
DUNGEON
BUSTERS
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Vol 2
Dungeon Busters

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Prologue

The soldiers were fighting in pairs, beating back waves and waves of creatures they had never seen before. As they had no weapons, there was no choice but to endlessly brandish their fists.

“Fuck! I’m a fucking soldier! The fuck am I supposed to do without a goddamn weapon?!”

More and more fantastical “monsters” commonly depicted in Japanese animation continued pouring through the passage ahead. Soldier after soldier succumbed to the overwhelming numbers. Even though they had been promised US$10,000 in hazard pay, you can’t put a price on staying alive. The troopers endlessly punched the enemies leaping at them, cursing the top brass the entire time. After taking several punches, the monsters would finally turn into smoke and drop tiny black stones. Every once in a while, there might even be a card. It was these soldiers’ mission to gather these stones and cards, but the danger was just far too great. And most of all, none of these men had a personal stake in the battle.

“Captain, sir! Permission to retreat?!” cried one of the servicemen in desperation.

If this had been in the Middle East theater, they could have called command on the wireless to ask for permission. However, this was an entirely separate dimension with no way to reach those on the surface. It was up to the present commanding officer to decide things like when to retreat. Seeing the unsustainability of continuing hand-to-hand combat with such a numerical disadvantage, the captain made up his mind.

“All right, we’re pulling back! Rick, Hauser, you two carry the wounded! Anson, Johnny, you’re bringing up the rear with me! We’ll have to buy time for everyone to get away. Snap to it!”

All of the soldiers were wearing stab-proof shirts and vests, but several of them had had their ears or noses viciously bitten off. Although the bleeding was quite severe, thankfully, none of the wounds seemed fatal. The group began

their retreat, leaving the larger-bodied members with the more powerful punches protecting their back. However, the number of enemies was far more than what three people could handle. They were gradually getting locked in, and retreat was starting to look impossible.

At this moment, a separate squad approached from behind. The two switched places, with the new squad taking up the fight as the first one finally successfully disengaged.

* * *

"Just send in more soldiers! Tell them that anyone who brings back a potion will get a medal!" screamed a dictator of a certain country in Africa, his spittle flying everywhere.

A mysterious ability named Slots had been discovered by those who had entered the country's dungeon. As it turned out, Slots could generate so-called panaceas that greatly surpassed what modern medicine was capable of. It didn't take a genius to predict that such products would go for sky-high prices on the black market.

This dictator, who needed a healthy influx of foreign currency to purchase his luxury condos, sports cars, and brand name watches, had realized that it was far more effective to accrue wealth through the dungeon than it was to squeeze it out of his dirt-poor citizens.

"Children! Elderly! I don't care! Just throw as many into the dungeons as possible and make them fight!"

The lives of his people meant nothing in this dictator's mind. As was the case with most poor countries, every family in his country had a minimum of five or six children. He knew that the large majority of them were so starved that they would gladly risk their lives just to have a bowl of maize congee. In other words, children were disposable. It wasn't as if they had a long life ahead of them anyways.

"Heh heh heh. I can buy so many more guns and tanks, more than enough to crush that pesky resistance! Then I will invade the other countries and eventually make all of Africa mine!"

The dictator stared at the numerous Potion Cards in his hand, his mind enveloped in dreams of blood and conquest.

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While every country that'd seen the emergence of these underground spaces named dungeons within their borders dispatched their armies to investigate, exploit, and otherwise interact with those dungeons in some way or another, a man and a girl were simply wandering about within a dungeon located in a certain South American country.

"This is wheat. Those strange creatures drop food when they die?"

"Mm-hmm. There must be lots of very hungry people around here."

The man gripped the club in his hand and brought it down on the head of the monster lunging at him. Several days had passed since he'd first stepped foot in this space. At first, he had had a really tough time due to being hungry, but that wasn't as much of a problem anymore. Munching on the apples dropped by the monsters had proven more than enough to sustain him. He had heard about the truth of this space and the world's doomed future from the girl. Even since then, he had fought as if possessed. His body had grown drastically thinner, but he felt power welling up in inverse proportion. After spending several days down here, he had returned above ground to procure water and clothes and then had come right back down. He'd spun the Slots, obtained new armor, and then continued fighting. He had long since stopped counting the number of monsters that he had massacred.

"Am I right? Or am I wrong?" the man mumbled repeatedly under his breath while wandering around within the dungeon like a ghost.

Eventually, he found the stairs that led to the next floor below. The monsters got stronger and harder to deal with, so he summoned more of the monsters that he had obtained through the Slots. Slowly but surely, his army of monsters was growing.

"Hee hee hee... Hee hee hee hee hee!"

The man had started to go mad. And yet, the girl said nothing, merely watching over him.

Chapter 1: First Dungeon Clear

[January 2020 — Addresses by Each Country's Heads of State]

The president of the United States of Gamerica, the world's greatest economic and military power, was expected to think not only of the interests of his own country, but those of the entire world. However, the history of Gamerica acting in a global leadership position actually was not that long. Specifically, this was something that had begun only after World War II in the mid-twentieth century and had not lasted that far into the twenty-first.

At the start of the twentieth century, Gamerica still carried itself largely along the lines of the Monroe Doctrine, a policy which shunned intervention in the affairs of other countries. It was only during the latter half of the twentieth century during the Cold War that Gamerica effectively came to head the Western world. When the Cold War ended and significant progress was made in shale gas extraction technology, the US's position started gradually crumbling away. Then in 2017, the man called a "real estate mogul," Ronald Howard, was elected president upon a platform of returning to the Monroe Doctrine.

"My fellow Gamericans, I wish you a happy New Year. I am currently speaking to you from the White House after canceling my end-of-year vacation. That's right, I canceled it just to deal with the Dungeon Outbreak Phenomenon that we've been seeing since the latter half of last year. As your president, I am always thinking of you and have your best interests at heart."

On January 1, the very first day of the brand new year, the White House was filled to bursting with reporters. At the end of last year, President Howard had posted on social media that he had a big proclamation to make, with the government releasing official confirmation soon after.

"It's been almost two years since I promised that I would make Gamerica great again. And in these two years, I've made that happen. We've fought enemies from outside and from within Gamerica and won every single battle. We've combated fake news and triumphed. We've done a deep clean of the illegal immigrants who threatened the integrity of our society and built a wall, a

great wall, to stop any more of them from coming over from Mejicanos. Sina was exporting deflation and stealing labor from other countries, but we taught them a harsh lesson, a lesson they will not forget. And now, Gamerica has returned to being a world power. However...”

Ronald Howard almost always started his speeches tooting his own horn. Then he would wait for applause before continuing. Such was his style. This time, however, he dove straight into a contradictory conjunction without pause.

“However, Gamerica is now under a great threat, the greatest threat we’ve ever had since the founding of our country. These mysterious caves called dungeons are everywhere, and we have no way of stopping them. We’re sending in our finest, but the investigation is not making headway. Trust me, folks. Gamerica is currently under attack. Some call it a punishment from God. Some call it the work of the Devil. But I promise you, we will show no mercy—no mercy!—to anyone who threatens Gamerica, even if it is the Devil!”

After tapping his podium forcefully with his right index finger three times to punctuate his point, President Howard continued. “Many of you folks might be feeling uneasy at the start of this new year. Some of you might be feeling sad or worried. As I’m sure you’ve heard, Private First Class Thomas Clancy lost his life in Los Angeles Dungeon. He stayed behind to buy time for his fellow soldiers to escape and faced the hordes of monsters with nothing but his fists. If it wasn’t for his bravery, many more lives would have been lost. Private Daniel Chan lost his life at the end of last year, suffering from the heavy wounds he took facing two monsters at the same time in Chicago Dungeon. The brave men and women of the Army, the Navy, and the Air Force are all fighting with their lives on the line. Folks, I promise you we will win. Even if it’s the Devil, we will win. But in order to do so, we need our soldiers.”

Here, President Howard paused briefly to take a sip of water. Then he appeared to shore up his resolve and turned to look straight into the camera once again.

“Currently, Gamerica has over two hundred thousand troops stationed all over the world. More than fifty thousand are in Japan and Reich each. These are honorable men and women who have helped maintain the peace of the world. However, Gamerica is now facing the biggest threat in the history of the world.

We know that many of our allies—including Japan—have had dungeons appear within their borders. However, *fourteen* have appeared in our country since the end of July last year, and we have reason to believe that there will be more. The first priority of the Gamerican military is to protect Gamerican citizens. We don't want to do this, and it sucks, but we can't afford to baby other countries any longer."

Up went President Howard's right index finger, thrust high into the sky.

"As I always say, GAMERICA FIRST! What that means is that defending ourselves takes priority. Within the coming six months, we will be pulling back nearly all of our forces currently stationed overseas, be it Army, Navy, Air Force, or Marine. Here are the specific numbers that we are calling home: from Japan, 2,000 Army, 12,000 Air Force, and 20,000 Marines; from Reich, 20,000 Army, 12,000 Air Force, and 1,200 Marines; from Woori, 16,000 Army and 8,000 Air Force. I repeat: we are pulling back all of our armed service members, even from countries I did not just mention. Folks, our troops are for protecting our land. This just makes sense, and we are only returning to what makes sense."

This speech, which would later be referred to as the Howard Doctrine, was the moment that defined Gamerica's complete return to Monroe's foreign policy and marked a crucial turning point in world history. Every country that was affected by this pronouncement was left scrambling about in a rush at the start of the new year.

That said, the effect of the Howard Doctrine on Reich, which was now a leader in its own right within the European sphere and had established largely cordial relations with all its neighbors, was rather mild. Similarly, the effect on Japan was also relatively diluted thanks to several reasons, such as being an island country, the continued stationing of the twenty thousand members of the Gamerican Navy, and the gradual building up of the JSDF that had been taking place during the six consecutive years the Urabe administration had remained in power.

It was the Republic of Woori that was caught the most off-guard and suffered the greatest shock of all.

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The nineteenth president of the Republic of Woori, President Park Jae-An, found himself chairing a convening of the National Security Council first thing in the new year. The Howard Doctrine was effectively a breaking of the US-Woorian Mutual Defense Treaty. As things stood, there would only be 250 US Navy soldiers remaining on the entire Korian peninsula in six months.

Director Cheong of the Office of National Security turned to the president with a grim look on his face. “Mr. President, President Howard’s proclamation places our country in a serious national security crisis. Although we have seen the emergence of only two dungeons in our country as of now, there is no guarantee that more won’t follow. Furthermore, the Kingdom of Ko’s silence at a time like this is very worrying. We have received intel that suggests they have also suffered at least one dungeon emergence, but no movement has been observed from their forces on the 38th parallel north. Once the Gamerican forces retreat fully, there is a very real possibility of the outbreak of a second Korian War. Should we not get in touch with the Gamerican side and convince them not to go through with this policy?”

President Park nodded slowly, but his heart was in a different place. He in fact thought the sustained Gamerican presence within Woori a deep-rooted evil. He had tolerated the Mutual Defense Treaty as a necessary evil from a national security perspective—since there was no telling when the Kingdom of Ko might come knocking—but if they were going to leave on their own accord, then he sure wasn’t going to stop them. In fact, this was a golden opportunity. And sadly, the Director of the Office of National Security was failing to see that.

