It wasn't a fake promotional video, but an actual video of the Digital World…?

"Yes... That video was A.I. generated by our observational data and composited as an imagery of the true Digital World. And the Digimon really do live there, in the Digital World. Turns out that the real extraterrestrials came from our digital network, not from outer space."

Ryusenji looked into Eiji's eyes. What he spoke of wasn't a metaphor or an abstract way of looking at things.

"Digimon are alive…!"

Eiji looked at the Hololized ModokiBetamon.

It was *alive*.

If that was the case, then the Tyranomon that he'd been using as an A.I. tool were also alive…? And all the other Digimon too?

"To see firsthand," Ryusenji said gravely. "With my own eyes, the natural Digital World and the Digimon in their own habitat. To see the Digital World directly with all of my five human senses, and not through virtual monitors or observational data.

To break the 'constraints' between the real world and the Digital World.

To experience it as it actually is. That is what I, Tomonori Ryusenji, have devoted my life to researching. Everything I do is, and has been done, for the sake of D4."

The data transfer of ModokiBetamon was finally complete.

Ryusenji ejected Eiji's Digimon Dock from the device, and picked it up with his fingers to peer at it.

"…Ah, thanks." Eiji extended his hand.

SNAP!

Ryusenji tossed the Digimon Dock aside.

"Whaaaaaaa?!"

Without any time to react in surprise, Eiji slid across the ground and intercepted the Digimon Dock before it fell into the trash can.

"What was that for, Professor?!"

He'd leapt forward so vigorously that he'd face-planted straight into the trash can.

Eiji had made this Dock from used parts. Even though it was mostly junk, it still cost him a lot of money.

"There was an error in its memory."

"Seriously?!"

Ryusenji is a Digimon collector, so he was more careful than most about the condition of his data.

"You shouldn't use outdated equipment, especially if you're working a job for me… That almost destroyed ModokiBetamon's data."

"Still, you didn't have to throw it away… Freelance code crackers aren't exactly swimming in money like big corporations are, Professor. I can't pay for everything out of pocket, or ring up a bill, or use all the high-spec equipment that's here whenever I want."

"Hmm."

"...Hello?"

Eiji was puzzled.

Ryusenji's response was a little strange. But he was, after all, a genius scientist of the highest caliber in Japan. He could be forgiven for coming across as a bit eccentric.

"I apologize for that. But… Well, that makes for perfect timing. Hold out your arm."

"Huh?"

Eiji didn't know how the timing was perfect, but he did as he was told.

Ryusenji attached something to Eiji's left wrist.

Eiji… swallowed hard.

"...!"

When had he'd last felt something like this?

When his parents had bought him a new video game console as a kid? When he'd gotten his first smartphone?

No, this was a thousand times greater than that…!

He felt as if his entire world was expanding just by wearing this thing.

"It's yours."

It was a wristwatch-like gadget.

"Is this… Abadin Electronics' state-of-the-art Digimon Dock? And a smartwatch type?!"

Eiji felt like jumping up and down and doing cartwheels.

AE's products were easy to modify into Digimon Docks, and thus were highly regarded among code crackers. And this was a genuine AE product. Because it involved Digimon, it was a trade secret.

— A Digimon Linker.

"This is the prototype of a product that I've been working on."

"Professor Ryusenji… I already knew this about you, but *you are amazing*!"

On Eiji's arm, the wristwatch Digimon Dock began to set itself up automatically.

"Well, I'm also the technical director of the Digimon Dock division. This device has a biometric vital sensor, so it can only be used by you, the person to whom it's registered."

"Oh! So it's made for me!"

"It has a medical device class sensor that records pulse, blood pressure, respiration, body temperature, and so on. And it comes with a 24-hour medical support system via our Life Support."

"I'm about to get *so* healthy!" Eiji responded enthusiastically.

"It also has a Hololization function. Normally Digimon Hololization is only allowed at DDL and a few other authorized facilities, but... this is a special exception."

It was all special, special, special. He was being given special treatment!

"But you're giving me the prototype… Are you sure? There must be some kind of catch."

"Relax. This is simply a gift from me to you."

"Oh wow!"

"But here's the thing."

"Yep, I knew there was a catch! I'm starting to catch on to what kind of person you are, Professor!"

While he said that jokingly, Eiji had no intention of parting with his smartwatch Digimon Dock.

He wanted it. The Digimon Linker had functions that were, without exaggeration, in a different league − even *leagues* − from Eiji's DIY Dock.

"I want to see what Cracker Fang can do with it in this next job that I have for you."

"I'll do it."

"Well, that was fast. Good, good. That's what I like about you."

Ryusenji took Eiji's arm and pressed a switch on one side of the Digimon Linker. The screen glowed faintly.

A mysterious flame seemed to flicker from the clock screen.

—Loogamon. Child-level. Magical Beast type. Virus species.

A Digimon that he had never seen before sat there on the color screen.

Eiji squinted.

"A puppy… A dog?"

———◆———

After receiving the new job request from Professor Ryusenji, Eiji passed through the gate alone and returned to the reception hall on the first floor.

"Break the constraints between the real world and the Digital World, huh…?"

The Hololized tri-colored object was back in the center of the hall.

"Oh, hello again!" Hatsune spoke up at the reception desk.

"Do I return my pass here?"

"You can put it here. Thank you."

Eiji gave her back his pass. Hatsune noticed the device on his arm.

"…"

"Oh, this? Professor Ryusenji gave it to me... Do you know what it is? It's a Digimon Dock."

Eiji showed off his new smartwatch gadget to Hatsune.

Hatsune looked around quickly and then whispered back, "Isn't that the new secret model?"

She seemed to be well-informed of company rumors. Maybe that was a perk of her position as a receptionist.

"It's a prototype though. I'm just doing a test run."

"Wow. That Professor Ryusenji himself asked you to test it out? He must really trust you."

Hatsune seemed to be genuinely surprised, rather than buttering him up.

"Hmm... I wonder. I mean, do you really think so?"

"Absolutely! I mean, despite his appearance, Professor Ryusenji is so—" Hatsune lowered her voice. "He can be a bit difficult to work with."

"Oh yeah, he is a peculiar one," Eiji said, trying not to laugh. Hatsune's attitude towards him was completely different from when he first saw her. But that wasn't a bad thing. "I'll see you later."

"Oh, Nagasumi-san."

"You can call me Eiji."

"Then… you can call me Hatsune-chan or Hatsune-cchi, whatever you want! So… about your entry form. I noticed that you left out your occupation! If you don't mind me asking, what should I put there?"

Hatsune looked at him expectantly and fidgeted.

"My occupation?"

Eiji thought about it.

Being a freelancer… wasn't exactly an occupation. It just meant that he had no established job.

"---I'm Eiji Nagasumi, a code cracker."

"Huh…"

Hatsune's reaction was the most doubtful that he'd seen her all day.

Chapter 1-5

There are two major ways to obtain Digimon in the Digital World.

One way is by using tools in their full capacity to capture Digimon. The other is by collecting Digimon eggs known as Digieggs.

Although these Digieggs are the shape of eggs, they are different from the eggs of birds or fish.

Let's start off with this: the current accepted explanation is that Digimon do not have gender. They are neither male nor female.

This leads to the question of: In that case, how are Digimon born? The current theory for this is that they are born from Digieggs.

When a Digimon dies, it leaves behind data that could be called its soul. This data remnant is then reborn somewhere in the Digital World as a new Digiegg.

It may sound like the circle of reincarnation, but there is much that is unknown about the Digimon's way of life.

Humanity still understood only mere fragments of the Digital World.

It was a long, long night.

Dusk seemed to go on eternally in the twilight sky. But no, what looked like the sky was actually the net ocean, and what looked like clouds were the waves of the Interweb. The shooting stars were streams of information... It was like being at the very bottom of the ocean floor. The shimmering pale light illuminating the ground came from the real world located far above the ocean surface.

The world of the network was both brilliant and beautiful.

But any world that is inhabited by living creatures grows to be, without exception, somehow broken and stagnant.

Rain the color of rust iron spattered down, and the wind smelled of blood.

Sewage water, rich with the pungent smell of chemicals, bubbled up as it was swept away by the rain.

It was more than just a drainage ditch. It was a blockaded city where mine pollution flowed— the flow leaving a trail of strange fluorescent colors that glowed in places, and unidentifiable garbage data that chipped away at the seawall as it spewed out of the fenced-in estuary.

Why was there a "flow" in the Digital World?

The flow of time. The flow of matter and the flow of natural phenomena such as weather— Why is that? Why was there this mountain of garbage that was so obviously remnants brought about by a living society?

According to one theory, contact with the real world (and thus, human society) through the network

brought about an enormous diversity of data and wide circulation throughout the Digital World.

If that was true… It would be like how the Europeans, when they had discovered a new continent, brought pathogens with them that destroyed the local empires. It would be like the plot of a science fiction suspense movie, where interstellar travel was possible and an unknown bacterium attached to the homecoming spacecraft caused a terrible crisis on the home planet.

It would mean that contact between mankind and the Digital World had forever changed this other world and the creatures living in it.

Was that a good thing or a bad thing? Nobody knew.

After all, it wasn't the police's job to neatly draw a line between what was right from wrong.

