

The Interpreter (excerpt)

written by

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Later that night...

You disembark from the 'C' train at about 7:20. You've been to Rockefeller Stacks before, but Tier 13 kisses the clouds. Must be a heck of a view. You make your way to the top floor and knock on Midori's door. Almost two whole minutes pass before it opens.

"お りください。"

You stare at her for a moment. You look down to see she's not wearing her pin. Upon realizing her mistake, she gestures for you to come in and shuffles quickly to the other end of the room.

Her studio apartment is huge. Floor to ceiling windows, full sized kitchen, a couch? It'd be nice if it weren't for the mess. That, and the Charon building is right across. The huge neon sign bathes the room in a warm orange light. No wonder she can afford this place.

Midori comes back, putting the pin on the collar of her sweater.

"より い?" (Better?)

"Yeah." You walk towards the window, passing a pile of dirty laundry and a few canvases.

Blinding neon signs aside, it's quite the view; the overlapping buildings underneath look like an unsolved puzzle. You take notice of an unfinished painting on the easel. It's of the city below.

"How'd you get a hold of real paper?"

"には がある。" (I have my means.)

"And the paint?"

"まとめ いしています。 から する があります。" (I buy them in bulk. I have to get them from construction wholesalers.)

At this point, you take notice of the large crates labeled "PAINT" near the door.

"That must've cost a fortune. Why put in all that effort when GENESIS can make it for you in a fraction of a second?"

"それは の ではありません。" (It's not about the result.) She lights up a cigarette. Yet another surprise. She has an O-Tank implant. Why risk it?

"める はできていますか?" (Ready to begin?)

You start to walk toward her personal workstation, but she grabs your hand to stop you. Confused, you try to break away, but she keeps a firm grip. She leads you back to the easel and puts a fresh canvas up.

"What do you want me to do with this?"

" らはあなたが に ったと っています。 " (They say you went to the port.)

"I did."

" せて。 " (Show me.)

"I thought you wanted to help me with my Interpreting skills."

" は。 " (I am.)

She slowly reaches for her collar and takes off her pin.

" せて。 "

She puts a paintbrush in your hand and guides it toward the canvas.

You don't know what you're doing. Just abstract shapes. But you're trying to visualize it. Bring it back to life. Every once in a while, Midori steers your hand in the right direction, saying something in Japanese you don't understand. But you do. Somehow, you do.

Blue streak there, orange reflection there. A ship, white foamy bubbles in its wake. It's not perfect, but it's as you remember. That feels more important than getting it right, somehow.

Eventually, it's done. It's objectively terrible, but it's yours. You both take a step back.

"(It's beautiful.)"

"What do you mean? It's not-"

"(What is your ELO?)"

"2205. I barely made Grade III."

"(Get on the console. We'll run a benchmark.)"

"What good will-" You stop. You realize that you've been speaking to Midori without her pin on. "How can I understand you? I don't speak..."

"(Just trust me.)"

At first, you don't think there's any change. You haven't had to take a GAMBIT test in ages. A series of hypothetical interpreting scenarios are shown on screen. But today, it's different. It's the same feeling as before, in the Crucible. Puzzles that used to take you 15 commands to complete before are only taking you 2. By the end, you're astonished by your results.

//'GENESIS: 2612 ELO GRADE II'//
Midori smiles. (I knew it.)

Over the next few weeks, you and Midori meet at her apartment every night for a session.

//'GENESIS: 2701 ELO GRADE II'//
By the end of each one, both of you are usually covered in paint. You even stay over some nights.

//'GENESIS: 2950 ELO GRADE II'//
Each day, your ELO gets higher and higher.

November 2, 2551

One night, without a word, both of you simply sit on the couch for hours, leaning against the couch cushions, not even talking. Just staring at her baggy, tired eyes.

"Hey, Midori."

"(Yeah?)" She's half asleep. Must've been a long day for her.

"You never told me... Why painting?"

Midori sighs, and lights up a cigarette. "(My parents immigrated from Japan. They had these old wood block paintings. Very vintage. Some painter from the 2030s, just before all the stationery companies went out of business. It was fascinating. My parents sent me through the Interpreter program at 3, and I didn't take to it as easily as the others. Strapping us to chairs, watching those damned dendrites cascading forever. It wasn't until I started studying art history in high school that things made sense. No one believed it. That art, an obsolete invention, could help you see.)" (Kuplen)

She takes a long drag of her cigarette, and blows smoke in your face. She's done it enough now that you don't even flinch anymore.

"(But you do.)"

"I'm sorry you had to go through that."

"(Don't be. What's past is past.)"

She stands and turns to walk toward the window. You watch her from afar, her slender silhouette contrasting the bright neon signs.

"There's better places to be than MUSE. An Interpreter of your caliber should be working for a hedge fund."

"(Art is what got me through the program. I thought being here would make it all worth it.)" She haphazardly tosses the cigarette against the concrete floor, stamping it with her foot. "(I was wrong. Art is dead. Nothing more than an empty husk. MUSE doesn't care about quality. Only volume. And the work I do is at the heart of that.)"

"Why'd you keep going through the program then?"

"(My parents. They wanted the best for me. Even if it meant torturing me.)"

She stands and turns to walk toward the window. You watch her from afar, her slender silhouette contrasting the bright neon signs.

"There's better places to be than MUSE. An Interpreter of your caliber should be working for a hedge fund."

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