

## Office of Delusions

Two months before the company collapsed, Megumi was lamenting how much she stayed in the real world these days. To survive as an office assistant at a generic, non-descript, investment company, she would usually imagine she was anyone else.

She googled it once, to see if she was a freak or something, but most people said it was just plain old daydreaming, though she would usually imagine she was in a fantastical other world. Her main daydream was about being thirteen again, but not as a lonely kid in suburbia SoCal, as a wizard learning magic. Sometimes the daydream would be about her at 60, being a professor at her old university, who would get a mysterious letter from an old student, and get thrown into a whirlwind quest. Maybe even a torrid love affair with some mysterious person in a town where people kept disappearing into the sea.

But these days things like sending emails, scheduling meetings, organizing folders, shredding documents, crafting invoices, getting coffee, ordering catering, getting mail, and other corporate bullshit was her life. Her entire life.

Megumi mused that it could be much worse, as she balanced the two tiers of coffee cups on top of each other and walked down the bland beige hallway to the conference room.

Even the word beige was so bland, so blank, so boring, bleh, bleh, bleh.

She was living in New York City, a dream she had ever since she saw her first spiderman movie, with she had a job that paid enough, an apartment with only one roommate, she was practically living in the lap of luxury. Sipping on lady luck's tit.

The door opened and rows of men and a few women didn't even look up as her boss, wearing another garish neon suit, let her in. Everyone was wearing suits and dress clothes and

jewelry that she could barely afford the knock offs of. Sipping on lady luck's tit her ass. This was real success. Not her delusions of adventure.

"I hope your meeting has been going well," Megumi said in a high, fake, voice that she usually used for work, and placed the coffees at the center of the room.

A few people murmured their thanks, and someone, joked about how she got the wrong coffee, then rubbed her back and said just kidding, like it was a joke.

But, one person, Tarres, one of the younger executives, gave her a sympathetic smile. She smiled back, then grabbed the empty trays and left. But not before hearing something that she'd repeat to an FBI officer two months later.

That her boss, with the gaudy suits that looked like he ironed wool with highlighters, said, "The investigation on the banks are going to set a bad precedent."

She mulled it over. Last she saw, those were investigations to punish banks for accepting bribes and glossing over clearly false income documents from large companies?

Megumi's stomach curled. Why was she thinking about business interactions? She was walking to an elevator, these little pockets of time—walking to the subway, getting coffee, fetching mail—they were for dreaming about magical other worlds, not work. She already spent too much time here.

The elevator opened and a scarily smart looking woman walked out. Yvette Lawson, an important potential client. So important, that Megumi's boss said that her personal investments alone could cover half the company for the fourth quarter.

"Hello Ms. Lawson. Currently Mr. Smith and his senior executives are in a meeting. Would you like me to send them a message?" Megumi put on her fake work voice.

Yvette shifted her gaze, and it felt like she could see through her. “No thank you. I’m just going to wait for him once the meeting ends.”

“Of course, miss.” Megumi smiled and went into the elevator behind her as Yvette walked towards the conference room. The instant the doors shut Megumi sighed and pressed her head against a wall.

Why was it so hard to think about kid wizards, or adventurous professors, or tragic love affairs? This was a boring office, these kinds of things should be easy.

Megumi didn’t always have difficulties with starting to daydream. She would usually have trouble stopping. Drifting off in class, staring out the window while on the bus, failing to shut her brain up while trying to go to sleep, but not being able to because what if dragons were much more interesting than she ever thought of before.

And now she couldn’t even start.

But who would care? If she told any of her co-workers, that she liked, they’d joke about how they wished they could start daydreaming too. If she told her parents, they’d be worried that she wasn’t focusing on work. And if she told her art friends back in California, they’d joke about her for losing her spark.

At least she was working on paying off her student loans. Half of her friends were working at coffee shops or being substitute teachers. There wasn’t anything fake about working a nine-to-five. She had to make money to live!