These areas contained the secret and furtive agendas of many minds.
A wireframe schematic appeared on her heads-up virtual monitor.

— The Last Coast.

No one knew how it had gotten the name, but it was the name of this beach with red iron sand. Digieggs that washed up in the flow of garbage data often ended up here.

Some poachers took advantage of that.

"Deputy squad leader! We have a suspicious Digimon in sight!" The voice chat through the police radio said.

Several red dots flashed across her virtual monitor on the estuary area of the map. They were unidentified Digimon.

"This is Tamahime. Continue the search."

She borrowed the "eye" of her Digimon, which stuck out from the river surface like a periscope.

"Detailed search is underway," her voice chat replied. "...Espimon, Child-level, Cyborg type, Virus species."

"Got it," she said. "Looks like a tin can toy."

The Digimon's appearance was hard to describe and definitely going to be damn difficult to report for her records later. At a quick glance, it looked like it could be a toy from one of those retro comedy robot shows that were popular in the Showa era. It was like an upside-down snowman, with the head bigger than the body. It had manipulator arms and its legs were simply rocket-propelled nozzles.

"I count four."

"They must be code crackers...!" She hissed. "The four of them all are bots, those assholes."

She clicked her tongue.

The word "bots" was police slang for a Digimon that was automatically controlled by tools.

"This Digimon has been pretty popular among the code crackers lately," came the voice of one of her men through the voice chat.

"Yeah, cyborg Digimon work well with tools," She agreed. "It's a good beginners' choice."

It was a common code cracker technique to implement A.I. tools on a Digimon and then let those Digimon run through the Digital World to search within certain areas and collect data that the code cracker was looking for.

If this were a real world server, they would be targeting corporate secrets and personal information.... But in this remote part of the Digital World, there was only one thing that code crackers wanted to make money off of.

– How many Digieggs did you get?

– Only one so far.

The police eavesdropped on their devices, picking up the GriMM voice chat conversation among the code crackers. Their voices sounded young. There was no evidence of a voice changer in use.

"Their voice chat is fully leaked... Are they amateurs?" She asked.

The Digimon were bots, but the code crackers controlling them were also logged into the Internet. They must have felt like they were playing an online game.

"What should we do, Deputy squad leader?"

Her men were controlling their Digimon through docks and tools, just like the code crackers. Their view of this rusty coast and the Digital World could only be observed in the form of schematic diagrams and numbers on their virtual monitors. They couldn't directly see it or smell it.

They knew, but they didn't understand… Those were the words of a famous scholar from somewhere.

The only one who knew— and who was physically here– was deputy squad leader, Satsuki Tamahime.

She used a tool to block more than 99% of her olfactory senses. Satsuki's Digimon actually loved poor environments like this rusty iron beach, but it wasn't for her.

"Police can't just pick and choose their criminals, so… Arrest them all."

More than ten green dots suddenly appeared on the virtual monitor's schematic. The code crackers' Espimon had long been surrounded by Satsuki and her team.

"Jam their voice chat," she continued. "The Commandramon squads will break off into two and overpower the targets from both sides."

"Roger."

The Espimon did not notice them.

The code crackers couldn't see them in the first place, and they probably didn't even know what sort of place their Digimon were in right now. The only thing they could see was the crude LCD screen of their Digimon Docks in hand. That's why they weren't alerted to what was going on.

But Satsuki could see them.

As they actually were. With all of her five senses.

She was one of the people who had broken the constraints.

"How dare you come here, you goddamn poachers!"

Their voice chat was jammed followed by this warning. Upon hearing that beautiful feminine voice echo in the background, the Espimon finally noticed their presence.

The Digimon of Satsuki's men, who had been quietly scuttling around them, stood up at that voice and surrounded the poachers.

— Commandramon. Child-level. Cyborg type. Virus species.

The Commandramon were equipped with police-regulation attire. They looked like humanoid dragons or lizard men in appearance. They wore body armor and a helmet with "POLICE" written on the front as they carried assault rifles.

The Commandramon had a special textured surface added onto their bodies which allowed them to turn on electronic warfare camouflage on themselves based on their surroundings. This was how they could approach their enemy undetected.

"Found the Digiegg!"

The Commandramon secured the poached Digiegg. The code crackers' tools and everything else were secured.

All that remained now was to round up the actual code crackers themselves to finish the job. Nothing more to say after that.

— The police?!
— It's the DigiPolice! Shit!

The code crackers finally caught on to what was happening, but could do nothing more than grumble in the voice chat.

Satsuki announced the current time of the arrest and the charges.

"—You've been caught red-handed! Come quietly or else! Just so you know, there's no point trying to escape… We've got your identities! Don't underestimate the police, we have your names and the schools you attend!"

The annoying thing about it was that the code crackers were apparently high school students. As minors, they could be taken into custody but they wouldn't be officially arrested. One of their seniors was probably a bad influence and urged them to become code crackers for profit. This kind of thing happened all the time.

"We're arrested? On what charges?!" A high-schooler said. "We've done nothing wrong..."

"You violated the Unauthorized Computer Access Prevention Act, the Basic Network Act, and the Digital Vandalism Prevention Act! In other words, you're guilty of poaching Digieggs, you dumb shit!" Satsuki spoke bluntly.

"This is the Digital World!" They protested. "It's not a country! Why are the Japanese police getting involved?!"

I see. The code cracker kids had *some* knowledge so they weren't going down without a fight.

Satsuki took a deep breath, her voice dropping in tone to one of thick tension.

"You think you're free to do whatever you want in the network and in the Digital World...?"

"...?!"

"That's the crack team's philosophy, isn't it? You bring up a big topic... but since what you're talking about is trash anyway, go say that shit on your social media! I'll knock your teeth out, you shitty code crackers!"

Drip-drip-drip-drip-drip!

Satsuki's Digimon, which had been hiding underwater with only its eyeballs protruding from the surface, appeared in full-form like a submarine.

NUMEEEEEEEEEE!

The red lights of the police siren flashed.

Seeing that Digimon, with their horrible moaning and slimy intensity, made the code crackers' Espimon tremble.

Satsuki's Digimon was—

"Unplug your ears and listen up, fuckers! In the end, your identity is that you're all Japanese citizens! And as long as you're involved in illegal activities! The Japanese police are gonna get you and call up your guardians, you assholes— Hey, don't move!"

– "Divanish!"

The Espimon suddenly disappeared.

One after another, the Commandramon lost sight of the targets at the ends of their muzzles.

It was vanishing magic. As soon as the Espimon pressed the button on their belly buttons, they melted into the red seaside background.

"Optical camouflage?! Those cheeky bitches!"

It was an invisibility cloak.

There was a volley of bullets. The Commandramon all fired their assault rifles at the same time. It was the firepower of an entire squad.

The Espimon, however, clad in camouflage and outmatched by Commandramon, managed to slip past the police circle. This was thanks to the Digimon A.I. 's built-in self-defense function rather than any code cracker's ability.

"Mechanorimon!"

As soon as Satsuki gave the order, two more Digimon appeared behind her, shedding their camouflage.

— Mechanorimon. Machine type. Adult-level. Virus species.

This Digimon was larger than Espimon and Commandramon. In terms of scale, it was about 3 to 4 meters tall. Its body color was white, and it looked like a robot— a humanoid power suit with long arms.

While Digimon were classified as police equipment, the Mechanorimon were classified as special-purpose vehicles. Inside each of them was a dedicated Commandramon, who was in charge of piloting the vehicle.

Whiiiir, whiiiiiir…

The Mechanorimon's single eye glared as it probed the area.

Because the Mechanorimon were equipped with powerful detectors, sensors, and other electronic warfare equipment, they could serve as field command vehicles.

Screee—

An optical weapon emitted from the linear lens embedded in the Mechanorimon's body.

— "Twinkle Beam!"

With a flurry of sparks, the optical camouflage of one Espimon dissolved as it fell with a thump onto the beach in a scattering of iron sand. The three remaining red dots on the virtual monitor faded fast as they broke up running.

"Don't let them get away! Shoot!"

"We're charging for the next round… We can't catch all of them!"

Just as Satsuki and her subordinate aboard the Mechanorimon said this,

— "Petit Impulse!"

A bolt of lightning pierced the rusty coast, followed by a thunderclap.

Satsuki didn't react to this right away, taken aback by this unexpected event.

"…Huh?! The Espimon!" The police radio blared.