“If Gamerica is withdrawing, then we’ll need to explore alternative solutions to maintain national security. We could even further our ceasefire status with Ko to a peace treaty and officially enter into the process of a peaceful reunification of the North and the South. In other words, we could aim for a Commonwealth Democratic Republic of Koria.”

The words of the president prompted the minister of unification to leap to his feet. “I agree fully, Mr. President! It seems clear that the US-Woorian Mutual Defense Treaty is already damaged beyond repair. What can a mere 250 Gamerican Navy soldiers do anyways? We should officially break the treaty and approach Ko with inter-Koria dialogue. General Secretary Kim’s conditions were

the adoption of a ‘one country, two systems’ policy with combined foreign policy and military and the retreat of Gamerican forces. The first condition is what we ourselves wish for and are working towards, whereas the latter condition is now being fulfilled without us having to lift a finger. Naturally, our Democratic Party will be in favor of this, and the Justice Party and progressives are also largely for reunification. We should have no issue passing this through Parliament.”

The prime minister, who was the only person within the Park cabinet familiar with Japan, protested. “Please hold on a moment, gentlemen. Are we not being too hasty here? Breaking the US-Woorian Mutual Defense Treaty will greatly affect our relationship with Japan. May I remind you all that our largest technology manufacturers, including Samshik Electronics and CK Electronics, are reliant on imports from Japan for parts, like semiconductors. It would be a severe blow to our economy if that is to be cut off.”

However, in this atmosphere where the long-held dream of North-South reunification seemed so close at hand, emotions ultimately trumped logic.

“We can always rebuild our relations with Japan afterward. They’re also under the same pressure with the withdrawal of the Gamerican forces. Once reunification is complete, we would become a perfect and noble country greatly exceeding what Dangun himself had founded. With even nukes at our fingertips, Japan would be a mere dwarf compared to our national power and military might.”

President Park nodded with satisfaction. At this moment, it was only a very tiny handful who realized that the country had embarked upon a path not of reason and logic but of emotional nationalism.

* * *

The Oriental Republic of Sina was, with a population of 1.4 billion and 9.6 million square kilometers of land, the world’s second-largest economic superpower. It was run by a single party, the People’s Communist Party, with the very first article of its constitution identifying the nation as “a socialist state under the people’s democratic dictatorship led by the working class.” After World War II, Meng Zemin led the People’s Liberation Army to banish the

government of the Republic of Sina—which was attempting to introduce democracy and market economy—to the island of Formosa as he founded a communist-socialist state on mainland Sina and named it the Oriental Republic of Sina. That was then followed by events like the Cultural Revolution and the Antianmen Incident, but generally speaking, this was a nation that had been successful in raising its citizens' average standard of living and unifying them through setting up Japan as a hypothetical external threat. Through employing what was effectively bread and circuses politics, the single-party regime was still in power even today.

"President Zhou, Gamerica has reverted to the Monroe Doctrine, and all their troops are withdrawing from their various Southeast Asian bases. Now we can finally claim all of South Sina Sea for ourselves."

"Let us take advantage of this opportunity to advance on Formosa and the Diaoyu Islands!"

Zhou Haoran, the seventh president of the Oriental Republic of Sina, was a man who had come out on top of the fierce infighting within the gigantic People's Communist Party and, by purging all his political opponents, seized power on par to what Meng Zemin himself had gripped. Naturally, the presence of a dictator who held such absolute power would elicit flattery from his surroundings. However, the man did not climb to the top above millions of party members by being a pushover who'd let such cheap words get to his head. Zhou Haoran took his glasses off and shook his head.

"We will first see how the global scene is affected before we make a move. Our top priority at the moment is to calm the unrest among the citizens. We have the most dungeons out of every other country—this is both a danger and an opportunity. Dungeons also produce a variety of things besides the black stones. We might be on the cusp of becoming the world's greatest resource exporter. For now, focus on thoroughly investigating and understanding these dungeons."

Everyone present nodded in response to the president's words. It was true that the emergence of the dungeons was causing widespread unrest within the country. As history demonstrated, it was often such times when things like a new religion would spring up seemingly out of nowhere and spread in the blink

of an eye. Ever since last year, the Cyberspace Administration of Sina had already been hard at work assiduously suppressing all mentions of dungeons on the internet.

“The People’s Liberation Army has already been deployed, with three thousand men sent to each of the roughly fifty dungeons that have appeared in major cities such as Beijing, Shanghai, Chongqing, and Chengdu. The troops at Beijing have already reached Floor 3, and it is only a matter of time before they clear it entirely.”

“As of now, we have confirmed the appearance of fifty-five dungeons within our borders. However, there might be more out there that have not been discovered yet. We have ordered all ministries to continue their surveys.”

“The most problematic areas are Inner Mongolia, Xinjiang, and Tibet. Most notably, riots have broken out in Ürümqi, where local Uyghurs have been clamoring for access to the dungeon in the city.”

“Crack down on it with every means possible. The dungeons belong to us Hans. We don’t need the trouble of dealing with powered-up Uyghurs. If there is a need to get a little rough getting them back in line, then so be it. Now, about the development of power plants running on the black stones...”

“I’m afraid it’ll be difficult to surpass Japan’s technological lead when it comes to the hydrogen power plants. Now that their security treaty with the US is under strain, however, they just might give us their technology if we threaten them a little bit. Shall we pretend to build up towards a forceful seizure of the Diaoyu Islands to draw them to the negotiation table?”

The president thought about the suggestion for a while, but did not nod to it. Rather, what he said next surprised many who were listening.

“We could *acknowledge* Japan’s claims to the islands in exchange for gaining their cooperation in the development of the power plants.”

“Mr. President, are you saying...”

“The dungeons are appearing all over the world. Depending on how you think about it, this means that the problem of global energy inequality might be over soon. Even without going to the trouble of extracting from the oil and gas

reserves under the seabed near the Diaoyu Islands, we have in the magic stones a far more reliable source of energy. Our national policy so far has been to prioritize the acquisition of resources; I predict that soon enough, we will be prioritizing technological developments for the utilization of magic stones."

"Isn't that all the more reason to conquer Japan now and—"

"Don't underestimate Japan!" President Zhou roared, his fierce frown striking fear into everyone's hearts. "In the face of these dungeon emergences, nationalism is on the rise in every country. The unity of the Japanese people in the face of a common threat extends far beyond what we can imagine. Mark my words. Many seem to think they've gone complacent with peace, but this is a people who've fought endlessly against everything nature has thrown at them for more than two thousand years. There's no telling how much damage *we* would suffer in backing them into a corner. Seeing as our goals are to gain control over our dungeons and secure new technological developments, *using* them would be a far wiser choice."

Like all other countries, Sina had paid great attention to the interview which had been broadcast live on Japanese TV at the end of last year where the adventurer being interviewed had brought up the Dungeon System Theory. As the country that contained the most number of dungeons in the world, Sina simply could not afford to ignore the possibility of monsters overflowing from all of them.

At the same time, the world was also closely eyeing the progress of the development of technology for generating power through the magic stones' capability for extracting hydrogen. It promised massive quantities of entirely clean energy through facilities that took up less space and cost figurative pennies to maintain. It was as if the solutions to both problems of energy shortage and global warming had been handed to the world on a silver plate. President Zhou's head was already filled with thoughts of the new direction that he wanted to take his country's diplomatic relationship with Japan.

* * *

"To all citizens of Japan, I wish you a wonderful new year."

Prime Minister Urabe Seiichirou had moved up the day of his return to work

after the New Year's vacation by two days from January 4 to January 2. This address to the nation that he was currently delivering was his first duty of the year.

"Yesterday, President Howard of the United States of Gamerica announced that he would be pulling back all overseas Gamerican forces to redirect them towards the protection of Gamerica. I assure you that this is not a particularly sudden development. During the past few years, Gamerica has already been steadily decreasing the number of troops stationed within our country. At the same time, we have been gradually expanding our JSDF with the aim of becoming able to protect ourselves with our own strength. Do not be alarmed at President Howard's words; what he said was actually quite reasonable. Protecting one's country with one's own hands makes sense. We humans have been doing things this way ever since the start of human civilization millennia ago; this is the normal way. All that is happening is that we are finally, seventy years after the end of World War II, returning to how things are *supposed* to be."

President Urabe paused a moment. The dream of independent self-defense that so many of his predecessors had pined for without being able to do anything about now seemed so close at hand.

"Ever since July last year, the entire world has been under threat as wave after wave of the mysterious spaces called dungeons continued appearing without respite. Within the dungeons, life-forms as-yet unknown to us that seem to be, for the most part, hostile towards humankind continue to increase in number. Although they are staying put within their holes now, we have no guarantee that they won't climb out one day. As the man elected to protect your lives and property, I cannot simply leave these dungeons be. In preparation for the worst-case scenario, I am formulating an extraordinary budget that will be used towards further bolstering of all our Ground Self-Defense Force, our Maritime Self-Defense Force, and our Air Self-Defense Force.

"Furthermore, we are also pushing ahead with the civilian adventurer initiative that we launched at the end of last year. It is true that we are facing a great danger—at the same time, this is also a great opportunity. Thanks to the

new resource called magic stones dropped within the dungeons, we now have a realistic and entirely viable path towards energy self-sufficiency. In addition to potions, the existence of tools with truly magical effects have also been confirmed. I believe without a doubt that at the moment we overcome this crisis, we would be attaining even greater heights of prosperity as an entire race."

Flashes and shutters went off in a flurry.

Urabe continued. "More than half of the Gamerican troops stationed within Japan will be withdrawn by June of this year. Naturally, many will feel unease at such a drastic change to a security treaty that had been in effect for more than seventy consecutive years. However, allow me to clarify that the large majority of the troops leaving are from their Army and Marine Corps. The twenty thousand troops of the Gamerican Navy will remain here and continue aiding us in the defense of our territorial waters, which does include the Senkaku Islands. Of course, we will continue aiming for further independence in self-defense. In order to return to the natural state of 'protecting our own country with our own hands,' I wish to ask everyone to express your opinions on constitutional reform through the House of Councilor member elections that will be taking place this summer.

"I'm sure that there will be voices of opposition. Remember, however, that we are already under attack. These dungeons are intruders from an unknown world in every sense. Yes, our civilian adventurer initiative is steadily getting on track. However, the defense of our country is, ultimately, the duty of the JSDF. And what are we to tell these brave men and women protecting us from the monsters in the dungeons? 'This is not sanctioned by the Constitution, but please enter the dungeons and fight with your lives on the line'? All signs lead us to believe that there are more dungeons to come. We, too, must be bold in standing up to this mysterious threat. What *we* can do is to reform the Constitution and provide our troops the proper constitutional support they need to do their job.

"In the ordinary session of the Diet that will be taking place this month, I will be introducing the Adventurer Act. During last year's extraordinary convening, we urgently enacted a countermeasure bill in response to emergency

circumstances. Afterward, we incorporated input from experts and civilian adventurers to create this legislation that I am bringing forth. My hope is that it will be seriously considered and deliberated over by the Diet so as to become the best legislation that it can be.