But was she even living. When her life was work, home, work, home, work, home, was that living? Why did she feel more alive at college, drinking more soju than water, getting into

screaming matches about the symbolism in *Buddha in the Attic* in class, and destroying her spine while she hunched over an essay that she had to perfect because her last one was only a 93.

Megumi pretended to be working while waiting for the clock to hit 5. It was Friday night so most of the office was already out, but she was still an hourly worker, and she'd be damned if she got cheated out of her 23 dollars just because it looked like it was about to rain.

Another thing she missed about SoCal, other than the people. If it rained even half an inch, the people would act like it was end of the world, and most of her classes would be cancelled. In New York, people just got pissier. Which was kind of entertaining. Mean New Yorkers were always a treat. Seeing a taxi driver threaten to knock out an Uber Driver for cutting him off was always the highlight of her day.

"Hey, Megumi, working hard or hardly working?" Ugh, even her boss' voice was garish.

"Hello sir. I'm working hard." Megumi smiled a fake smile. Her boss was wearing an eye bleeding neon green suit. Tarres was standing behind him.

"Of course you are. Listen, I was hoping you could help stay for a little longer and shred some old documents. The trash bins are getting emptied out over the weekend so we want to full em up as much as we can," her boss said with a smile.

"Sure, sir. I'll get right on that. Which documents would you like me to shred?"

"Oh, Tarren will help you with that. I have to catch the East Train to Yankee Stadium. They're playing tonight and the wife would kill me if I told her work was more important than family time with our boy," he laughed and walked towards the elevator.

In two months, Megumi would shiver while remembering this, because his wife wouldn't have tried to kill him over missing a baseball game, but she did when she learned that he was trying to flee the country with their son, without telling her.

But in the moment, Megumi just bit her tongue about how she needed family time too. Maybe not in person, her parents were still at work back at home, but what if she had family here, and working overtime meant she couldn't get dinner with them? God, she'd do anything to get dinner with her parents now.

"Sorry about this. I'll make sure you get overtime, and I'll round up any time you put in, don't worry," Tarren said, with the same sympathetic smile he always had for her.

"Thank you," Megumi said in her real voice.

They both went to get the documents, some out-of-date information on old clients that moved on to other investment companies, or something. Megumi sat by the shredder and let it rip up old documents. She absentmindedly wondered what kind of shredder it was. Most new ones cut two ways diagonally, so it was impossible to put the documents together.

Shredders were boring! She should be thinking of her last idea, the kid wizards. How would you make tension in a story where the main characters were kids. Kids couldn't go through torrid love affairs, or have their limbs ripped off by zombies, or deal with manipulative political figures. Well, maybe the last one, but how to make politics understandable to children. Did children follow politics closely now a days? Probably, Megumi herself went to protests as a high schooler. But she might not be the best example of a normal child. She was always like this.

"Oh, you're already almost done." Tarren was back, holding an energy drink. "Do you still want this?"

Megumi smiled. "No thanks. I'm not really a caffeine person. It makes me jittery."

"Me neither honestly. I'd prefer tea, but everyone else at the board meetings orders coffee, so I feel like I have to go along with it."

"What kind of tea do you like?"

“Hot hibiscus blackberry tea—” Megumi tried not to make a face, she thought that no fruit should be cooked, “—but I’ll drink anything without caffeine.”

“I’ll remember that for next time.”

The sky cracked and it started to pour.

“Oh no,” she muttered. The walk from the building to the subway was at least 10 minutes. She’d usually take the bus, but with weather like this, everyone was going to take the bus. And she didn’t even have an umbrella on her.

“Could I take you home?”

Megumi stiffened. A man, and older man, who was sort of her boss offering to take her home?

“Or to the subway. It was my fault for making you stay late. I noticed these documents and knew that they shouldn’t wait. I thought I’d be the only one to have to deal with them, but Smith always has his own ideas, doesn’t he?”

“His own ideas?” Megumi muttered.

Tarren laughed, and he looked so much brighter when he did. Like any tension he carried vanished, even for a second, just gone. It was nice.

“No, no, they have to be his own ideas. I don’t know if I’ve heard anyone else saying the things he does in meetings. You’re lucky you don’t have to attend. It’s mind-numbing.”