The remaining Espimon, blackened, crashed to the ground in wreckage one after the other. The lightning bolt had struck them simultaneously and with great precision.
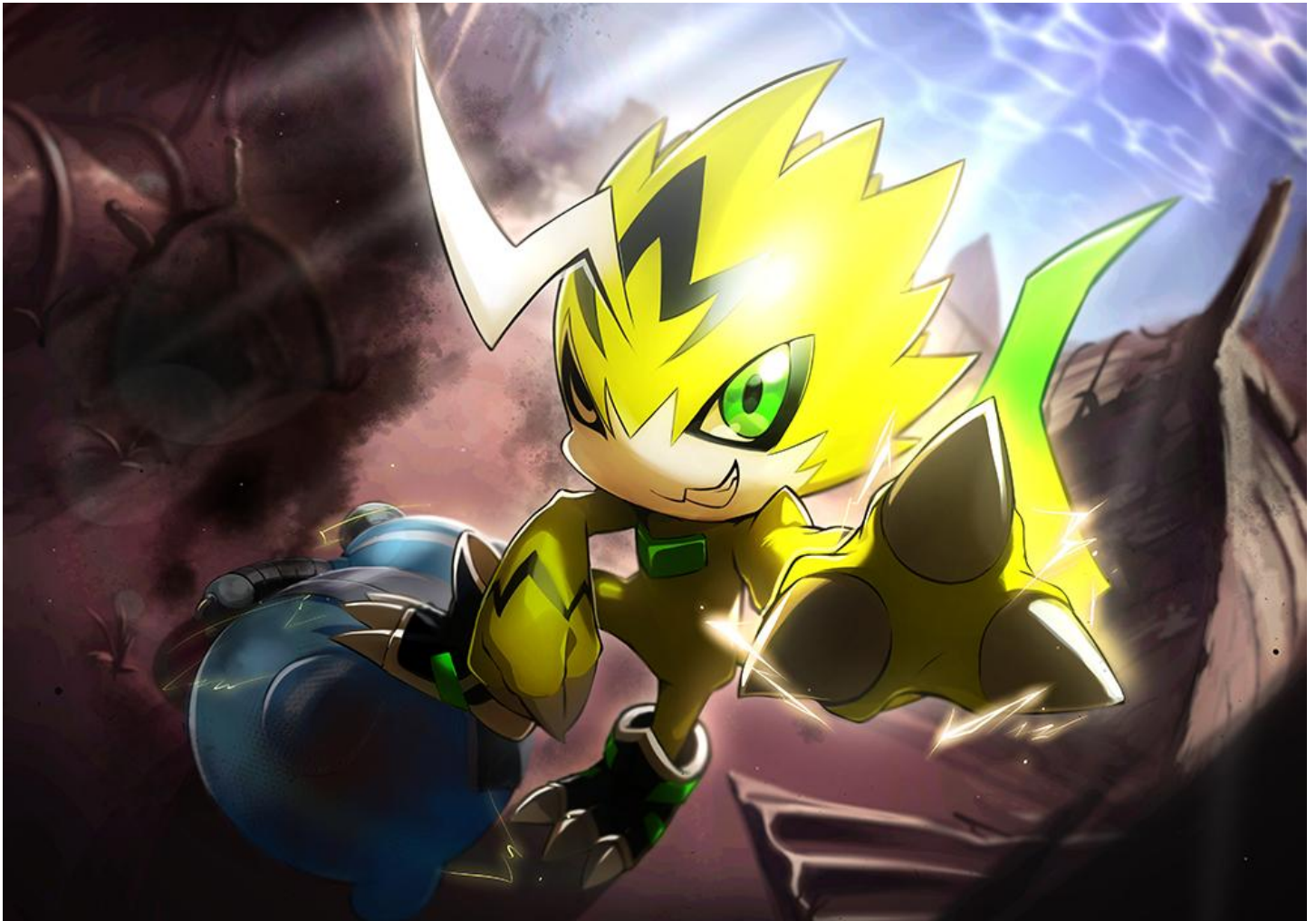
Who had done it…?!

Satsuki looked at the new indicator that had appeared on her heads-up virtual monitor.

It was just standing there, seemingly unperturbed, on top of the deactivated Espimon.

It looked like a legendary beast of thunder.

"Is that... Pulsemon?!"

—Pulsemon. Child-level. Beast type. Vaccine species.

Known as 'Lightning Bolt,' it was difficult to even catch sight of this Digimon as he moved at a high-speed zigzag pattern.

Could it be another code cracker? The Commandramon squad readied their guns.

"The only one," Satsuki said slowly, "Who uses Pulsemon is…"

She knew his name all too well. "As far as the police know, it can only be one. He's a hacker!"

"Deputy squad leader! Your orders!"

"It's that hacker, 'Judge'!"

ZAP!

Pulsemon glanced at Satsuki's Digimon.

"You're too soft," Pulsemon said. "Deputy squad leader of the DigiPolice."

With a smile and blowing a kiss, he sped off immediately like a lightning bolt into the sea of networks.

"What the...!" Satsuki sputtered. "That pisses me off!"

"Deputy squad leader!" The Commandramon squad insisted on instructions.

Satsuki shook internally with anger at being ridiculed, but remembered her position as field commander and managed to maintain her composure.

"We've got the Espimon under control... and the poached Digiegg is secured. We'll let jurisdiction handle the rest in the real world."

"But that Pulsemon..."

"Leave that hacker jerk alone. We can't catch up to him anyway. He's also..."

Satsuki sulked.

Pulsemon and the hacker that Pulsemon was linked with, was the same as Satsuki.

— They had broken through the constraints as well.

"Copy that, Deputy squad leader."

"Sorry, we're going over the K-Line. If we exceed the time limit, Squad leader will nag about it and we'll get penalized with a pay cut."

"Yes, of course, after you! But what about the Digiegg?" The subordinate reported quickly.

"Huh?"

Satsuki could feel her mood drop to uncontrollable levels.

The Digiegg that had been lying on the beach earlier was gone.

The one who had snatched it away, of course, had been...

Like a bolt of lightning...

"Pulsemon... Hacker Judge! Give me back my evidence, goddamnit!"

Character design/illustration: malo

Chapter 1-6

Eiji Nagasumi, AKA Cracker Fang, visited his client, Professor Ryusenji of Abadin Electronics (AE) at his Denrin Digital Laboratory (DDL).

There, he received a Digimon along with the latest Digimon Dock, the Digimon Linker.

After getting takeout at the restaurant in front of the metro station, a beef bowl with soft-boiled egg on the side, Eiji headed home in high spirits that he hadn't felt in a long time.

DING!

He rang the bell of the Buddhist altar.

His room was a very small one-room apartment (the size of 3 tatami mats) with a loft, furniture-style Buddhist altar, and LED candles. He didn't usually offer incense because that would cause a fire.

"I'm home, Mom, Dad. Grandma and Grandpa."

He greeted his dog too.

His family's mortuary tablet had the names of his family members. For some reason, there was even one for a dog that he had a long time ago.

Placing his hands together in prayer, Eiji sat down to eat dinner alone at the table.

He looked at the Digimon Linker on his arm.

"Never seen a Digimon like you before."

Loogamon.

The color screen showed a dog-like Digimon sitting fluffed up in a ball.

— I want you to raise this Digimon.

The request from Ryusenji had been quite simple.

If one scrolled through GriMM, they'd find that Digimon training jobs were prevalent. In pet terms, it was like being a breeder.

Because the growth of Digimon was a kind of learning A.I. program, their behavioral patterns from birth were largely relevant to its matured state. This meant that code crackers who were experts in dealing with Digimon could also serve as breeders.

– If you are interested in my research, then your encounter with Loogamon ought to be very interesting.

"If Professor Ryusenji has that much expectation in me, then I've got to do my best."

Eiji had never been this excited before in his life. Nothing could go wrong as long as he followed the professor's lead.

However, Eiji had little experience in training Digimon.

"I have three Tyranomon, but all I'm doing is fine-tuning them with tools… I guess you *could* call that part of the training process?"

He laid his Digimon Dock on the table. A pixelated Tyranomon showed on the monochrome LCD screen. The dock that stored the Tyranomon was small enough to fit in the palm of his hand.

This type of dock was outdated in terms of specs, but blueprints were available, so it was relatively easy to obtain parts and make one yourself. Shops with GriMM code crackers as their target audience sold special cases and complete units. Eiji also owned a few of them.

"The professor said something about the memory card being corrupted in my delivery dock… so I'll have to switch out those parts. But since I have the Digimon Linker, there's no need to rush."

Eiji grinned at the memory as he looked at the new Digimon Linker around his wrist.

This Loogamon was like a good luck charm for Eiji. He couldn't help but think that he needed to take good care of them.

"…Still though, why do I have to wear my Digimon Linker 24 hours a day, even when I'm in the shower?"

It wasn't really a problem since it was completely waterproof and antibacterial, but still…

———◆———

Loogamon grew during the 2-3 days that it took for Eiji to learn how to operate the new gadget. It was a Digimon that grew up fast as they felt Eiji's heartbeat through the Digimon Linker.

"It feels like I have my own kid, growing big as I carry them around in my heart…"

Eiji looked fondly at the Digimon in his wristwatch.

Digimon growth— in other words, their evolution, is systematic.

When a Digimon hatches from a Digiegg, they start off at the Baby-level. Like a newborn baby, it has not yet learned anything and is not immediately useful as a tool.

Normally, one would start raising a Digimon from this Baby-level. However, Loogamon was already at Child-level, the next stage of growth.

Eiji posted questions to breeders in GriMM.

Naturally, he didn't mention his job from Ryusenji or about Loogamon, but he did ask about how to raise "dog-like" Digimon in general… After all, when he searched GriMM for information on Loogamon, he didn't get any hits.

"A.I. learning programs and training programs… There's actually a lot to this."

It might even be a bit of a pain in the neck. Eiji started to almost regret taking this job.

"When was the last time I even owned a pet? I guess not since my dog died when I was a kid."

— *To see firsthand, with my own eyes, the natural Digital World and the Digimon in their own habitat. To see the Digital World directly with all of my five human senses, and not through virtual monitors or observational data.*

That was the kind of impressive research that Ryusenji was conducting.