“This coming year is sure to be a crucial turning point in human history. Our knowledge and understanding of the dungeons remains woefully inadequate, and we have no idea what is waiting for us in the future. It is not an exaggeration to call this the greatest crisis in all recorded history. Even so, we refuse to be beaten. In order to pass down this Land of Abundant Rice and this life-sustaining planet to our children and our grandchildren, now is the time when all humanity needs to stand together and unite. I shall believe. I believe in humanity’s wisdom, intellect, reasoning, heart for peace, and bravery in standing up for loved ones. I. Believe.”

Prime Minister Urabe stepped back from the podium and bowed. The shutters went quiet and, after a short pause, a storm of applause thundered down.

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[January 4 — Sapporo - Ezoe Kazuhiko]

January 4 was the day when normal employees would be returning to work. Instead, I was currently in the city of Sapporo in Hokkaido Prefecture together with Akira and Mutsuo; Mari couldn’t come because school was resuming on Monday. And Hokkaido in winter was the capital of gourmet food. So naturally, the first thing we did was visit Susukino, the city’s entertainment and red-light district.

“This taste is heavenly!”

First place we hit was Susukino Kin Sushi, where we almost thought we ate the place out of stock. In spite of its small size—there wasn’t even enough space for ten counter seats—this was actually a rather well-known restaurant in town. The chef had been kind enough to allow us to rent the restaurant out for the night. We were hoping to fill our stomachs with delicious food tonight before delving into Sapporo Dungeon tomorrow morning.

“As the young people say, we’ll be ‘playing till we drop’ tonight. I’m sure you

two know what Susukino has to offer, right?”

“Aniki, I know a good shop with plenty of really cute girls! I’ll take you guys there after this.”

“I-I’ve never really gone to places like that before, but...” He paused. “I really want to give it a try!”

“Well, it’s just us men, and we have the whole night. We’re going all out!”

Regardless of how much preparation was done in advance, dungeon delving was still a highly stressful affair. Playing hard was an integral part of coping. *Just for today, let’s completely put the dungeons out of mind.*

“It’s my first time eating Pacific herring sushi! This is so good!” Mutsuo gushed.

Normally, sushi was served one piece at a time, but the chef decided to start serving two when he saw how voraciously we were wolfing everything down. Even so, everything he served disappeared almost as soon as it hit the counter.

“Even after the dungeons emerged, the fishermen still go out to fish and, for the majority of people, life remains largely unchanged. And that’s because you folks are handling it, and for that, us common folk are thankful. Here ya go, cod roe gunkan maki sushi.”

The chef looked extremely happy with how much we were loving his food. *I’m glad to see that today’s another peaceful day in Japan.*

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Odori Park of Sapporo, Hokkaido extended all the way from 1-*chome* to 12-*chome* of West Chuo Ward along Odori Avenue. Starting with the Sapporo TV Tower at the 1-*chome* end, the park was separated into the distinct zones with unique themes named Cultural Exchange, Oasis, Gathering, Frontier, and Flowers. This was also the venue where the Sapporo Snow Festival would be hosted every year in February. It would not be an exaggeration to say that this park was at the center of the lives of the nearly two million residents of Sapporo.

During October last year, a dungeon had appeared within the 8-*chome*

section of Odori Park. The entrance to what was dubbed Sapporo Dungeon was located on the open grassy area decorated by an artistic installation that looked like a slide. Fortunately, no one had fallen inside. Then soon after, the JSDF had arrived and sealed off both the 8-*chome* and 9-*chome* areas.

"I heard that this year's Snow Festival is still going ahead, just without 8-*chome* and 9-*chome*. It's not as if the monsters are coming out anytime soon, so the municipal government gave its permission."

"Instead of worrying about monsters coming out, I think they'll have to worry more about idiots trying to get inside for kicks or something."

"I just want to know what they're doing for Snow Miku this year!"

Susukino was within walking distance from Odori Park. After leaving our hotel, we headed down Sapporo-ekimae Avenue until we reached Odori Avenue, at which point we turned left and kept going until eventually arriving at the area sealed off by the JSDF. The entire 8-*chome* area of the park was cordoned off with a chain-link fence, and two tough-looking soldiers stood guard at the sole entrance. The three of us all took out our respective adventurer licenses.

"I am Ezoe Kazuhiko, a licensed adventurer. We have come to investigate Sapporo Dungeon upon request by the Dungeon Adventurer Administrative Bureau."

The soldier looked between my face and the picture on my license, then saluted. "We have been waiting. A room's been prepared. This way, please."

The inside of the support facility at Sapporo was nowhere near as intimidating as the one in Yokohama. Part of it was because this was a park, and part of it was likely also because there was no bootcamp being hosted here. When we followed our guide into the temporary structure, everyone inside stood up and saluted us. I bowed respectfully, then followed instructions to sit in the chair facing the table with a PC on it. On the monitor was the image of an unfamiliar woman with almond eyes. I could tell who it was with a single look, though.

"Happy New Year, Ezoe-san."

"Happy New Year, director general. Uh... When did you go to the bootcamp?"

It was none other than Director General Ishihara Yukie of the Dungeon Adventurer Administrative Bureau, except that she now looked like a version of herself who was ten years younger. She had already been quite the looker before, but now there was a certain vibrancy and a little extra formidableness to her demeanor.



“The day before yesterday, I went with the full aboveground day course. You know, it had been quite a while since I was last hit on. Becoming young again feels wonderful.”

“How badly did you push it through?! Don’t be deploying the JSDF within the first three days of the New Year! Let the poor soldiers have their time off!”

A retort inadvertently escaped my lips before I could swallow it back down. However, not only did Ishihara not take offense, she even cackled heartily.

“You didn’t know? The JSDF are on shift duty. They’re taking turns having time off and standing guard over each dungeon. There are still troops entering and leaving at regular intervals. I merely had a little talk with Major General Katsuragi, and he readily let me in.”

“Okay, that’s got to be a misuse of authority. First mention of the man in the new year and I’m already feeling bad for him...” I sighed. “All right, moving on from the matter of your having gotten younger... So, what’s the reason for this call?”

“Aside from paying my new year greetings, I have something I want you to look into for me. According to our investigations, Sapporo Dungeon seems a bit different from all the others. On Floor 1 are small slimes that can be easily killed with a stomp of the foot, but they don’t drop magic stones nor cards. It seems to prove your theory about the dungeons all belonging to a spectrum of difficulties. This would be the weakest dungeon that we’ve seen to date.”

“Slimes that you can kill with a stomp... If we take Yokohama Dungeon as a reference—so, Rank C—then it sounds like Sapporo Dungeon would be a Rank D.”

Ishihara nodded, then continued, “Our request to Dungeon Busters this time was to investigate Sapporo Dungeon. But now that this information has come to light, we wish to ask you to attempt to clear it entirely if it is at all possible. You can invoice us the additional running costs at a later date.”

I felt the corners of my mouth creeping upward in a grin. “In other words, you want us to squash it altogether?”

“A dungeon that doesn’t generate magic stones nor cards is more trouble

than it's worth. Do you want to have a guess at how much it costs just to run the monitoring facilities? Thanks to a certain mischievous president, the JSDF is going to get a lot busier in the near future. We were the first country in the world to adopt a policy for employing civilian adventurers; now, we will also be the first country to have cleared a dungeon. There's no better way to prove to the world that we can protect ourselves just fine without Gamerica's help. This would make for great PR towards both our own citizens and to the world at large."

"That sounds less like PR and more like propaganda if you ask me. That said, this isn't a bad deal for us. We would be gaining an opportunity to take a look at the lowest floor of a dungeon, and our company would gain the laurel of the world's first dungeon clear. We accept the request."

"The Sapporo facility should have clothes, food, and showers all ready for you and your group. There are also enough batteries and memory cards for 480 hours of filming. They're all fast charging, so just exchange the spent ones when you return above ground. Now, about the reward for the dungeon clear..."

"The matter we talked about before; that's all I need. Preferably before the regular session, please."

"I've already gotten his agreement. The convening this year takes place on January 22. If you manage to clear this dungeon before then, I guarantee you that I can uphold my part of the bargain. Looks like we have a deal, then. I'm looking forward to good news, Dungeon Busters."

The beautiful woman in her forties winked before turning off the feed.

Akira, who had remained quiet this whole time, sighed. "Aniki... I know I'm not the best person to say this, but your taste in women isn't the best, is it?"

"The Guildmaster is a dominatrix! I can't wait to get back and draw an illustration of her holding a cigar in her mouth and saying 'Kneel!'"

So the two of them see Ishihara as a manga character? I confess I don't know much about that sort of thing, not really being into anime or manga myself. Though I suppose I can see her saying something along the lines of "I hope you don't misunderstand. This isn't a request; it's an order." Guess I'd better think carefully about how I interact with her.

“Well, let’s get going. Our objective is the bottom floor.”

And so began Mission Sapporo Dungeon Clear.

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[Sapporo Dungeon — Shishido Akira]

Ezoe—who I referred to as Aniki—had previously said that the greatest challenges on the way towards our goal to clear every last dungeon on Earth wouldn’t be the monsters that lay within but the humans that would be actively obstructing our way, and that the only way to lessen their numbers was to demonstrate how clearing dungeons would be to their own benefit. That was why Aniki was accepting requests from the Japanese government for practically nothing. Furthermore, he said that he planned on passing over all dungeons we cleared to the government or to the United Nations. Busters—which was the term for someone who’d cleared a dungeon—holding personal ownership over dungeons would only lead to conflict. That was why he wanted to be the world’s first-ever Buster and to publicly pass control of that dungeon over to the government so as to set a precedent.

“I’ve brought Akane and Emily’s cards along just in case, but if it’s a Rank D dungeon, we just might be able to clear it with the three of us alone. The cameras will be rolling, so let’s try to go as far as we can without their support.”

“Sounds good to me. I’d get a lot more fired up that way too.”

“But, Ezoe-shi, it wouldn’t hurt to listen to what Akane-shi might have to say before we start, right?”

“That’s a fair point. All right, let’s have a talk with them on Floor 1 before we start filming.”

The floor of the Safety Zone on Floor 1 was covered with a tarp, and there were mattresses and batteries already laid out in wait for us. We put down all the luggage we were carrying and went straight through into Floor 1, where Aniki promptly materialized Akane, who I personally referred to as Anego.

“You require my aid, Kazuhiko-sama?”

“Akane, this here is Sapporo Dungeon. We want to take a quick loop around

Floor 1 together with you and hear your opinion on the place. According to my deduction, this should be a Rank D dungeon. Please tell us whether you agree with my deduction and, if it's correct, everything you know about Rank D dungeons."

"As you command."

Just as we'd heard, the monsters we found on Floor 1 were green slimes about five centimeters high that did nothing but just quiver in place. They really did disappear with a single stomp and did not drop magic stones or cards.

"These are baby slimes, Kazuhiko-sama. At this strength, they are considered below even Rank F. Based on this, I also agree that this is likely a Rank D dungeon. The large majority of monsters that appear within Rank D dungeons are only Rank D or lower and do not provide much Enhancement Element, if at all. These dungeons are always the first ones to be cleared. It should not be more than seven floors deep."

"How possible is it for the three of us to clear the place on our own?"