She nodded to that. At least her highlighter boss didn’t need her around too often.

“Oh, but let me take you to the subway. It doesn’t look like this storm is going to let up.” Megumi agreed and they both left the office and walked to the parking lot, where Tarren’s car sat. A sleek Maserati that could have been Megumi’s entire yearly salary and a half, at least.

“The nearest subway station works for you, right?”

“Oh, yes. Thank you again for driving me. I wasn’t looking forward to walking in the rain.”

“It’s not a problem. Not for you,” he flashed her a smile.

They drove to the subway in relative silence, and she waved bye as he drove off, and she got on the subway.

He might like her; he probably liked her. Certainly, as a person, but probably romantically as well. At least he didn’t seem like a creep, even if he was ten years older than her. Ten years wasn’t that big of an age gap, right? And he was nice to be around, at least tolerable. If they dated, it would be good for her career, even if it was weird. He could introduce her to some people, get her a job as a copywriter, not just as an intern. And he was somewhat handsome, white but not ghostly pale, dark hair, tall and fit, trimmed beard. They could look good together, though she didn’t want to be around other executives as an ethnic trophy girlfriend, a sexy porcelain doll, and spending time with those people at work was already nauseating. Could she pretend if the money was—

What the hell was she thinking!? Trying to date a man she didn’t even know, didn’t even like. He wasn’t her type, at all, just someone who showed interest in her, who was also rich.

But that was the kicker, he was rich. If he really liked her, would it be so bad to go on a few dates and try to woo a rich guy? That’s what people say all the time, marry a rich guy so you’ll never work again. And work was always so dull, would it really be terrible to ask him out?

Sure, it made her stomach squirm and her skin crawl, like something inside of her was trying to scream, but it would be comfortable. Wouldn’t it?

Megumi was looking through her desk, trying to find a flash drive her boss had given to her to make copies of a few months ago. He had suddenly asked for it to be destroyed, while wearing a highlighter blue suit, so she flicked through her drawers at her desk to find it.

She had found a lot of random stuff, hard candies, expired coupons, a mushy candy bar, crumpled sticky notes, and finally a flash drive, stuck in the rings of a very old notebook. She pulled it out and plugged in the flash drive to make sure it was the right one.

It was, just old files of previous clients, current clients, clients who were—at the time—people who hadn't signed on yet. And notes about investment returns and percentages. But it was fixed, a guarantee on how much they would get back, not speculation. They worked in stocks, these things supposed to be random. Well, not random, but not this precise. Never this precise.

In one month, Megumi would be relieved that she grabbed a notebook and wrote down the names of the documents. At the time, though, she just thought she was being paranoid.

“Excuse me, Megumi.”

She turned to see Yvette Lawson standing by her desk. She looked different from the last time Megumi saw her. Of course, her hair was now in an afro, she used to have thick braids, but she also looked a lot more tired. And something else, determined maybe.

“Yes Ms. Lawson? What can I help you with?” Megumi said immediately, remembering what her boss said about how important Ms. Lawson was.

“I just wanted to check if my meeting with Mr. Smith is still on for tomorrow.”

Megumi checked and frowned. “I'm sorry Ms. Lawson, but I don't see a meeting between you and Mr. Smith tomorrow. Or on any other day.” He also suddenly had another meeting scheduled tomorrow that he didn't tell her about. Quite a few meetings with his executives actually. Now that she thought about it, she did see a meeting with Yvette before.



Yvette sighed, “It’s all right. I’ve been bothering him too much, haven’t I?”

“Oh no, never. I don’t think that’s possible. He’s most likely just busy.” He wouldn’t cancel for anyone. And Yvette was a fairly normal, patient, person. The only off-putting thing about her was how sharp she was. Maybe Mr. Smith didn’t like that?

“Hmm, hopefully.” She looked a million miles away.

“Is there anything else I can help you with?”

“No, no, I was just wondering about that. Hmm, is that a sketchbook?” She pointed at Megumi’s old notebook on her desk.