"If that sort of thing is possible, then I want to see it. I want to see the world that Professor Ryusenji sees. A world where the Digimon are living creatures, huh? If I raise you, Loogamon… If I got you to evolve to your Perfect or Ultimate form, would something change for me?"

To break the 'constraints' between the real world and the Digital World.

If he could become a top-notch code cracker like that, which Ryusenji said was possible…

There was the sound of a notification.

Eiji picked up his smartphone. He had received a reply to his question post on GriMM.

—Fang, congrats on becoming a Digimon breeder! If you're raising a Digimon from Child-level, then I recommend keeping it with a number of other Digimon. When you have more than one Digimon together, they'll play and learn from each other.

"I see! So you keep a number of Digimon together! Many thanks to collective knowledge!"

Eiji immediately connected his Tyranomon's dock to the Digimon Linker.

Being the latest model, the Digimon Linker had more than enough capacity and processing power. It would be a good idea to transfer his Tyranomon in with his Loogamon for company.

But… in his excitement, Eiji didn't read the rest of the answer.

—Some Digimon have a social hierarchy, though, much like dogs do. It's important that you discipline them first!

Which was why…

Trouble came about several days later.

Character design/illustration: malo

Chapter 1-7

After receiving an urgent call from Abadin Electronics' Denrin Digital Laboratory, Eiji immediately went to Ryusenji's office at DDL and cried out with a teary voice.

"Professor! Professor Ryusenji!"

"Good morning, Eiji-kun."

It was already afternoon, but Ryusenji seemed to be the type to always say "Good morning."

"What is wrong with this Digimon?!"

He showed Loogamon napping on the Digimon Linker screen, who appeared to be having a good dream on a full stomach.

"Looks like you're doing a great job with his training. I look forward to seeing him evolve," Ryusenji smiled.

Digimon change forms as they grow, starting from a Digiegg to Baby-level (I & II), Child-level, Adult-level, Perfect-level, then Ultimate-level.

It was similar to how insects, for example, grew from egg to larva, then pupa, then adult.

What made it different, however, was that the same individual transformed into a completely different Digimon. This was why the growth of a Digimon was labeled as "evolution" in the academic sense.

"---If you evolve him to Adult-level, I'll pay you an incentive."

"An incentive... An additional reward?!"

"If you get him to Perfect or Ultimate-level, you'll get even higher rewards. I wonder what kind of Digimon Loogamon will evolve into. I'd like to see Eiji-kun and Loogamon looking cool together," Ryusenji said supportively, quite obviously baiting him.

"You wanna see what?!" Eiji spluttered. "Don't try to change the subject by metaphorically dangling money in my face! That's the behavior of a bad adult."

"Hmm."

"You saw the training report that I sent you yesterday, right?" Eiji complained.

"I get hundreds of emails every day so, actually, I hardly open any of them," Ryusenji admitted shamelessly.

"Sure," Eiji said, backtracking. "You'd lose days of work if you checked them all..."

"That's right. I'm a researcher and I don't have time for anything but my research. However, Eiji-kun... I do have notifications on for your messages so that I can check them immediately."
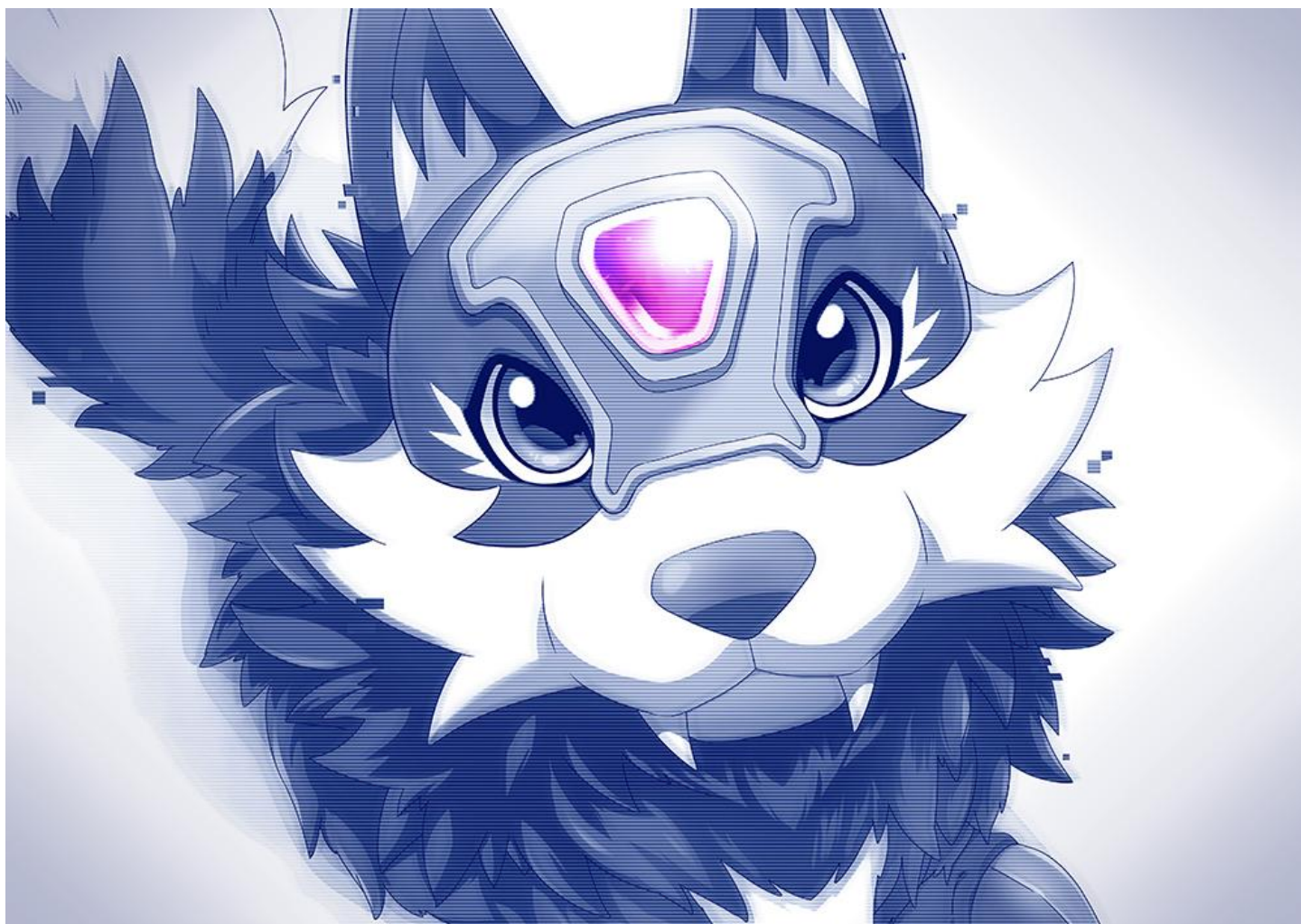
"I felt that right in my heart a bit," Eiji said, clutching his chest.

"You're a very important business partner of mine, Eiji-kun."

Eiji couldn't dislike this part of the professor in the least. In fact, it made Eiji like him even more.

The world's leading authority on the Digital World claimed that Eiji, a code cracker brat, was his business partner.

Ryusenji opened Eiji's report on the monitor and played the attached video file.

---Loogamon. Child-level. Magic Beast type. Virus species.

He was in a virtual training cage. The video was dated to yesterday's date.

Loogamon was eating food.

Digimon stop growing if they don't eat. This is why, when they get hungry, they instinctively continue to eat food.

It may seem strange for an A.I. to eat but food was, in essence, data and information. Even human beings would not grow in any way, shape, or form if they did not read books, watch videos, and study to obtain information.

For some reason, there were four plates of food in front of Loogamon. And for some reason, the three Tyranomon that had been housed with Loogamon were all trembling in a corner of the cage.

"---Even with three Tyranomon, he's too much to handle?" Ryusenji observed, sounding curious.

"Tyranomon are Adult-level, and yet this Child-level Loogamon has them under his paws..."

"Loogamon is a magical beast type, which strongly influences data relating to wolves," Ryusenji explained.

"Wolves... So he's not a dog."

Eiji mussed his own hair in frustration.

"He is a dog, so to speak... But more primitive, the type of dog that was directly descended from tamed wolves," Ryusenji said. "In any case, they form a pack and have an alpha. Such packs are strict about their social hierarchy order."

"So... is this because I kept them all in the same cage? Did Loogamon make the Tyranomon... his minions?!"

"More or less. Obviously, the boss has first dibs on food."

Ryusenji was smiling for some reason.

"But that doesn't make it right for him to eat the others' food! He's such a glutton! He even tried to eat one of my Tyranomon at the beginning!"

"Oh wow! Now that's quite interesting. That sounds much like the mythical demon wolf that dares to eat giant gods."

"The sight was too horrible to make a video of... Anyway, this guy eats too much! He costs too much and poops too much!"

"...And?"

"What?"

"Do you have a problem with that?" Ryusenji asked back.

I see...

All of this was simply interesting developments to a genius researcher.

Eiji took a deep breath.

"The following data that I got is the result of benchmarking Loogamon. It's definitely not your average growth score."