"There might be some variance in difficulty based on the monsters you encounter, but generally speaking, I think it more than possible. However, a warning, if I may. At the deepest part of the dungeon, you will find the Dungeon Core—an offshoot of the Dungeon System—which will be guarded by a special type of monster called a Guardian. If this is truly a Rank D dungeon, then the Guardian will only be Rank C at the highest. However, there is no guarantee that there is only one Guardian; it could be a whole group of them, all Rank C. If that happens to be the case, please do not hesitate to use us."

Aniki nodded, stroking his chin. "I see. It's often the case in games and light novels that there is only one Dungeon Master in each dungeon, but apparently that is not so in reality. Well, it only makes sense once you think about it. All right. Thank you, Akane. You've been a great help. Please return to your card form."

Anego bowed, then cardified herself. As I watched Aniki putting her card away, I remembered another thing that he had said—busters would gain the ability to materialize cards even above ground and that there was a need to carefully decide who to grant this power to.

One time, when we had gone drinking at a club in Mizue, Aniki had suddenly said, “Humans change when they gain power. Normally, people like us who’ve surpassed the limits of what it means to be human are not supposed to exist. The Dungeon System may be something intended to help us humans evolve as a race, but if the direction of our evolution is simply more power, then we will definitely turn around and wipe ourselves out with that very power. I actually think that we humans are fine as we are. We don’t need this otherworldly system that’s trying to make us evolve.”

I had always been someone who’d sought strength for the sake of more strength. What Aniki was trying to say to me was that I also had to think about what I would be using that strength for. Just being strong meant nothing in and of itself.

It was precisely because this was the kind of person he was that I called him Aniki.

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[Sapporo Dungeon — Tanaka Mutsuo]

If we really could get the world’s first ever dungeon clear on tape, it would surely rock the entire world. After that happened, I planned on dedicating myself to handling the IT management side of the company. While down here in Sapporo Dungeon, I realized that I really wasn’t suited for staying on the front lines and killing monsters. When I looked at the quivering slimes, I just couldn’t help but feel sorry for them. This was why I planned on quitting as an adventurer after we cleared Sapporo Dungeon.

“We’ve all got small cameras attached to our helmets, but because those will be shaking around a lot, I’ll also be recording with a handheld cam. I’m not all that useful in a fight, so I’m afraid it’s going to be mostly on you two.”

“The recording is actually the most important part of this mission. You just focus on keeping the camera running, Mutsuo. Akira, you take point. I’ll be protecting our rear.”

“Gotcha. It’s not like I’ll be going all that fast, as I’ll be mapping while progressing. Leave everything up front to me; so long as the monsters aren’t above Rank E, I’ll be able to handle everything by myself. Make sure you make

me look cool, all right, Mucchii?”

“Y-You got it.”

At the moment, humanity knew almost nothing about the dungeons. Countries all over the world were sending soldiers—and civilians, from what I’d read on the internet—inside to gain even the smallest slivers of information. Footage depicting the deepest part of a dungeon and the entire way there would be simply priceless. Governments, armies, and mass media around the globe would all be referencing what I was shooting. The responsibility of being the cameraman was incredibly heavy.

When I’d first become an adventurer, Ezoe-shi had said to me, “There is no job in this world that is fulfilling in and of itself, and neither is there a job that other people can tell you is fulfilling. What value do *you* see in what you are doing at the moment? How fulfilling a job is is nothing more than the value that you yourself assign to it. If you work for me, I’m not the one who’s going to tell you how rewarding this job is. What I *will* do, however, is explain things in an understandable and transparent manner and create an environment that ultimately makes it easy for you to determine how much value you see in what you’ll be doing for us.

“If you still think that killing monsters really doesn’t suit you after having tried it for a while,” he’d continued, “you can simply do something else. All I want is for you to find your own meaning in being a part of Dungeon Busters. We are not a company that’s entering the dungeons for monetary gain. Dungeon Busters, Inc. exists to learn as much as we can about the dungeons and to clear as many of them as possible so as to soften the blow of the impending Monster Stampede as much as possible. To achieve this, we need more than just adventurers who’d do the actual delving; we also need experts who can accurately record the information they bring back and disseminate it to the other adventurers out there. Would you be willing to take on that role for us, Mutsuo?”

Ezoe-shi planned on eventually gathering more than a hundred adventurers to form what he called a clan. He’d need to hire a large variety of back office staff for the adventurers and the headquarters, such as managers, people to work on logistics, a marketing team to do public relations, and techs to process

all the information. Instead of fighting the monsters directly, these positions would be providing the support needed by the heroes that would be gathered from all over the world.

Ezoe-shi, I've found my meaning in being a member of Dungeon Busters, Inc.

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[Sapporo Dungeon — Ezoe Kazuhiko]

The baby slimes on Floor 1 weren't even enemies for us. We checked out the entire floor, just in case, but it didn't feel like a fight. After giving it two hours and confirming that the baby slimes really were not dropping anything, we headed down to Floor 2.

"Floor 2 is also slimes," I noted.

The monster waiting for us was about thirty centimeters in height, bluish in color, seemed half-transparent, and was similarly jiggling. Akira continued walking towards it, not bothering to stop.

"Going by light novels, these should possess some resistance to physical attacks, but how about this!"

He kicked the monster like a soccer ball. It slammed into the far wall, then simply turned into smoke. Unsurprisingly, it did not drop anything.

I stroked my chin. "I see. So this is also considered weaker than Rank F. If the ones on Floor 1 were baby slimes, then these would be kid slimes, I suppose. From what I see, the layout of this floor is grid-like, just like above. Just in case, we'll dedicate two hours to exploring, rest up in the Safety Zone, then head for Floor 3."

"Gotcha."

"All right."

The bluish, jiggly masses continued to bounce towards us. We were having no trouble at all, but this was indeed a dungeon that was unsuitable for hosting the bootcamp. Even at top speed, it would take a whole hour to reach Floor 3. *Just as Ishihara said, this is very likely a dungeon that would be more trouble left alone than erased.*

“You two, time to eat.”

When we discovered the Safety Zone on Floor 2, we decided to stop to have our lunch. So we opened up an outdoor folding table to cook on top of. Each of us used our own gas burner to cook our soup and our meals.

“Getting proper meals inside the dungeon is very important,” Mutsuo said to the camera. “So, what we’re eating is a bit on the fancy side, because camping tools are quite accessible in Japan. As you can see, I’m having hashed beef rice. We ordered these boil-in-the-bag packages by the dozen from a high-class restaurant named Hirosue in Ginza. Then this is vegetable egg drop soup, which is Sinese soup stock with domestically sourced dried vegetables and egg beaten in. There’s cabbage, carrots, shiitake mushrooms, and dried spring onion inside.”

There was no problem showing Magic Pouch and Magic Water Bottle on screen, as they were only of Uncommon rarity, and we had already confirmed that the JSDF already had these cards. We only had to take care to put away the Other-dimensional Pouch, which was a Rare card.

After eating, we rested for a short while, then tackled Floor 3. Almost immediately, a monster came out to greet us. We weren’t particularly alarmed, though, as we were very familiar with this monster.

“Ah, so it’s goblins on Floor 3.”

This species, which occupied Floor 1 in Abyss, a Rank A dungeon in Shishibone, had appeared on Floor 3 here in Sapporo Dungeon. This only went to illustrate just how wide the gulf between a Rank A and Rank D dungeon was. Akira mercilessly dispatched the opponent standing in our way, looking slightly bored.

Only after coming this far did we finally see magic stones and cards being dropped. However, the stone was extremely tiny. I picked up the speck—which was around the size of a green pea—to roughly gauge its weight.

“This is less than three grams. That’s even lighter than the ones dropped on Floor 1 in Yokohama Dungeon. Ah, I see. So different dungeons have different cost-to-performance ratios. But now that we know that it *is* possible to harvest magic stones from this place, should we still erase it? Guess I’ll have to consult

the director general.”

As we continued walking, with me occupied by calculating the drop rates of the magic stones and cards here, Akira suddenly stopped.

“It’s a dead end.”

The basic layout of Floor 3 was still grid-like, but there were dead-ends here and there that made the place somewhat like a labyrinth.

“Hmm, just to be safe, let’s first retrace our steps and return to the stairs going up. Akira, double check the details of the map as we go.”

Once we were back at the entrance to Floor 3, I turned to my other companion and asked, “Mutsuo, is it possible to develop an app that automatically maps these labyrinthian floors?”

“I think so, but the accuracy wouldn’t be 100%. It could be set up to register the average length of the user’s stride, then generate a map based on the number of steps they take. A voice command function could be added for them to pause the recording when entering a fight. Oh, and we could enable it to link up to a laptop or tablet for making amendments on the fly. I think it’d be more of a mapping assistant tool than a complete taking on of the mapping process. That said, I kind of feel like the gacha just might give us an automatic mapping item...”

“The problem with gacha items is that they’re not commonly available. What I want is a tool that any adventurer from anywhere in the world could use freely. Well, I suppose this is just something to add to our list of future ideas. Guess we’re stuck with pen and paper for a while longer.”

Then we resumed our exploration of Floor 3.

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Whereas Floor 3 was occupied by goblins, the residents of Floor 4 turned out to be hobgoblins, a Rank E monster. These were larger than normal goblins, but because they were not wielding weapons, they weren’t that much harder to deal with.

“If I recall correctly, Floor 1 of Osaka Dungeon is occupied by kobolds

equipped with swords. Here in Sapporo, though, we're on Floor 4, and the opponents are still unarmed. I am going to have to check out Osaka in person one of these days."

"The labyrinth's starting to get a bit complicated. Aniki, I'm going to adopt the left hand rule. Can you take over the mapping for me?"

"Sure thing," I replied as I accepted the graph paper pad Akira was holding out.

We then continued on as before. Every once in a while, a hobgoblin approached from behind me, but I easily dispatched it with a single back kick. Judging by our progress, a Rank D dungeon seemed quite clearable by a mixed team of Rank C and Rank D adventurers.

When we turned, I would write down the number of steps we took. This was how we figured out the distance to fill in on the map. The way to perform this older method of mapping definitely needed to go onto the list of things that we'd need to teach future adventurers.

"The left hand rule really does take time and isn't very suitable for getting a comprehensive understanding of the entire floor layout. I can see why the idea for the app came to you, Ezoe-shi. I'll ask my friends when we return to the surface."

Mutsuo was walking around the entire time while holding the camera up. Maintaining the same pose for two hours should have been quite tiring, but he had yet to make a single complaint despite how badly he was sweating. I almost expected him to get a rank up from doing this alone.

Four hours in, we finally found Floor 4's Safety Zone, so we stopped for a breather. At this rate, we would be done mapping out the floor after another four hours.

"We'll call it a day after finishing up Floor 4 and return above ground to enjoy a good bath."

"Even Floor 4 isn't a challenge for us. Perhaps we really won't need Anego's help after all. Oh, oops, please cut that part out later, Mucchii."

"Oh, don't worry, I turn off the camera when we're resting. I only record

things like what we're eating."

"Mutsuo, would you be able to edit a short video out of this footage and then upload it on our website together with the map we're making? I'm sure this could prove useful to other adventurers."

"Of course. Speaking of which, do we have more ideas for content? If possible, I'd like to at least have something to populate the 'Coming Soon' page on our site."