“Oh, no, this is just an old notebook. I actually don’t quite remember what’s in here.” Megumi flipped through it and was hit with a wave of melancholy. It was her old notebook of stories. Stories of kid wizards, adventurous professors, tragic love affairs, mysterious small towns, haunted detectives, tyrant dragons, romantic meet cutes, poems about grief. None of them were quite good, but they were real. So much more real than her thoughts had been these past weeks.

“It’s—ah—it’s an old notebook that I used to write down ideas. Story ideas. Sorry,” Megumi start to put the notebook away, back in the drawer.

“Don’t apologize, it’s good to have something to do. I used to draw a lot.”

Megumi started to say something. It could have been, what did you like to draw, or did you do it professionally. It probably wouldn’t have been; when did you stop or what was your inspiration. And certainly wasn’t going to be, doesn’t it feel like silent betrayal not to do it. Even if that was what she wanted to know the most. She wasn’t going to ask if she was in mild agony over nothing, if she was letting a rotting tooth stay in her mouth instead of getting it ripped out,

of if she needed to change, and unclog a plugged artery before it killed her. Or if there was something wrong with Megumi specifically.

But Mr. Smith walked out of the elevator at that moment, and Yvette nodded a quick goodbye before trying to catch his attention. And he strangely seemed to be walking farther away from his greatest potential client.

A wealthy woman, well known in the investment field, who had the money to make their company one of the most well known in the country. Who also used to be an artist.

What did she draw? What did she use? She said draw, so she could have used pencil, or maybe she was a digital artist, but probably not a painter. Maybe she used charcoal, or pen, or colored pencil, but that felt a little silly for such a serious woman. What would she draw? The view from her window, the layout of banks, self-portraits? She was pretty, a good self-portrait would have sold well. Or maybe she didn't draw to sell. Maybe she drew because she loved it, and it made her feel away from herself, and completely herself.

Megumi slipped her old notebook into her bag, to take home later, and went back to work. But there was seemingly nothing to do, and work had been slowing down so much, that in a few minutes, she pulled out her notebook again and started scribbling some ideas down. They were awkward, half sentences, that read more like word vomit than prose, but they were real.

And she ignored the text message from Tarren who was asking about a party in a few weeks. But she couldn't ignore it forever.

Megumi didn't know why she brought her old notebook in her purse. It wasn't like she was going to find writing time at a fancy shareholders party with Tarren. As his date. Sort of.

She was officially going as his friend. His younger, pretty, friend to a fancy event where everyone else would be bringing their girlfriends or wives. It all felt so terribly uncomfortable.

The discomfort could have been the dress, a too tight, pretty, blue number that felt itchy everywhere it touched her skin. Or maybe it was the place, some ritzy bar that was ridiculously expensive. Or the makeup, she rarely wore much of anything, but an event like this meant she had to wear some.

It was all so . . . unnerving.

The cab stopped and she got out and tried not to gawk at the ridiculously tall hotel. Why was New York so tall? Why didn't they build wider, like in California? They even built underground; she hadn't even been in basement until she moved here. It was like everything was leering at her.

"Megumi! You made it." Tarren gave her a smile and held out his arm. "Thank you so much for coming, and on such short notice. I didn't even realize that I needed a date to this event until the day I texted you."

She took his arm. "It's not a problem. I didn't have anything to do this weekend anyways. Really, I should be thanking you."

Tarren laughed, not that sparkly laugh but a normal one. "Well, I accept anyways. You look very pretty."

Pretty, what a plain word. Pretty, plain, positively placid.

"Thank you. You look handsome." And he did, in a bit of a plain way. A simple suit and tie, with a dark blue handkerchief. Very safe.

They walked into the hotel, and up the elevator to the roof. Dozens and dozens of fancy rich people were milling around, all talking about who cares what.

Tarren introduced her to various people with important titles like so-and-so the chief financial officer of that company, or this-and-that from the board of executives of this business.