"Hmm."

"By the way, Professor... What is this thing on Loogamon's forehead?"

Eiji paused the video and zoomed in. Loogamon wore a mask or a face protector that covered his forehead and nose. On it, where his forehead was, was attached a shiny jewel-like object.

"---I've been wondering about it," Eiji admitted. "Sometimes it even glows."

"I'm not sure what to say about it," Ryusenji said. "But good on you for noticing it, Eiji-kun."

"Thanks."

"So how do you feel about him? You have tried using him already, haven't you?"

"He's so peaky that I can't evaluate his performance as an A.I. tool."

Eiji paused for effect.

"What do you mean?"

"It's not that the tool's commands don't work... He just won't listen to what I tell him! Forget getting him to work, he won't even go for a walk. This dog that I used to have years ago was the type to pull the leash because he loved going on walks so much."

"...So you don't think you can raise him?"

"I didn't say that! Raising him is my job... and I'm interested in Loogamon! I'll definitely get him to evolve!"

"Try to Hololize it," Ryusenji said.

Eiji chose a command on his Digital Linker. The still sleeping Loogamon was Hololized.

He was big and bulky.

Child-level Digimon, depending on their type of course, are usually about one meter in length. Loogamon was about the size of a Siberian Husky or a small wolf. His physical form was small but stout, so he had a strong presence while indoors.

His fur was blue-gray, like a gray wolf. His eyes were red.

Eiji would have liked to pet him with both hands, if he could.

"The Digimon Linker checks your bio-information 24 hours a day, Eiji-kun. I've inspected the data along with Loogamon's training information and... My word!"

Ryusenji gave a loud shout.

"Wha?! Don't surprise me like that!"

"You are truly remarkable!" Ryusenji raved.

"Huh? Why am I being complimented?"

"Look at this number!"

Ryusenji brought up the evaluation report and pointed excitedly at the screen.

"What's 'DS value...?' Actually, I can't even read this."

The numerical number was blinded out for privacy. It wasn't a term that Eiji had heard, not even in code cracker circles...

"That's D4."

"Oh, so it's classified."

"DS value is one of the indicators that I've designed to assess one's compatibility with a Digimon. Eij-kun... Your compatibility with Loogamon is already second to none, even compared to the best code crackers."

"Seriously?!"

Eiji looked at Loogamon, who remained napping on the floor.

"I'm glad that I was right about offering you the job."

"So does this mean... that Loogamon can evolve right away?!" Eiji asked excitedly. "To Adult-level... even Perfect and Ultimate?!"

"I can't say for sure."

"Why not?"

"The DS value is only an indicator of potential."

"So it might still be possible then!" Eiji was undeterred.

His compatibility with Digimon... Eiji had never really thought about that before. The extent of it, for him, had been mainly whether or not the Digimon was easy for him to use as a tool.

"I've only been in contact with Digimon like... Tyranomon and stuff. The ones that pretty much everyone else uses."

The more prevalent a Digimon was among code crackers, the easier it was to adjust tools to suit your needs. This was because you could listen to what other people did and copy them. Recently, cyborg types were

all the rage.

"Where have you been getting your Digimon?" Ryusenji asked. "At GriMM?"

"Yeah. Though that's slightly illegal in Japan."

"There are countries where it is legal, after all. There are no borders and laws in the network… In the Digital World."

"Yes! *'There are no borders in the Digital World!'*"

"Eiji-kun… Do you know who that quote came from?" Ryusenji asked.

"…" Eiji was stumped. "Who is it from? Doesn't everyone say that? It's like a set phrase among GriMM's code crackers at this point. Are you saying there's a source?"

At this answer, Ryusenji shrugged his shoulders dramatically. "What was your occupation again, Eiji-kun?"

"I'm a code cracker."

"Then you know of 'crack teams,' don't you?"

Illustration: PLEX

Chapter 1-8

—'Crack teams.'

They are a community of anonymous individuals who upheld the philosophy of being "free to do whatever you want in the network and in the Digital World" as their goal.

There is no membership list. It is not a special club of friends.

Even crack teams had diverse groups within them. They all had different ideologies, principles, and goals. Often, they even broke out into fights among each other.

Crack teams are at odds with the existing law and government.

A group of outcasts that were labeled an anti-social group— through process of elimination, this was the only common denominator that was shared among all crack teams.

Nevertheless, those who called themselves code crackers more or less agreed with the crack team philosophy and slowly participated as such.

A short promotional movie on crack teams that was uploaded to GriMM's video service played on the monitor.

"---Be free to do whatever you want in the network and in the Digital World… The Digital World has no borders or laws. Therefore, no government of ours or laws can oppose any activities that involve Digimon," Ryusenji said.

This was a common argument from the code cracker's POV.

"Stuff like that goes over my head, but…" Eiji shrugged. "It was simply the most lucrative job for me at the time, since I had no connections or education."

Eiji had first gotten interested in code cracking while he was in high school. One of his seniors who had a bit of a bad streak talked him into doing it for the money… The story was a common one.

It was probably a good fit for him. He made more than enough money doing it on a part-time basis.

But after a bunch of stuff happened and he gave up on taking college entrance exams, Eiji started to take code cracking much more seriously. He decided that he'd try to make a living at it.

"It's good that you can do what you love," Ryusenji said.

"Yeah, seriously! I just work jobs that I like doing."

"But to the government, code crackers are the network's worst offenders, causing nothing but trouble."

"I'm careful of traps!" Eiji protested. "I don't get too greedy, or the DigiPolice will come after me."

The police department that handled cyber crimes had a team that dealt specifically with Digimon crimes.

The DigiPolice.

It was a secret organization unknown to the public, but well-known among code crackers. Just recently, a high school student was arrested by the DigiPolice for acting as a code cracker poaching Digieggs.

"You've joined the crack team, but you're not really interested in their ideals," Ryusenji mused. "Is the idea of freedom for you something that you take off at the end of the day, something trendy?"

"Shallow of me, right? But the things that I want most right now are a job and credentials!"

"Credentials, eh? I wonder where your future is leading you. Eiji-kun... What is your dream?"

"I... I want to win!" Eiji replied sincerely.

"Oh? Win what?"

"I couldn't be a winner in real life, but on the Internet… If I get big on the Internet and rise to power, I ought to be able to change reality! To do that, I want to earn money, evolve my Digimon and… become a top-class code cracker! I want to reach the point where I have a team of my own!"

"Would you need to be a code cracker to do those things?"

"Yes! For me, the Digital World is the only place where I can really change my life!"

Eiji had a premonition. This job was a once-in-a-lifetime chance to become a code cracker of the highest caliber and to change his life.

"---I want to be on the same level as you, Professor Ryusenji! If it is possible to interact with the Digital World directly with all five senses, and not through monitors or observational data… If I could do that…!"

As it actually was.

—If it was possible to live in the Digital World.

Upon hearing Eiji's words, Ryusenji smiled.

"The Digital World... can change a person's life."

Much like it did mine.

Eiji took those words as that of a successful man who had become one of the wealthiest figures in the world.

He had nothing at the moment. No savings, no education, and, moreover, no girlfriend.

He didn't have the luxury for those things. His life was spent in a cramped three-mat room, living on an unhealthy, irregular diet. Being able to survive a day at a time like he did now probably wasn't something that he could sustain in the long run. He would simply be wasting away like that, just getting older as time went by.

That was boring.

"I... I want to change my life! I want to be a winner in the Digital World!"

Eiji made up his mind.

He had no intention of losing out on his unlikely acquaintance with Professor Ryusenji.

No matter how hard or frustrating it might be, he would master his Digimon Linker and this training job with Loogamon…

No matter what.

"Sometimes, by changing your viewpoint to a different angle, one can finally understand the world that you thought you'd known and seen for a long time," Ryusenji murmured.

"...?"

"Thank goodness. This is great. I had asked you to train Loogamon, but I was also testing you as well, Eiji-kun."

"Ugh, there you go again!"

"If you were invested in crack teams down to their ideology... If you were a foolish, happy-go-lucky kid drunk on the idea of freedom... I wasn't going to give you this job."

—"SoC."

An insignia—a badge—with three letters of the English alphabet.

This badge that featured in the promotional video was a familiar sight to anyone who has ever tried to peek into the network underground.

"'Sons of Chaos'...!"

Eiji gulped.

"The Sons of Chaos indeed," Ryusenji said mildly. "It appears that you know of them."

"Of course I do! They're an incredibly famous group of code crackers..."

"What is your honest impression of the SoC?"

"..." Eiji answered. "A group of dangerous guys, I guess."

The SoC were top-notch. Eiji would even admit to admiring them.

But if you wanted to enjoy a carefree, easygoing life, they were people that you needed to stay away from.

The SoC were extremists. A militant organization that was considered the far-right of crack teams.

"---They're known for their crimes using Digimon… information theft, corporate blackmail, cyber-terrorism, you name it," Eiji continued. "But their leader is so charismatic! The legendary code cracker, 'Tartaros,' who was the mastermind behind that Cyclops Incident… the person who went to war with the world!"

The Cyclops Incident won't be described here. It was the trigger that made it impossible for the leaders of the international community to ignore the existence of code crackers, crack teams, and the Digital World.