Dungeon Busters's website had gone live on January 1, but the content on it was quite scarce, mainly boiling down to information on cards up to Uncommon rarity and articles about Yokohama Dungeon. Even so, the number of worldwide visits had shot through the roof. If I hadn't chosen to host it with Japan's biggest IT firm, the site's server just might have crashed.

"Let's give it a big revamp once the headquarters is finished at the end of March. At that time, you'll be focusing solely on managing the website and creating and uploading content. I do want more staff, but you guys know how it is..."

In a way, the requirements for joining Dungeon Busters, Inc. were quite strict. With the exception of the battle-loving Akira, I was looking for people who wanted to enter the dungeons not for self-serving reasons like monetary gain and fame but for someone else's sake. The reason why I weighed motivation so heavily was out of worry for how a person would use the power they'd obtained through the dungeon. There was no telling what a selfish person would do with, say, magic that could control other people's minds. The only sure thing was that it wouldn't be to other people's benefit.

I doubted that such people could even endure what it had taken me to reach Rank C in the first place. Rank D was more than enough for those who wanted to delve into the dungeons for money. A very specific reason and motivation was necessary in order to persevere through the purgatory that guarded the gates to surpassing the limits of being human. Self-serving ambitions were nowhere near enough to pull someone through such hellish tribulation.

Members of Dungeon Busters are forbidden from using their skills and magic above ground for self-serving reasons. Usage is allowed only to protect oneself

and/or other people.

This was something that all four current members of Dungeon Busters, Inc. had talked over and agreed on, despite it not being on the employment contract.

“How about letting JSDF members in? They’re working for the non-selfish motivation of national defense, so they technically fit the bill, right?”

“I agree with Shishido-shi. More specifically, I want a big-breasted JSDF lady soldier wearing a camo uniform to join our party!”

“Now *that’s* a self-serving motivation if I’ve heard one!”

I watched my two companions laughing together with their straight man exchange. *It’s true that the JSDF do meet my requirements, but I’m just not sure whether it’d be a good idea to get that close with them. They belong to the Ministry of Defense, so getting too close with them runs the risk of turning Dungeon Busters into a semi-governmental organization. If doing so could guarantee that we thwart what’s coming in ten years, then I wouldn’t mind. But as with most semi-governmental organizations, the other side would likely just send us previously high-ranking officials looking for a cushy after-retirement position and I simply can’t imagine such a system working out well for an organization like ours.*

“Maybe if it’s just currently employed JSDF members... Or we restrict it to a select few, make them transfer their affiliation... Hmm...”

I continued mumbling to myself as I bit into a corned beef sandwich containing finely diced onion and pickles mixed with corned beef in mayonnaise sauce.

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[Roppongi, Tokyo — Ishihara Yukie]

We’re going a little back in time. Although it was called the New Year holiday, the time off at the end of the previous year and start of the next was still filled with work-related matters for Urabe Seiichirou, the ninety-eighth prime minister of Japan. On January 2, he went golfing in Chigasaki with the chairman of the Japan Business Federation, accepted interviews with various news

companies, then, at the hotel in Roppongi where he was supposed to rest up, delivered that speech he gave to the citizens. The next day, January 3, was a full day off for him, consisting of activities such as strolling around the vicinity of the hotel with his wife and reading a book back in his hotel room. All of this had been on The Prime Minister's Movements. Every waking moment of his every day was spent surrounded by journalists, with his every action broadcasted to the public on a minute-by-minute basis. There was zero privacy in being the Japanese prime minister.

Or so it would seem, when actually, he did have time alone. After the walk around the hotel in the morning, there were five hours that he spent inside the hotel before eventually returning to his home in Tomigaya. During that time, The Prime Minister's Movements only said "Lunch," but he had actually been meeting a certain person. When he had been outside and pulling the throngs of journalists away, a woman had slipped into the presidential suite that he was staying in. Naturally, this was something that had been arranged beforehand through the minister's secretary.

"I am Ishihara Yukie, Director General of the Defense Ministry's Dungeon Adventurer Administrative Bureau. I am deeply grateful for this time on your day off."

The woman, Ishihara, had waited in the meeting room that was part of the 290-square-meter suite. After hearing what Ezoe had shared with her on December 31, she had immediately contacted the prime minister's secretary the next day and passed along the message that she had urgent and top-secret intelligence. Seeing as it was related to the dungeons, Urabe had immediately decided to make time to meet her.

This was precious time that the prime minister had cut into his own day off for her sake. Ishihara could easily see her own head flying if she failed to make him see the importance of what she was bringing to his attention. After she nervously sat down, Urabe, in a relatively casual outfit of a black turtleneck and chino pants, also grabbed a seat. The expression on his face was mild, but his eyes were entirely devoid of warmth.

"The Ministry of Defense's first-ever female director general *and* first-ever to make the post under forty. I've heard the rumors. Young blood like yours is

indeed needed to face a crisis such as the Dungeon Outbreak Phenomenon. So, what do you have for me?”

“First of all, please allow me to preface by saying that I have no evidence whatsoever for what I’m about to share. All I can do is relay what I saw with my own eyes and what I heard with my own ears to the best of my ability. I beg of you to listen with that in mind and give me your instruction.”

After seeing Urabe’s silent nod, the woman who clearly had the appearance of a forty-something-year-old began speaking at length.

* * *

“A Monster Stampede, you say...”

“Ezoe Kazuhiko-shi said that it was his knowledge of this fact that drove him to register as a civilian adventurer and found Dungeon Busters, Inc. Furthermore, the reason why he kept this a secret this whole time was because of the weight of the matter...”

“From your account, at the very least, this man has admitted to committing tax evasion. As the prime minister, and as a fellow Japanese citizen, I cannot simply close my eyes to another man’s criminal acts.”

“But, Prime Minister...!”

Urabe raised a hand to curb Ishihara’s protest.

“Let’s say that neither you nor I thought to ask what it was that this dungeon in Shishibone dropped. You were indeed shown the place, but were told nothing that corrected your assumption that it dropped the same black stones that were being found in all the other dungeons.”

“So you’re saying...”

“But then eventually this dungeon in Edogawa City was cleared, and it was converted into a dungeon that did in fact produce magic stones. Ezoe-shi, who lives in Edogawa City, discovered it by accident and, because it was located within a residential area, decided to clear it in secret so as to suppress any possible disorder. When the Monster Stampede has been stopped, or when we have sure means of stopping it without needing him anymore, his crime will be

‘discovered,’ and he will be judged according to the law.”

Ishihara’s eyes nearly popped out of their sockets. She realized once again who it was that she was facing. As the man expected to hold the longest term in constitutional history, Urabe Seiichirou was the man who, through his steadfast leadership, immaculate record, and being mild mannered, had managed to maintain an approval rating around the 50% mark with a voter base that ranged from conservatives to swing voters. However, being sincere and free from scandal was far from enough to keep a man in the position of prime minister. He needed a certain flexibility of morals, a certain craftiness, and a certain amount of blackheartedness to retain his grip on power.

“You mean to use him for what he’s worth and then discard him?”

“If he is the man you described him to be, I’m sure he resolved himself to this fate when he decided to share what he did with you. Furthermore, the statute of limitations for tax evasion is seven years. How much he manages to achieve by then and how much he would have contributed to society and to humanity as a whole might play a large part in what happens to him.”

“He’s definitely not doing what he’s doing for self-serving motivations...”

“All I have at the moment is your impression of this man. I have yet to meet him myself; even if or when I do, I still would not be able to trust him entirely. Director General Ishihara, I remind you that I am currently shouldering the lives of 120 million Japanese citizens. I cannot afford to easily trust anyone on a matter of such import.”

After several beats of silence, Ishihara nodded. It was true that if she were the prime minister, she, too, would not have dared to easily believe what she had just shared. Anyone whose head was so empty as to swallow such a narrative at face value had no place being responsible for so many people.

“Ezoe-shi said that he wishes to invite you to the dungeon located in Shishibone, sir. It would be underground, which means thirty aboveground seconds would actually be seventy-two minutes long. If I may, I would also recommend that you hear all this directly from the mouths of the character cards that are supposedly part of the Dungeon System.”

“My schedule is packed before the regular session, but I’m sure I can spare

thirty seconds. If I summon him to the Kantei, he can then bring me over using his Teleportation skill. I would need a pretext, though."

"Tomorrow, Dungeon Busters will be beginning their investigation into Sapporo Dungeon. The monsters in this dungeon are reported to be weaker than in the others, and it is my expectation that they are capable of actually clearing it altogether. If Dungeon Busters successfully clears Sapporo Dungeon, or if they manage to bring back some crucial evidence from the lowest layer, would that suffice as a pretext?"

"That will do. I will summon him to the Kantei to commend him publicly. If he then announces that he possesses important information about the dungeons when we meet face-to-face, I would have no choice but to clear the room. If he can produce sufficiently convincing evidence, then the Japanese government may publicly acknowledge the *possibility* of this Monster Stampede. We will not confirm it definitively as, just as Ezoe-shi feared, doing so would indeed provoke substantial mayhem. Naturally, the time frame of ten years will remain top-secret."

"I fully understand, sir. I will request him to clear Sapporo Dungeon tomorrow. Knowing him, he will produce some form of result within a few days at the most. I apologize sincerely for taking up so much of your time today."

Ishihara understood that she would not be able to gain anything anymore today. Having successfully obtained the prime minister's promise, she determined it a good time to pull back and end the audience. After Urabe and his wife headed out for lunch together and, in so doing, pulled the journalists away once again, Ishihara slipped out through a side door.

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[Sapporo Dungeon — Ezoe Kazuhiko]

On Floor 5 of Sapporo Dungeon, we encountered a Rank D monster that we had never seen before. A fifty-centimeter-tall, one-meter-wide jiggly form was slowly crawling towards us, looking not unlike a piece of jelly-like candy. Within its half-transparent blue body, we could spy a round ball roughly fifteen centimeters in diameter.

"It's a proper slime. Let's give this another shot," Akira murmured as he

rushed towards it and, just as he had on Floor 2, unleashed a soccer ball kick. This time, however, his foot merely sunk in a little before being bounced back.

"Whoa there!"

In order to disperse the force from the bounce back, Akira retreated a few steps in a fluster. The slime merely shook itself a little before reverting to its previous state, looking none the worse for wear. Clearly, it had some degree of resistance against physical or blunt damage. However, resistance did not equate to immunity, which meant that all we had to do was deal it more damage than it could resist. I gripped my shovel.

"Aniki, let me test this out."

Before I could step forward, however, Akira retrieved a Steel Spear Card from his waist pouch. As I myself had no idea how to use this Uncommon card—being a complete novice in martial arts—I had handed it to Akira for a rainy day, thinking he might know what to do with it. I watched as he materialized it with a soft *poof*, spun it a few times above his head, and then adopted a double-handed stance with it.

"Hup!"

The moment I registered Akira's movement, his spear had already impaled the slime, with the spearhead precisely piercing the ball inside.

"When I was in high school, I went on a short exchange trip to Sina, where they taught me a little of the spear. It's been a while since I held one last, but it looks like I haven't forgotten the lessons."