Everyone was a businessperson, and it seemed like everyone was in some kind of made-up money business too. Like investing, stocks, day trading, they talked about shorting and budget cuts and salary raises, which was torture, or they talked about spring vacations in Venice, taking private jets to Dubai, buying country homes in the Amalfi Coast, which was even worse.

It wasn't even jealousy; it was the disregard. And the jealousy of course, she'd kill to have a quarter of that money and move out of her apartment that sprung a leak for the fourth time this year. But it was just how they didn't care. They could get another million dollars and it wouldn't even affect them. If someone robbed them of ten million, would these people even notice? Did they feel anything?

God, these people are worse than dragons. At least you can point and say that they're evil, these people are praised for sitting on their asses and getting 50K a month for breathing.

"Oh Tarren, I've heard that your company is going to be going through some layoffs," said some consultant from who-gives-a-crap in a faux sympathetic voice.

"Yes, it is going to be rough, but we'll get through it," Tarren gritted out, "But that's boring, so how was your trip to Japan?"

"Oh, it was beautiful. But the locals were so stiff. And I thought everyone there spoke at least some English, but not everyone. It was a headache to get some headache medicine."

"Excuse me, I have to step out," Megumi spat out, and walked to the bathroom. Which was also disgustingly rich, but at least the people weren't there.

Megumi screamed in her mind. "Of course, the people there didn't all speak English, it's Japan! Learn the damn language or get a translator or shut the hell up! And what do you mean

stiff, just cause we don't shoot guns in the air every time one of you idiot's sneezes, doesn't mean that we're not people!"

She gripped the sink so hard she swore she heard a crack. Then realized it could have been her teeth and stopped to check. No crack, thank god, she didn't have dental, but still.

"Just keep this up to get a rich boyfriend and get money," she muttered over the sink.

Once she got the guy, then she'd . . . what? Might get a promotion and have to work with these clowns? Or just depend on Tarren, watch him do the actually important things? Hell, did she even like him or did he just smile at her sometimes and was less of an ass then the others?

Megumi sat on the side of the sink and pressed the side of her head against the marble wall.

Just stop caring, so you get the guy with the money. Just don't think about things so you can live that life. That awful annoying life with those awful annoying people.

But she didn't want to think about that.

What if, there was a dragon who stole from the wealthy, and only from them. How fast would they beg the government to shoot down the dragons? Would dragons even go after the wealthy if all of their money was digital, in stocks and bonds and stuff? Maybe digital dragons, that could hoard credit. A digital dragon that threatened to destroy your credit score if you didn't deposit money into its hoard. HA! What a nightmare. But a better nightmare than this party.

She didn't want to be at the party, she wanted to go back to her apartment, or take a walk around her neighborhood and think, or go to the library and read, or just do something she wanted.

Megumi left the bathroom and almost ran face first into Tarren.

“Megumi, I’m sorry about what he said, you don’t need to worry.” Her heart fluttered, did Tarren understand? “He wasn’t serious about layoffs happening, it’s all just, speculation right now, don’t worry.”

Her face fell for half a second, then rose in alarm. “Are their going to be layoffs? Is it going to affect me?”

“It’s not going to happen because we have plans set up to make sure that we won’t lose money.”

“How do you know that? It’s an investment company.”

“I just do. So don’t think about it, okay?”

“No. Sorry, no, I don’t feel well. I’m going to get a cab back to my apartment. Sorry.”

Tarren grimaced. “I- all right. Just text when you get home safely,”

She would. And later he would send her other texts, but she would never respond. It would be an awkward half a week of ignoring him and, thankfully, not seeing him around the office much, until the morning the FBI started questioning everyone about a Ponzi scheme.

Megumi had never wished she was a coffee drinker more than today. The company was swarming with FBI agents, and it was only 10am. It should’ve been interesting, but for now, she was just sitting in a hallway and staring at a wall, sweating.

There was a weird stain right across from her, a dent in the skirting board about six feet from where she was sitting, and the lightbulb right next to the elevator was a slightly different color than the others. On both sides of her where other low-level employees who were waiting to be questioned, all whispering to each other. She didn’t know if she was going to explode before or after the FBI questioned her.