The identity of SoC's leader, code cracker Tartaros, was unknown. Apparently they were Japanese, but beyond that there wasn't even a whiff of rumor.

"They're like a dark hero, certainly. Tartaros is very popular, even more so than I am," Ryusenji smiled.

"GriMM has a lot of Tartaros followers too, but… on the other hand, a lot of people hate them because when extremists like them get too conspicuous, the laws and regulations get tightened."

"That's just it." Ryusenji looked at Eiji. "The SoC is meddling with the Digital World in a very negative way. Their excessive interference is creating risks to the Digimon ecosystem and ultimately to human society. And naturally, it's threatening my research as well. That's what I am most concerned about."

"I see."

"If stricter legal restrictions were to be enforced and caused the Digital World and the real world to grow even further isolated from each other than they are now, it would be unfortunate for both humans and Digimon. Wouldn't you agree?"

Ryusenji remained in a neutral camp when it came to code crackers. He wouldn't have hired Eiji in the first place if he wasn't.

However, when it came to violent crimes and terrorism using Digimon, he was deeply concerned.

This was because, ultimately, he loved Digimon.

If there was one thing that Ryusenji found deplorable, it was humans and code crackers who misused Digimon and put them in danger.

"Don't you have lots of contacts in the government though? Politicians and the like?" Eiji asked back.

Ryusenji was a government expert on technology and their special advisor to the Digital World. If Eiji remembered correctly, he was also involved in choosing the police equipment.

"Of course," Ryusenji said. "I lobbied for changes. However, the current prime minister is all about sitting back and observing, not acting… The police just follow the law and crack down on code crackers. Relevant laws are not yet in place and the ones we have are insufficient… It's not going well."

"Professor… What you're telling me sounds like you're taking a dangerous direction."

"Do you want me to stop talking about it then?"

"Not at all! It's making me more and more excited!"

Ever since Eiji had decided to become a code cracker, he knew that he would want to do a job like this one day. Not capturing Digimon, or collecting Digieggs or junk data. He wanted to confront other code crackers as a fully fledged code cracker himself… A dangerous job with a more adult feel to it.

"I want you to do an undercover investigation into SoC," Ryusenji said. "To find out what their mysterious leader Tartaros is up to. Do this for the sake of the Digital World and the Digimon. To protect them!"

Illustration: PLEX

Professor Ryusenji asked Eiji to investigate the Sons of Chaos (SoC), a destructive group of code crackers.

—Join the SoC as a fellow code cracker. I want you to make contact with their leader Tartaros, and find out what their goal is.

The SoC organization consisted of a group of hardliners who were said to be the worst and strongest of all code cracking teams. Lately, they had been showing signs of planning something large-scale.

Intelligence agencies and police forces from all over the world were on the case, but Ryusenji felt that even the Digital World wasn't completely impartial to what could occur. Therefore, he hired a personal code cracker to investigate.

—To protect the Digital World and the Digimon.

The reward offered to Eiji was through the roof. But what moved Eiji's heart more than anything else was Ryusenji's passion.

If the activities of SoC and Tartaros caused the international community to view not only code crackers but even the Digital World as dangerous and Digimon as the enemy...

—The ecology of the Digital World, nay, the very lives of the Digimon, will be at stake.

Long ago in Europe, the U.S., and even in Japan, wolves were eradicated simply for preying on livestock. This tragedy had to be avoided from being reproduced in the Digital World.

Digimon were living creatures. Eiji was greatly influenced by this viewpoint from his role model Ryusenji.

"In other words, I'm a spy," Eiji said out loud in his cramped single bedroom.

A fluffy lump with its belly up lay sprawled at the foot of his futon on the loft. It was the Hololization of Loogamon. Pets weren't allowed in here because the room was a rental, but that rule didn't apply to digital pets.

"Listen up, Loogamon!," Eiji said to the Digimon. "We're gonna infiltrate SoC, and find out who Tartaros really is! Don't let your guard down!"

He had never spoken with intent to a Digimon before.

Loogamon continued to lay with his feet in the air, cocking his head like a dog.

There were many opinions on how well Digimon understood human language, but...

"We'll be dealing with SoC, after all! Those guys are hardcore code crackers, and really scary to boot. My ordinary Tyranomon wouldn't stand a chance. You, on the other hand, would be a rare find for them, even if you're still a Child-level."

Eiji was going to sell himself as Cracker Fang. Everything would start from there.

He stretched out a hand to stroke the jewel on Loogamon's forehead.

Of course, he couldn't actually touch it... but the moment his fingers went there, Loogamon growled and bared his teeth.

"Oh, you don't like that, huh? Sorry... Now that I think about it, I once had a dog that got mad whenever I tried to pet it."

The dog had been cuddly to his parents, but only behaved that way toward Eiji for some reason.

The alarm went off.

It was time to get to work.

"Let's go, Loogamon."

He undid the Hololization, returning Loogamon to the Digimon Linker screen.

Attaching a voice chat intercom over his ear, Eiji leaned against the loft wall and opened the Digimon Linker menu.

A virtual monitor projected on the heads-up screen. This was another application of Hololization technology.

———◆———

Once Eiji connected the virtual monitor to the network, he logged into GriMM.

Joining the SoC itself was not difficult. Once you obtained an invitation code from GriMM's member registration page, you could come and go from the SoC's private channel as a part-timer.

Eiji had applied to the SoC in advance and secured an appointment.

"---SoC deals with government agencies, the military, police, and global corporations... That sort of bunch. The level of code cracker skills that we look for is quite high, to say the least. What's more, it's risky."

A senior member of SoC was speaking with Eiji via voice chat. It was an online interview.

"So it's easy to apply, but if you don't have the code cracker skills, you're turned away," Eiji mused.

"Do you have what it takes, newbie?"

"The name's Fang."

"Yes, Cracker Fang. Are you willing to put your real life on the line to be a part of SoC?"

The interviewer's username only said "Interviewer."

The icon that they used on GriMM looked like a standard Showa-era salaryman wearing his necktie as a headband. His voice however sounded like… a section chief or something? It was the voice of an older gentleman.

"So, let me ask you instead… If my skills are up to par, will I get to meet Tartaros?"

Eiji got right down to business. On the internet, it was not considered a social faux pas for code crackers to speak frankly and bluntly with each other.

"Are you interested in our leader?" The interviewer's voice tinged with a hint of caution.

"Who wouldn't be?! They're a legendary genius!"

"Hahaha… You're really young, aren't you? Are you in high school? Or maybe junior high school?" The interviewer laughed.

"Well, how old are you, Mr. Interviewer?"

"It doesn't matter if I tell you I'm a 60-year-old fart or a 17-year-old high school girl, because there's no way to prove it. Here we simply sound and look like how we want others to believe we are."

"Insisting on your high level of Internet literacy is characteristic of a certain, salty generation of old men though, isn't it?"

Eiji had a hunch that the interviewer really was an old man.

"…"

"Oh, please continue," Eiji said.

There was a brief pause.

"…Our leader, Tartaros, is a mystery. Low-level members like me have never even heard their voice."

"A mystery, huh."

So that was how the organization wanted to spin it.

"If you're the genius code cracker you think you are, and you have a good track record, one of the executives will get in touch with you without you even needing to go looking. If you get access to the executives' chat room, maybe you'll get to talk to Tartaros."

It looked like this was going to take a while...

The only way to get in touch with Tartaros would be to participate in SoC activities and make a name for himself. The organization was a meritocracy.

"So, is this job that I'm about to take the SoC's employment exam?"

"That's one way to look at it. For your reference, the difficulty level for this is equivalent to the semi-A level... I've shared the file with you on GriMM. I've also opened up a channel exclusive to the mission."

A summary of the mission displayed on the virtual monitor.

"---The name of the mission can be… uhh, whatever you choose."

"Wolf at the Back Gate strategy," Eiji requested.

"…? Why that?"

"Just the first thing that came to mind." There was no real meaning behind it.

If there were to be meaning assigned, it would be because it was his wolf— Loogamon's first battle. It signified that Eiji had made up his mind as a code cracker to do something that had no turning back.

"A Wolf at the Back Gate… Very well," the interviewer said. "That's kind of long though, so we'll just call it Operation Wolf."

"That's too short!"

"Are you really sure about going for a semi-A? In nine out of ten cases, you'll lose your precious Digimon. Needless to say, we do not insure or provide compensation for their loss."

"I got you," Eiji said. "Prepare a welcome party."

"Welcome party? For what?"

"To celebrate me as a new SoC executive."

Big words, but it was not a foolhardy move on Eiji's part. He had something special in store.

—In order to infiltrate the SoC, I have temporarily lifted the functions on your Digimon Linker.

For this job, the reliable Ryusenji had provided Eiji with the means to improve his code cracker skills in one fell swoop. It was the results of D4's research, the very thing that would push him past the "constraints"...

(I'll go see it! I can see the world the way that the elite see it! This Digimon Linker and Loogamon that Professor Ryusenji gave me will make that possible!)

Eiji took a deep breath.

"Please read the file for the details of the operation. I wish you success."

"Thanks, Mr. Interviewer."

Eiji gazed at the Digimon Linker screen. Loogamon looked back at him through the small monitor, silently.

(Digimon are alive... I bet I'll learn what Professor Ryusenji meant when he said that!)