Akira sounded nonchalant about it, but he was talking about recalling something he had learned more than ten years ago at a high enough level of mastery as to be applicable in actual battle. *No normal person can do something like that. I guess this is what pure talent looks like.*

"You really are a genius, Akira. When you reach Rank C, you'll be way stronger than I am."

After all, I was nothing more than a former consultant. Fighting with pure stats and no technique was going to reach a limit one day. This was just the truth.

“In regards to fighting monsters, maybe. But I don’t think I can ever obtain the strength that you possess, Aniki,” Akira replied with a laugh.

Within the big picture of adding value to a service, the role of an enterprise manager was, well, to manage things, be it people, roles, or overall vision. When I was no longer able to fight, I would then dedicate myself to gathering those who could and managing them. That was what I’d thought at the start.

But the longer I continued being an adventurer myself, the more I understood how impractical that idea had been. Being one of those standing on the front lines was absolutely crucial in bringing multiple adventurer parties together into a clan. Adventurers weren’t salarymen with a cushy nine-to-five schedule. There was no way that men and women fighting days on end with their lives literally on the line would listen to instructions delivered from an armchair position inside a comfy office.

“Should I also start taking up a martial art...?”

“You’re going to become a clan head, Ezoe-shi. Do you really need to be that strong?” Mutsuo asked, still holding up his camera.

A slime approached us from behind, so I thrust my shovel towards the nucleus suspended within its body. The monster disappeared in a puff of smoke and dropped a card and a four-gram magic stone.

Name: Blue Slime Title: None

Rank: D

Rarity: Uncommon Skills: Blunt Damage Resistance (Lvl. 1), _____, _____

“So it doesn’t have resistance against slicing damage. How about this?”

I turned my shovel back into a card and switched it out with Cosmic Zantetsuken, which appeared with a cold glint. I swung this Super Rare weapon that was said to be “capable of cutting anything in this world with one exception.” It dug into the slime’s blue body, then...

Boing.

“Does it have to be *this* faithful to the source material?!”

As expected, Zantetsuken could not cut the slime!

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“So magic stones do appear starting on Floor 3 in Sapporo Dungeon. I see.”

The woman on the screen narrowed her eyes while nodding. *Ah, I think I see what Mutsuo was talking about. Depending on the angle, I think I can see a certain Rushian mafia boss from a certain manga who smokes cigars and orders men around with her chin in her.*

“What? Is there something on my face?”

“Ah, no, sorry. So, what do you want us to do? We reached Floor 5 before coming back up. If we keep going, we’ll reach the lowest floor before long. Do you really want us to erase the place?”

“What do you think? You’re the CEO of Dungeon Busters and the man who’s the most knowledgeable about dungeons in this entire world. Any good ideas?”

Returning my question with a question. Tsk. This woman really is hard to deal with. “My recommendation would be to withhold judgment until there is more information. We could take footage and bring it back for you to examine. I’m sure this would greatly affect the running of the Dungeon Adventurer Administrative Bureau going forward.”

“Very well, let’s do that, then. But be careful. Even you don’t know exactly what will be involved in actually clearing a dungeon, do you? As in, you don’t know what’s on the lowest floor, right? If the situation seems impossible, pull back immediately. Understood?”

After the screen went dark, I turned towards Akira and Mutsuo.

“For now, let’s rest up inside the dungeon. Then tomorrow, we’ll be powering through to Sapporo Dungeon’s bottom floor.”

The two of them nodded soberly.

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On Floor 6, we were assaulted by large bats that came in droves. Akira put away his spear and switched back to using his knuckle-dusters. Judging from the high-speed jabs that he was unleashing, this genius martial artist had

apparently mastered boxing as well.

“Mucchii! Duck!”

Mutsuo squatted obediently, still keeping his camera rolling. From our positions in front of and behind him, Akira and I steadily worked our way through the hundreds of bats, him with his fists, me with Cosmic Zantetsuken. I felt almost no feedback at all from my weapon, but the monsters before my eyes were indeed all turning into smoke one by one.

“Monsters that can fly are troublesome, but these bats are lacking in both speed and strength. Makes sense for being Rank D,” I noted.

“Agreed,” Akira replied. “It’s annoying how they come in a group, but they aren’t actually that much of a threat. Hold on. I think I can finally...”

He trailed off and tucked a fist to his waist, then punched out towards the incoming bats. “Four Simultaneous Punches!”

With the sound of a balloon popping, four bats burst into smoke at the same time. The corners of Akira’s mouth climbed up into a broad grin. “I’ve finally surpassed the limits of being human!”

“Congratulations! But wait till later to check your Status; let’s finish up here first!”

After that, we continued fighting against bats for quite a while longer.

* * *

Name: Shishido Akira Title: Species Limit Breaker Rank: C

Possession Limit: 10 / 25

Skills: Card Gacha, Striking (Lvl. 5), Body Strengthening (Lvl. 4)

We managed to find the Safety Zone on Floor 6, so we ducked inside for a breather. Akira brought up his Status, and sure enough, he had reached Rank C and received the title for it.

“So, I went through Shishibone, Yokohama, and now, Sapporo, and I’ve *finally* reached Rank C! Just how many monsters have I fought...?”

“In order to rank up, you need to fight monsters at the same rank as yourself. In other words, you’d need to fight Rank C monsters to get to the next rank—so, Rank B. Hundreds of thousands of them.”

“I can’t even imagine it. But with this, we should now be able to make more progress into Abyss, right?”

Next to Akira, who was smiling wryly, Mutsuo was also checking his Status screen. Although he had done almost no fighting, he had been wearing weights on both his hands and feet. The hope was that doing this, paired with the effects of Enhancement Element, would be enough to help him grow stronger.

“Ezoe-shi, I’ve also ranked up! I’m Rank E now!”

“Really?” *Could he have maybe earned a new skill? If it’s a magic skill, then we might be able to make even better progress through Sapporo Dungeon.* With my heart beating expectantly, I peered over at Mutsuo’s Status screen.

Name: Tanaka Mutsuo Title: None

Rank: E

Possession Limit: 15 / 28

Skills: Card Gacha, _____, _____

“It does say Rank E. Congratulations. But there’s no new skill.”

“I-Is it because I didn’t do any fighting?”

“How about asking Anego? She might know something.”

We stopped our cameras and summoned Akane. She took a look at Mutsuo’s Status, then nodded as if it were normal.

“Sometimes you do get a skill when ranking up, but normally, it’d be something the Dungeon System grants you based on something you’ve mastered with years of experience, or you’d have to find a Skill Orb. Kazuhiko-sama is an exception, being First Contacter and all, but in Akira-san’s case, his skills are derived from his mastery over martial arts.”

“What about Mari and her Holy Magic skill, then? She’s never had experience

with any type of magic.”

“In her case, I believe it was due to affinity. When it comes to magic skills, affinity is more important than mastery. She just happened to be suited for Holy Magic.”

“So, in my case...”

“You do not have much experience fighting, and you do not possess any particular affinity for magic. I believe that to be the reason why you did not gain any new skills when ranking up.”

“Oh ma gawd, so orz,” Mutsuo moaned while falling to his knees and planting both hands on the ground in a pose that distinctly conveyed his depression.

Akane bowed elegantly, then returned to her card form. As I picked her up and returned her to my case, my mind whirled furiously. *What are the available skills based off of? There are ones useful for battle, such as Striking and magic, but there are also supernatural ones, like my Teleportation. Akane even has Sex Technique, of all things. However, the number of available skills is clearly far too limited.*

“The way I understand it, ‘skills’ are reflections of ‘technical skills.’ And in our modern society, there are practically an infinite number of technical skills. If we take Mutsuo as an example, I’m sure he qualifies for, say, Programming, 3D Printing, or Figure Crafting. If skills are reflective of mastery and experience, why didn’t he then gain a Programming skill?”

“Uh, Aniki, aren’t you reading too deeply into this?”

“Why wouldn’t I read into it as deeply as I can? This is the real world here. From what we’ve seen so far, many parts of this Dungeon System are reflective of this world of ours. And yet, the same does not appear to be true of the skills. Why are there so few skills? It’s almost as if this were a game and someone had to actually go to the trouble of creating new skills. And why are there *two* conditions of ‘mastery’ and ‘affinity’? Why isn’t it consolidated? This conundrum seems like a hint towards something. Can it be that the designer of the Dungeon System does not understand the meaning of the word programming? Hmm. But it wouldn’t make sense to know about gacha and not programming...”

Words like “Inventory” and “Alchemy” often appeared in light novels as skill names. However, even in a medieval European setting, technical skills like bookkeeping, weaving, and firewood chopping existed. Although such skills were too drab to merit mention in light novels, life back then should also have involved at least several million technical skills that bore names.

As I dove into my own world of thoughts, I saw from the corner of my eye Akira approach Mutsuo, who was still on all fours in the so-called orz pose, and place a supportive hand on his shoulder.

“Hey, Mutsuo, regardless, let’s eat, yeah? I mean, don’t take it to heart so much, man. Maybe instead of Programming or Figure Crafting, you’ll be getting something like Handiness or Handicraft in the future.”

“If I have any say, I’d rather have Hacking or Modeling.”

“Bro, getting Hacking as a skill from a fantasy dungeon would just be plain weird!”

“I was just joking.”

The two laughed at their exchange. I sighed and got started preparing our next meal.

* * *

The moment we reached Floor 7, I knew without a doubt that it was the lowest floor. Its layout was completely different from that of all the other dungeon floors I’d ever been to.

“You two, stay sharp. This would be a bad place to get pincered from the front and back.”

This floor was just a straight, two-meter-wide path. We proceeded slowly and vigilantly. When we’d made it roughly halfway through, Mutsuo suddenly stopped in his tracks.

“Ezoe-shi, look up!”

Mutsuo was pointing his camera upwards, so Akira and I also looked up. We gasped. *Is that a relief on the ceiling?!*

“It’s too dark to see clearly. I think I’ve got a flashlight in here somewhere...”

I eventually found my flashlight inside my Magic Pouch and shone it on the ceiling. The carved image which stood out from the rest of the ceiling turned out to be a depiction of a hand holding what looked like a billiard ball and was just about to place it onto a table-like surface.

“What does this mean?”

“Ezoe-shi, this might be a creation myth scene! That ball is our universe, and when it bangs onto our table, the big bang occurs. At least, that’s what it looks like to me.”

“Wait, God has hands? No, no, no. More importantly, why is there a relief down here?!”

Akira has a point. The meaning of the relief is important, sure, but equally important is why something so suggestive is down here in the first place. This is undeniable proof that the Dungeon System is something created by an entity with intention as opposed to being a natural phenomenon. And if that’s the case, then there should be significance in the very fact of there being a relief on the lowest floor.

“Mutsuo, take a few still images of it, too, just in case.”

“On it.”

Mutsuo switched the mode on his handheld cam to snap a few pictures. Akira and I kept a lookout, but the lowest floor appeared to be free of monster spawns.

“Aniki, what should we do? Should we return above ground?”

“Let’s check out the end of the hall first. Then we’ll decide.”

Our group walked to the double doors on the far end. It looked exactly the same as the ones at the entrance to the dungeon on Floor 1. *So that’s the entrance and this is the exit?*

“You two, turn off your cameras for a bit.”