The elevator door opened, and Megumi blinked in surprise as Yvette Lawson and an FBI agent walked out, talking to each other. Yvette wasn't officially a part of their company; was she still being questioned as a client?

"Thank you for your patience, I'd like to talk to Megumi Sato next," said a terrifying man with a clipboard and a scowl.

"That's- ah- that's me." She stood up and passed Yvette who gave her a slight nod, then walked to a side room where a few people were talking.

The man questioned her about work, if she knew that half of the investments at the company were fraudulent, that the Canadian office in Vancouver was a ghost office, that Mr. Smith had tried to flee the country with his son and was now in the hospital because his wife tried to kill him for trying to kidnap their son, that Tarren was arrested first for destruction of evidence.

"No. No I didn't know any of that. I was just . . . I was just an office assistant. I didn't know anything."

She told him about the shredding, the strange documents, something about layoffs from the party—the officer raised an eyebrow at that and asked if she was involved with Tarren, which she absolutely denied—and after what felt like an eternity, he let her go, but told her to check her phone because they would call if they had any questions for her.

Megumi walked out and sat down. She wasn't a pile of nerves and guts all over the walls and floor, so at least there was that.

She looked down the hall, another one of her coworkers was getting questioned, and on the other side, Yvette was looking exhausted, standing by the faulty water cooler that barely let out a dribble on the best days.

“Ms. Lawson, sorry but that water cooler doesn’t work very well. I could get you a water from the vending machine if you’d like.”

Yvette looked up and shook her head. “It’s okay. I’ll it myself, thanks.” She stopped pressing on the water cooler and walked to the nearby vending machine. “Rough morning?”

“Absolutely. I’m still not sure if my heartbeat is resting yet. I feel like a hummingbird.”

“I feel the same. I was actually trying to schedule a meeting with the executive board to reject their offer, when the FBI pulled up. Terrifying. Guess it’s a good thing I rejected their offers though. They were really happy I was trying to fall for their scheme, until I started asking too many questions about their returns, then they iced me out. Heh.”

She rubbed her arms. There were probably goosebumps under her blazer.

“That’s true.” Megumi nodded. What could she say, what did she want to say? “A few weeks ago, you said that you liked to draw. Are you still drawing?”

Yvette turned to her. “A little. But that isn’t my life now.”

“What do you mean?”

“I like art. It’ll be a part of me, but it’s not a part of me that invest in very much.”

Invest. What did Megumi want to invest in?

“Will you be looking for work after this?” Yvette asked.

“Oh, yes. But I don’t know if I can throw myself into the corporate world again.” It was starting to become winter, and she wasn’t sure if she could survive the cold.

“I could ask around, see if a secretary position or something similar opens up at my company.” Yvette handed her a business card. “No pressure thought. All of this-” she gestured to everything “-is a lot.”

Megumi gave a small laugh. “It certainly is. Thank you.”



It was two months after the company shut down, and Megumi was sweating from her thick wool jacket that she bought a few months ago. She thought she'd need it for the rough New York winter. But the only time she was using it was to stay warm on a plane back to California. Maybe she could sell it back at home. Someone would buy it, some new to town person who thought that California winters meant it might get below freezing ever.

But for now, she curled into her seat and pulled out her trusty notebook. The first half was notes about her living situation. She had some money saved from work, and she was planning on living with her parents until the new year, then move in with her friends from university and start the job she managed to snag back in her hometown.

It wasn't as glamorous as living in New York, but a copywriting job back in Riverside to pay the bills was all right.

The second half of her notebook was the mad scribbles of her newest idea. A magical and mundane world where physical dragons had to be slain by brave kid warrior wizards and digital dragons worked for the rich and powerful. But now, digital kid warrior wizards were secretly slaying these digital dragons and trying to keep people safe from cruel interest rates and malicious loans.

It was silly, and a little rough, and so real. She loved it.

The plane started to lift off, and Megumi reached for her earbuds and thought about what movie she would watch after she penned down one last idea. And she wouldn't realize that she never watched anything, until the plane landed.