Eiji selected the menu.

>mindlink

The sensor measured his biometric data and allowed the command after checking his vitals.

The limits were lifted.

His consciousness was about to become light and thrown wide open.

Now then...

—"Mindlink"!

Character design/illustration: malo

Chapter 1-10

Sound and vision faded.

The feeling of all his limbs, along with the weight of the Digimon Linker on his wrist, went away.

Eiji lost consciousness.

Dizziness.

The semicircular canals of his inner ear went awry.

The world fell as if rolling down a slope, turning upside down.

Sinking.

As he sank… he suddenly flash backed to memories of his childhood.
Summer.
He played in the river with family. At that time, it was both his family and his friend's family.
His very best friend…

—Leon!

His friend's father, getting the BBQ ready, called out for his son.

—Eiji!

His friend yelled out his name, heading out from the river towards the shore.
But Eiji had been heading towards the sandbank and had unknowingly entered the river at its deepest point. When he turned around, his foot got caught in the sand at the bottom of the river.

(…! Oh no!)

One step ahead was an invisible cliff.
Eiji considered himself a good swimmer, but a flowing river is different from a swimming pool.
He couldn't float. He couldn't tread water and could only plunge his head beneath the water surface.
What he caught glimpses of underwater was—

Another world.

What looked like a home of monsters that was deeply gouged out from beneath the clean, clear flowing water— a place that could easily swallow up a child.
Air bubbles swirled.
It was going to swallow him whole.
And then, all of his senses disappeared.

It was only for an instant. Or was it?

Something soft and fluffy gently received Eiji's consciousness. It felt similar to wearing a wetsuit while floating in water.
Before long, light scattered through the bubbles to form an image.

A new world.
No, it was a world that he thought he was already familiar with… By changing his viewpoint, Eiji's consciousness was hit with newfound stimulation.

(…?!)

It was so bright.
The light was too strong here. And yet, he couldn't close his eyes.
What's going on here?
Confusion. Anxiety.
He didn't know what he was seeing or what was going on.

The image seemed to zoom in coarsely like a digital zoom, but then faded away as if he was looking through binoculars upside down. Static rang through his head. A bug flew into his ear and flailed around buzzing noisily.

He smelled like an animal…

(It's like the smell of wet dog here. What a bad dream…)

—It's not a dream.

———◆———

That voice was the only thing that Eiji could hear clearly.
(Huh? Who's that?)

CRASH!

The sound of something being kicked over was heard as someone came running.

—Chuumon. Child-level. Beast type. Virus species.

The data was displayed above its head.
A small rat Digimon appeared, moving like an old Western cartoon. The naked pink rat was holding pieces of data— pieces of cheese in its arms.
Where was this place?
The inside of a building.
The walls, ceiling, and floor were concrete. Was it under construction? Or abandoned?
Another Digimon emerged.

—ChuuChuumon. Child-level. Puppet type. Virus species.

This one was another rat Digimon. However, it was not a beast, but a puppet— a stuffed rat doll with sharp glaring eyes. It was riding atop another machine-like Digimon.

—Damemon. Adult-level. Mutant type. Virus species.

Its metallic-looking body was clutching a tonfa, a T-shaped club used in martial arts. Its appearance could be described as follows:
(A kettle with limbs...? No... That thing looks like a pile of poo!)
Eiji was unsettled.
If this was the phantasmic Digimon Land brought to life, he would have cheered loudly. But Eiji had put aside his pure childish heart, which would have once been amused by the mere appearance of poo, in his time capsule of memories.
Eiji looked coolly now at what was happening before his eyes.
Damemon was a poo-shaped Digimon being piloted by ChuuChuumon.

"You've got guts trying to steal from my family."
"Squeak! Please, show me mercy, ChuuChuumon! We're both fellow rats!"

ChuuChuumon threatened, while Chuumon begged for their life as they clutched the cheese. Apparently Chuumon had run off stealing ChuuChuumon's food.
"It offends me to think that we are the same species, Chuumon," ChuuChuumon said.
"No good, no good." Damemon pointed their tonfa at Chuumon with a jerky motion.
Just then, ChuuChuumon noticed Eiji's presence.
"By the way, you dog there."
(Huh? Dog? Where?)
Eiji didn't know what they were talking about.
What was this anyway? What was he being shown?
(The Digimon is… talking?)

……

"I haven't seen you around here… This is Wall Slum's Sixth Street and my family's turf. You should tuck your tail in and run while I take care of Chuumon here. If you're still in my sight after I'm done…"
"A rat picking a fight with a wolf? Don't make me laugh."
The voice that Eiji had heard before growled in his ears again.
He took a step forward.
No… Eiji hadn't moved at all.
And yet, he was approaching Chuumon. As though… he was riding a car that had begun moving on its own.
"---From this day on, this is my home turf."
"…! Get him, Damemon! Use Gun Vulcan!"

Bam-bam-bam-bam-bam!

The Vulcan cannon, embedded in the tonfa, discharged. Bullets chattered as they landed in the floor and walls. Chuumon ran right and left to escape their trajectory.

(Whaaa?!)

Eiji suddenly felt nauseous.

This was...

(I-It smells! My nose is burning!)

It was like poison gas.

The bullets of Gun Vulcan weren't powerful, but they released a horrible stench that was unbearable.

"Ahahaha! This attack must be torture for a dog with a strong nose! Digimon fighting is all about exploiting weaknesses!" ChuuChuumon cried triumphantly at their successful strategy.

"No good, no good!"

"I say we get rid of this stray first... Damemon! Finish him off with your Boost Atta—"

Fwooooom!

Some kind of energy swirled around Eiji.

(What?!)

It was an ignited flame— bright and furious. Moving faster than Damemon—

"Howling Fire!"

A fireball ripped through the entire floor of the building.

The flame consumed everything. In a whirlwind of heat and shockwave, Damemon was blasted out of the building through a window.

(So hot…!)

Eiji was surprised. He felt as though his face was being burned by a bonfire.

"Damemon is known for his toughness, and you took him out with a single attack…?"

ChuuChuumon had rolled out of Damemon's cockpit and lay on the ground.

The floor smoldered with flames. There was nothing to burn but the flames weren't extinguishing right away.

"What kind of fire is this?! It's no ordinary fire!" ChuuChuumon panicked.

Eiji glared down at the stuffed rat Digimon— from above.

"Maybe I should eat you…"

He sniffed with his nose.

ChuuChuumon's face pulled into a grimace as they trembled.

"That old interface on your forehead…!" ChuuChuumon gasped. "Is that you, Loogamon? No, you're… Sir, you're the Demon Wolf of the Castle of Nine Wolves!"

(Loogamon…?)

It was then that Eiji gasped. ChuuChuumon was talking to Loogamon.

Which meant Eiji was...

"Nine wolves...? Oh, I see… I remember now…" The voice murmured in Eiji's ear.

"Sir… Have you returned to Wall Slum?!" For some reason, Chuumon's voice suddenly took on a more respectful tone.

This conversation—

Where and how was Eiji able to hear it?

"---You don't look tasty at all… Get outta here."

Loogamon turned his nose away.

ChuuChuumon scampered off before the fearsome wolf could change his mind.

Eiji, on the other hand—

Although completely baffled by the conversation, he regained his composure and spoke up.

"Umm, Loogamon? Can you hear me? It's Eiji! Hey, Mr. Loogamon…?"

Character design/illustration: malo

Chapter 1-11

"---That voice is Loogamon, isn't it? Could you go ahead and… I mean, could you please explain to me the circumstances here, sir?" Eiji couldn't help taking on a more formal tone.

"Explain? Explain what exactly?"

"I don't understand a single bit of what's going on."

Where was this place?

Why were the Digimon talking?

And most of all, what happened to Eiji?

He was supposed to be up in his loft at home!

"Eiji Nagasumi... You didn't listen to anything that Ryusenji told you?"

"Huh? Ryusenji?" Eiji was taken aback that Loogamon referred to the professor so casually, without using his title.

"The Mindlink explanation."

—In order to infiltrate the SoC, I have temporarily lifted the functions on your Digimon Linker.

The research results of D4, a top secret within both AE and DDL. The professor had even said that it was a means to improve Eiji's code cracker skills in one go.

"Umm... It's a function that'll make me into an elite code cracker... right?"

"Ugh..."

"The professor's explanations are sometimes hard to understand, alright?" Eiji felt slightly uncomfortable that his casual nodding along to cover up his own ignorance had been found out.

Loogamon started walking.

"---Oh, there's broken glass there, so watch..."