Once everything was off, I told them, “Let’s first see if Akane and Emily know anything about the relief before heading back up.”

Then I took out the two character cards and summoned them.

* * *

“So... Do you two know anything about this?”

Akane and Emily were both silent as they stared up at the ceiling intensely. Both of them looked slightly sick. It was my first time seeing them like this. Neither seemed to have heard me, so I stayed quiet and let them have their space. Only after a full minute of waiting did they finally look back down.

“I’m terribly sorry, Kazuhiko-sama. Nothing is coming to mind.”

“Me neither. It’s like... It’s like it’s pulling at something inside of me, but nothing’s coming out. It’s such a frustrating feeling.”

So it’s not that they forgot but that they’ve flat-out lost those memories. They’re still Legend Rare cards, though, and the very core of their being is still reacting in some way to seeing the relief. Is that what’s happening?

“In all likelihood, Emily and I have both seen something similar to this in the past, but our memories of the time have been erased by the Dungeon System. At the same time, our hearts are desperately trying to tell us that it’s something really important, something that we really mustn’t forget. I believe these emotions to be the result of that discrepancy.”

“That’s it; that’s exactly it! This painting is just...! I don’t remember it, but I feel like it’s super, super important. But I can’t recall *why* it’s so important!”

Akira offered, “Would it help to examine the other dungeons? We still have more than ten years. That’s plenty of time to think about it.”

“I agree with Akira-shi. And we can also ask other character cards when we meet them in the future. Maybe something will shake loose sometime.”

“The two of them make a fair point. Akane, Emily, your reaction itself is helpful as a hint. The fact that two of the 108 Pillars of Destiny find this relief so crucially important already helps narrow down the possibilities quite a bit. It’s probably related to how to erase the Dungeon System itself or to the identity of the designer of the System.”

“Yeah... I’m sorry... I’m not getting anything.”

“My apologies, Kazuhiko-sama...”

“Don’t worry about it. Thanks for coming out. It seems like it would be wiser to err on the side of not erasing these dungeons. Just having learned that is in itself a huge gain. Akira, Mutsuo, we’re heading back up and showing the director general this footage.”

I returned Akane and Emily to their card forms and teleported to the Safety Zone on Floor 1 together with my companions.

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[Ministry of Defense — Ishihara Yukie]

January 4 was a sort of rehabilitation for workers just getting back from holiday for most civilian businesses. At Kasumigaseki, however, we had no room for such leisures. In fact, the entire Ministry of Defense was on pins and needles, with many not even having been able to take the time off. On the first day of the year, Gamerica’s king of controversy had declared on social media that he was “revising the US-Japan Security Treaty.” Thanks to that, the Bureau of Defense Policy was in a state of pandemonium. From what I could gather, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs wasn’t faring much better. The moment Gamerica’s influence was gone from the Far Eastern sphere, the Oriental Republic of Sina would immediately move to expand *its* influence over the South and the East Sina Sea. Dealing with the dungeons was important, but the monsters weren’t coming out. It was only natural to prioritize “visible” threats such as Sina and Ko.

“This is quite troubling indeed. The JSDF is already stretched thin enough as is, and now we have to redirect more forces towards the western front? We still have to keep our guard up against the Rushian Federation, and more and more dungeons keep appearing. Lack of manpower is our greatest problem right now. How much easier would it be if only we could outsource some of these duties to private companies?”

I could not help but grumble a little. The Dungeon Adventurer Administration Bureau, which had been established just last year, did not have a deputy director general. Its previous form, the Special Dungeon Countermeasure Department, had been a hodgepodge of personnel gathered from the Bureau of Defense Buildup Planning, the Bureau of Personnel and Education, and the

Bureau of Local Cooperation. Once a dungeon appeared, we needed to build up facilities in the nearby vicinity in order to guard and monitor it and, in case we were assigning troops, calculate salary and manage other personnel details based on dungeon time. After all, we couldn't very well treat soldiers living according to a whole different time axis and fighting against enemies from another world the same way we did soldiers assigned elsewhere in the country.

Due to the background of the founding of the bureau, the Dungeon Adventurer Administration Bureau was actually still scrambling to get many things in order.

"You've gotten so much younger over the break, Director General Ishihara!"

Admittedly, I looked entirely out of place within this meeting called by Nishida Kenichi, the administrative vice-minister of the Ministry of Defense. Going by appearances, it was me, a thirty-something woman (*late twenties, thank you!*) among a panel of men in their sixties. Depending on the context, the administrative vice-minister's words could have been construed as sexual harassment. He wasn't saying it in a snide way, though, so I was generous enough to let it slide.

"Much obliged, Administrative Vice-Minister Nishida. While I surveyed Yokohama Dungeon at the start of the year, I saw the need to personally experience the bootcamp that we were offering to the citizens and availed myself."

"Oh, no, I'm not reprimanding you or anything. Rather, thank you for working so hard even over New Year's. But that is quite the drastic change indeed. Maybe I should also consider participating with the missus."

Nishida Kenichi had assumed the office of administrative vice-minister the year before last. Although convention at the government administration office normally called for a change in this position every year or two, this had not happened last year due to the commotion of dealing with the Dungeon Outbreak Phenomenon. He was now on his way to challenge the record of Moriyama Masaru, the so-called "Emperor of the Defense Ministry" who had sat in the very same position for four years straight. *Funnily enough, the personalities of the two men are like night and day.*

“If you wish, I can arrange it for you any time.”

“Thank you. I’ll talk it over with the missus. So, I heard that the Dungeon Busters people are currently in Sapporo Dungeon. How is progress?”

“We have asked them to investigate the dungeon and, if it seemed possible, clear it outright. At the moment, they are the best dungeon specialists we have. I have faith that they will soon be back with tangible results.”

Unlike Moriyama Masaru, who had clawed his way into the seat by kicking his rivals down with scandals and malicious gossip, Nishida Kenichi had assumed the position with the blessings and support of many of his former subordinates. He was frank and candid, never put on airs, was tight-lipped, and was an extremely good listener. As a result, even today, there were directors who preferred going straight to him for advice instead of the deputy director generals or the director generals who were their direct superiors.

“I think this is probably going to be another tough year, so feel free to come talk to me if you need help. The same goes for everyone else. I think we’re all going to get a lot busier because of what Howard-san said, but it is exactly in times like these that we should be helping each other out. Knock on my door anytime if you need me to help put in a word with another ministry, you want something pushed through, or if I can make things easier for you in any way.”

This effectively served as the opener for the meeting. Today, we director generals were here to report ongoing concerns and possible upcoming issues relevant to our respective bureaus as part of the groundwork for the defense minister’s New Year’s address, which would be happening Monday. The meeting lasted the entire morning.

As soon as I got back to my own office, I received a report from my secretary.

“Director general, we received contact from the civilian adventurer Ezoe Kazuhiko-shi. I informed him that you were in a meeting, to which he replied that he would be waiting above ground for you to get back to him.”

“Above ground? Does that mean he finished clearing the dungeon?” *If so, that’s much faster than I’d expected.*

I settled into my office chair and started up my computer, my heart beating

with expectation.

* * *

“Long story short, I believe it wise to *not* erase the dungeons, Sapporo Dungeon included. Based on what we know at the moment, that is.”

This was the first thing that the man who’d come up on my screen said. One thing that I highly appreciated about him was how he always got straight to the point. He would start right off the bat with what concerned me most, delivered in a succinct and straightforward way without using unnecessary qualifiers like “We’ve discovered something big,” or “Something happened that we had not expected.” Only after making sure I understood the most important point would he then fill in the whys and hows to my satisfaction.

On the screen, beside Ezoe’s face, were several pictures. *This is...a relief from somewhere?*

“This relief was found on the ceiling of the lowest floor of the dungeon. We have no way of figuring out what it means. However, this gives us cause to suspect that other dungeons might have something similar. This needs confirming.”

“This is the first time I’ve received a report of anything resembling a sign of civilization within the dungeons. This indicates that they are not simply natural phenomena. Hmm, and the fact that this is on the lowest floor seems meaningful somehow. What do your two partners think about this?”

What I wanted to know was the input from the two women supposedly part of the Dungeon System who had told Ezoe much of what he knew about the background of the dungeons. I figured that he’d catch on if I used “partner” to refer to them.

“They might have seen it before. Very likely to be very important. But not sure how it is important. That’s what they said.”

As hoped, Ezoe’s response indicated that he did pick up on the subtext in my question. And that answer was all I needed. If this relief was truly that important, then I agreed with Ezoe that we probably should not erase the place.

“Please go ahead and clear it. But don’t erase it; secure the right of ownership

instead.”

The man on the screen nodded, then left the call. *Now I have to attend an in-bureau meeting. With the time difference, Ezoe just might be done when I get back.*

I stood up and headed to the room where my directors were waiting.

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[Sapporo Dungeon — Ezoe Kazuhiko]

“Kazuhiko-sama, the Guardian is lying in wait behind this door. When you defeat it, the Dungeon Core will appear. The first person who touches the Core will be given the choice to erase the dungeon or obtain administrative rights over it.”

“Be careful, master. There might be multiple Guardians, and the dungeons in this world have already proved to be different from what we know in multiple ways. There’s no telling how this would turn out.”

“Don’t worry. If push comes to shove, I’ll summon you two even if the cameras are still rolling. Akira, Mutsuo, you two ready?”

“You bet, Aniki!”

“I’m good to go.”

I returned Akane and Emily to card form, and we all switched our cameras back on. We verbally confirmed all our preparations, then I placed my hands on the double doors that, just like their counterparts on Floor 1, opened to the left and right. After we stepped inside the dimly lit room, the doors closed behind us. Illumination flared on close by and spread towards the far end of the room, eventually revealing a gigantic form with a bull’s head, blue skin, and a battle-ax in its left hand.

“Aniki... Is that monster really Rank C?”

“Th-Th-That appearance... It’s a minotaur! It looks exactly like a character I’ve drawn in a doujinshi before!”

“I’m switching to using Cosmic Zantetsuken. Mutsuo, you stay as close to the door as possible and keep the camera rolling. Akira, let’s do this!”

“ROOOOAAAAARRRRR!”

The moment we took a step forward, the blue monster stood up and roared at the top of its lungs. The bellow from the three-meter-tall giant sent trembles through the air. A smile came over Akira’s face. I suspected it was the same for me.

As we charged forward, the monster swung its ax horizontally as if to mow us down, but we ducked below the attack. Right after, the ax was brought back to bear.

“I’ll cut down its weapon!”

I intercepted the incoming ax with Zantetsuken. Contrary to my expectation, however, the two weapons ended up locking, screaming with the sound of metal on metal. I felt myself slowly sliding backwards despite all my efforts at bracing my legs. In short, the monster’s one arm was generating more strength than my two. However, stopping its weapon did create an opening for Akira to get in close. He tucked both his fists to his waist, exhaled sharply, then leaped into the air.

“Shinmyoukan-style Secret Technique: Centerline Meridian Six Consecutive Punch!”

Almost simultaneously, punches landed on the monster’s counterpart to the six vitals on the human body of glabella, nose, throat, solar plexus, dantian, and groin. However, Akira’s body was sent flying by the monster’s right backhand the very next instant. He flew for about ten meters before crashing to the ground.