As Eiji spoke, he spotted the reflection of a Digimon in the large window shards, their form illuminated by flickering flames.
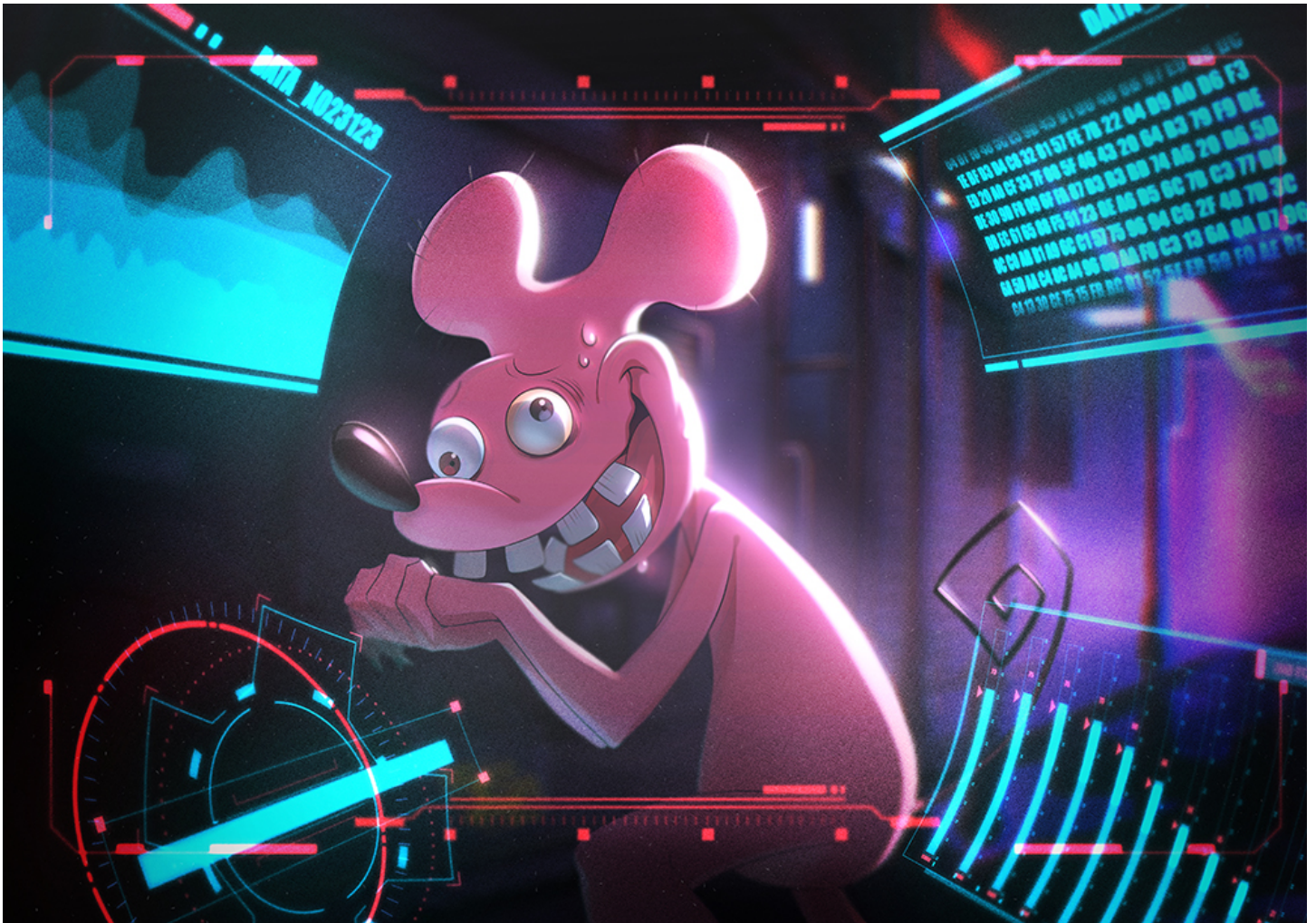
It was Loogamon.

"..."

No matter how hard he peered into the glass, all he could see was Loogamon. "I'm... not here?"

This was...

Was Eiji seeing the same world as Loogamon…?

Thump!

Another rat came rushing by.

"Good sir! I apologize that I failed to recognize you, the great boss of the Castle of Nine Wolves[1]! My name is Chuumon, a lowly rat Digimon at your service!"

The Chuumon who they'd happened to rescue by chance came forward in greeting.

"..."

"If you don't mind me asking, where have you been, sir? I haven't heard your name in these parts for quite some time. Rumor had it that either an assassin turned you into a Digiegg or that you were captured by a human..." Chuumon dared to probe a little.

"Who allowed you to speak to me?" Loogamon growled.

"Chuu! So sorry!"

"Do you really think that an assassin could turn me into an egg, or that a human could collar me?"

"P-P-P-Please forgive me!" Chuumon trembled all over in fear.

Loogamon sighed and quickly raised his head.

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[1] My first translation note! Hopefully no more, but we'll see!

"Castle of Nine Wolves" is a literal translation of 九狼城, pronounced "kuurou-jou." It is most likely a reference to 九龍城 which is literally translated "Castle of Nine Dragons," but better known to you as "kuuron-jou," or "Kowloon City." The reference to slums in the novel also strengthens this idea. I would personally have translated this term to "Kowroo City" or something similar to keep this reference intact (also the "roo" reference to the wolf, get it?), but as I'm not in charge of this translation in any official capacity, we'll stick to the official translation to avoid fandom mix-ups. -onkei

"Yes, I remember now... The Dust Kingdom. You Chuumon served the Great Sukamon, ruler of the Fifth Avenue trash heap."

"Yes, sir!"

"I'll look after you from now on," Loogamon said. "Besides, you look tastier than that stuffed animal from earlier."

Loogamon sniffed Chuumon and licked them.

(Yuck!)

Somehow, Eiji was also able to smell the rat and taste them with his tongue. The shock overwhelmed him.

"Squeeeaaak!" Chuumon cried in fear. "I promise to be of use to you, sir!"

"The Demon Wolf of the Castle of Nine Wolves, huh."

It's got a familiar ring to it, Loogamon whispered to himself.

"---Hey, Chuumon."

"Yes, sir!"

"Do the others think that I've been captured by a human then?"

"It's only a rumor! After you were gone, Ninth Avenue has gone absolutely dismal… It's deserted."

"Wall Slum looks to have changed a lot in my absence as well... Here's your allowance, take this."

Loogamon threw food at Chuumon.

"This is… real world meat! You sure eat the good stuff, sir, as befitting of your stature! Until next time then!"

After gathering up the meat and cheese, Chuumon ran away as though he never wanted to see Loogamon ever again.

"Umm... Are you finished talking now, sir?" Eiji spoke timidly to Loogamon.

Loogamon just sighed. "You wanted an explanation, right?"

"Yes, please!"

"What do you humans say at times like these... Seeing is believing? The proof is in the pudding?"

"Wha… Whoa!"

It happened so suddenly.

Loogamon threw himself out of the broken window. Eiji experienced his first free-fall of his life.

Loogamon easily landed from a height of 3-4 stories and looked up.

It was a sea of multi-story buildings. Among them was a dark skyscraper— it made one think of a deserted city sub center just before dawn, isolated from glitz and glamor. Its windows were completely dark.

Once he approached the tallest building in the area, Loogamon ran up— vertically, along its wall.

He ran swiftly as his claws dug into the structure.

———◆———

He felt the wind on his skin.

Eiji shared all the sensations of the five senses that Loogamon was having— his eyes, ears, nose, tongue, and skin.

"I see... So this was Professor Ryusenji's research! This is the top secret technology of D4!"

Because the Digital World has a different structure from the human world, the real world, it could not be directly perceived by humans. For example, a submarine relies on instruments and sonar, and a space probe

travels outer space. Humans can only perceive what is going on around us indirectly in those areas, through observed data.

Would it be possible to somehow experience the Digital World through the five human senses?

After exploring this possibility, it was discovered that a human's "mental data" could be transferred into the "Digicore" of a digital life form that is a Digimon to create the closest thing to a true "real-life experience."

"Mindlink is a technology that converts the human mind into digital data and transfers that human consciousness into a Digimon's Digicore," Loogamon spoke as he ran up the skyscraper, not even sounding winded.

The Digicore is the data center of a Digimon's core. It is the core of life, the area that shows the Digimon as an individual— the ego or the soul of a Digimon, so to speak.

"Yes! I remember the professor saying something like that!"

Once it became clear to Eiji, he was more intrigued than bewildered.

This was no tiny monochrome LCD screen. He was seeing the true state of the Digital World and the Digimon with his own eyes. It wasn't through a virtual monitor and observation data. He was perceiving the Digital World directly with his five human senses.

Ryusenji had already perfected this technology.

This was the answer. —Mindlink!

"It's like I've become a Digimon! Mindlink... So this is the world that the best of the best are seeing!" Eiji crowed with excitement.

"It's your first Mindlink, so it's only natural that you'll be feeling some confusion. You'll get used to it soon enough."

"I'm already getting used to it! But when was my mental data converted into digital data?"

"The Digimon Linker has been sampling your biometric data, brain waves, and level of consciousness for 24 hours a day."

"Seriously?! You mean my personal info was being leaked?!"

"What do you mean? That's what the Digimon Linker is for. The amount of data required to convert the human psyche into digital data is enormous."

"Professor Ryusenji is incredible... So incredible."

"...... Any other questions? I'm getting annoyed with all your constant yelling in my Digicore."

"How am I able to talk to you? You're a Digimon!"

"What a stupid question. It's because Digimon are alive. We always have been and always will be."

Digimon are alive.

Loogamon, Tyranomon, and all the rest of the Digimon were alive.

"I see... So the Digimon have been talking to me all along..."

"You're just getting to know us Digimon a little better is all."

After finally climbing to the top of the skyscraper, Loogamon stood triumphantly on the roof.

The view from there was—

Character design/illustration: malo