Mutsuo shouted his name in alarm, but Akira sat back up almost immediately. There was a bit of blood dribbling from the corner of his mouth, seemingly from a wound he’d suffered inside his mouth.

“I’m fine. I managed to block it with my shoulder in time. But damn. It took no damage at all from my secret technique? I’d been pretty confident in that move!”

“That might not be the case.”

It was hard to tell from the monster’s face, but its movements had definitely

gotten a bit duller. As proof, it was no longer swinging around the battle-ax in its left hand. I held Zantetsuken in front of me warily as Akira wobbled to his feet.

“Aniki, we really should call—”

“No, we’ll do this ourselves. If we can’t defeat a monster like this, then there’s no going forward for us.”

I gritted my teeth. Every single one of my muscles was thrumming, and even I was aware that I was in a charged state. In all likelihood, this monster *was* Rank C but on the far end of the spectrum, close to Rank B. That was why it was equipped with a Super Rare weapon on par with Zantetsuken. If we let such an opponent stand in our way, we could forget about clearing Rank C dungeons, much less Rank B. I hardened my resolve. *I’m not going to get out of this unscathed.*

“ROOOOAAARRR!”

The minotaur grabbed its battle-ax with both hands and lifted it high. I dashed straight in, not bothering with a stance. The battle-ax rushed straight down, but instead of stopping, I dodged it with the thinnest of margins. A searing heat assaulted my left shoulder. However, the minotaur was now leaning over with its ax dug into the ground. This was the perfect opportunity.

“HAAAAAAHHHHH!”

I grabbed Zantetsuken with both my hands and swung it down right onto the minotaur’s head. The blade sliced into its forehead, nose, throat, then torso.

“AAAAAHHHHHHHHH!” *I did it! I won!*

The minotaur, which had been bisected straight down the middle from the top of its head, disappeared into smoke, staring straight at me to the very end. I screamed victoriously, then gulped in a huge gasp of air within the roiling fumes. *We managed to get through this somehow, but there’s still a long way ahead of us. It took two Rank Cs everything we had just to clear a Rank D dungeon. When we’re done here, let’s get back to Abyss and aim to rank up to B.*

“Mucchii! Extra Potion!”

“Ezoe-shiii! That was far too reckless!”

I watched Akira and Mutsuo running towards me as my shoulders heaved with heavy breathing. *Why do they look so panicked? I don’t think I suffered an injury serious enough to merit using a Rare potion...*

This was when my brain finally registered the state I was in. Whereas I had thought I had been holding onto Zantetsuken with both hands, the only hand gripping it was my right one. I turned my face to my left side and found my entire left arm gone from the shoulder and blood gushing out like a fountain. Then the pain hit me like a truck.

* * *

Put the cut-off arm against the place it had been detached from and pour Extra Potion onto the wound. See, now that was easy to put into words, but the pain—there were no words to describe the pain. Agony coursed through my body during the several minutes that were required for my wound to heal.

“Aniki, please hang in there...”

I nodded, glaring daggers as cold sweat ran down my forehead in rivulets as I lay on my back with my mouth gagged. The Extra Potion on my wound felt as excruciating as what I imagined it would feel like having a tooth drilled without anesthesia.

“*Hnnnnnggggggg*!”

Akira held me down as my body struggled desperately to escape the agony, allowing Mutsuo to continue applying the potion. In my pain-fogged mind, I resolved to demand that the Dungeon Adventurer Administration Bureau maintain a stock of anesthesia.

After several minutes that felt like an eternity, the pain finally receded. Akira released his grip and my gag was removed. There was still some pain, but it was at a tolerable level. My left arm had been perfectly reattached without even a scar. When I staggered to my feet, Akira grabbed me by my collar.

“Aniki, you went way too far! There are plenty of people who can replace Mucchii and me, but nobody can ever replace you! Please don’t overdo it like that ever again!”

“Sorry...”

“Ezoe-shi! Shishido-shi! Look!”

We turned to look where Mutsuo was pointing. There, in the middle of the room, a black octahedron was floating in midair, rotating leisurely. It looked like some sort of crystal.

“That’s definitely the Dungeon Core! We did it! We cleared Sapporo Dungeon!” Mutsuo shouted excitedly.

The three of us approached it slowly and warily.

“Here goes, all right?”

After exchanging looks with my companions, I placed a hand on the Dungeon Core. A black window similar to our Status windows popped up.

Dungeon No.: 103

Rank: D

Master: None

Qty. of Floors: 007

Supplied DE: 717

Resource: Black Magic Crystal Stampede: On

<Do you wish to claim administrative rights? Y / N> <Do you wish to erase this dungeon? Y / N>

“I have a lot of questions, but before anything else, ‘Yes’ to claiming administrative rights.”

When I pressed the “Y” button, a voice rang out within the dungeon. Seeing Akira and Mutsuo both looking around restlessly informed me that I wasn’t just hearing it inside my head.

<Dungeon No. 103 has been cleared. The Buster, Ezoe Kazuhiko, has claimed administrative rights. The Buster-only ability Card Materialization has been granted. Furthermore, as reward for being First Buster, you are hereby granted the character card “Liu Fengguang the Fist Emperor.”> The third Legend Rare

card I had ever seen appeared before my eyes, floating and glowing as the other two had. I reached for it and turned it over.

Name: Liu Fengguang Title: Fist Emperor Rank: F

Rarity: Legend Rare Skills: Bare-Handed Fighting Technique (Lvl. 1), Armed Fighting Technique (Lvl. 1), Disciple Cultivation (Lvl. 1)

“Incarnation of martial arts; master over every form of physical combat. Had often lost himself to the thrill of battle in his youth, but now focuses his efforts at raising successive generations. Age of 103 years old?! He’s an old geezer?!”

“Ho ho ho... Who do you think you’re calling a geezer?”

The character card shone brighter and brighter until the light took on the form of an old man. At close to two meters tall, he towered above even Akira and was so muscular that it was hard to imagine him being older than a hundred.

“My name is Liu Fengguang. It is true that I am over a hundred, but I have yet to regress so far as to be made light of by young whippersnappers like yourselves.”

Seeing Liu extend a hand towards me, I thought, *He might be a Legend Rare character card, but he’s still Rank F. If he tries anything funny, I’ll just turn the tables on him.*

At least, I did until Akira slid in between the two of us and deflected the hand with a mawashi uke move, warning me, “Aniki, you really should apologize. This guy’s bad news.”



“I see... I apologize for my disrespect.”

When it came to fighting, I fully trusted Akira’s judgment. The grave look on his face was all I needed to tell how dangerous this old man was. As an amateur, the best thing I could do was to obediently listen to someone who knew what he was talking about. I corrected my posture and bowed my head.

“Hmm, I see. A man who knows himself, trusts his followers, and promptly corrects his own wrongs. You are a good leader. I accept your apology. You all may name yourselves.”

“My name is Ezoe Kazuhiko. I am a Rank C dungeon adventurer.”

“I’m Shishido Akira, also a Rank C dungeon adventurer. I’m a martial artist.”

“I-I am Tanaka Mutsuo. I’m only Rank E, and I’m not so much an adventurer as I am an IT manager.”

Liu examined each of us in turn, then focused on Akira.

“If you’ve reached Rank C, your bodies must be quite tempered. But technique is something else entirely. From what I see, you are the only one who knows how to truly fight.”

Seeing how Akira was standing at attention with his back straight, it was clear that he had received some sort of shock from the old man before our eyes. However, I had to interrupt the conversation, as we were still in the middle of something.

“I’m sorry. We have yet to completely clear this dungeon. Could you return to card form for now and save the details for another time? That is, if you are willing to accept me as your master...”

“I serve no one, and I call no one master. However, if you wish to challenge the dungeons, then I am willing to lend my aid. Call me again when you have need of my power.”

Leaving those words hanging in the air, Liu Fengguang reverted to card form. I sighed and turned towards my two companions.

“Let’s finish up here. I’m turning Stampede off.”

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[Ministry of Defense — Ishihara Yukie]

After the man in the video said, “Let’s finish up here. I’m turning Stampede off,” he once again turned towards the Dungeon Core management window. When he pressed the field marked “Stampede,” the screen changed to one indicating the remaining time until the Stampede. It read “45,441,973,440 seconds” and was not moving.

“What does this mean?” I asked, looking up from the video towards Ezoe Kazuhiko, who I was on a call with.

He shrugged his shoulders and replied, “As it says, it’s probably a countdown to the Monster Stampede. One revolution of our planet around the sun is 365 days, 5 hours, 48 minutes, and 46 seconds, which works out to a total of 31,556,926 seconds. The displayed time is exactly 1,440 years. But that’s in dungeon time; in aboveground time, that’s ten years.”

“The reason why the number is not moving is because the dungeons haven’t all fully appeared yet...?”

“Yes, most likely. What do you think? Is this enough to serve as evidence of the impending Monster Stampede?”

“That is indeed more than enough to imply the possibility. But we can’t base our decisions on Sapporo Dungeon alone. We’ll need to check other dungeons as well...”

“Fair enough. Furthermore, this video reveals the existence of the character cards. If you’re going to be publicizing it, I recommend you be careful how you go about it.”

“Anyone who clears a dungeon gains the ability to materialize cards above ground, is it? If we don’t manage it carefully, this could very easily be used for terrorism. Honestly, this is way above even my pay grade. I’ll have to discuss it with Administrative Vice-Minister Nishida and wait for orders from above.”

“This does sound like an ability that extremists in the Middle East would love to get their hands on. In any case, the dungeon has been officially cleared. The rest is all yours.”

I sighed and slumped my shoulders. *I wish I could be as carefree as this man. The year's only just begun, and he's already dumped problem after problem on my desk. Can he try being in my shoes a bit?*

In fact, I could not help venting some of my frustration. "Goodness, it's just one thing after another. As if the Ministry of Defense isn't already entirely swamped. It's far too late now, but I seriously regret having volunteered myself as director back when Anti-Dungeon was being established."

"I'll pretend I didn't hear that. If you weren't here, we probably wouldn't have been able to get inside Sapporo Dungeon. Powerful adventurers are important, but good administrators who can manage them properly are even more important. When I accept my next interview, I'll make sure to say so."

"Wow, I'm so touched. Truly. Anyways, I confirm that the request from us has been fulfilled. Feel free to rest up for the rest of the day. I'll hear the detailed report when you get back to Tokyo. Good work down there."

After ending the call, I sighed heavily and leaned back in my chair, looking up at the ceiling. There was no longer any doubt as to the veracity of what Ezoe Kazuhiko had said on December 31. If nothing was done, all of humanity would be wiped out by a Monster Stampede. In order to prevent this from happening, every last dungeon that appeared on Earth needed to be cleared.

"If this is truly the work of a god, then that god is definitely an evil god. Just what does he think he's doing to this world of ours...?"

My first order of business was to reconfirm the content of the video and write a report about it. But before I started the task, I needed a short break. All seventy-six indoor smoking rooms within the Ministry of Defense had been closed down, leaving only the twelve that were outdoors. It was a bit of a distance, but I didn't really have a choice. I pulled open one of my desk drawers and took out a thin cigar.

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[Edogawa City — Kinouchi Mari]

<Breaking news: Three civilian adventurers have just cleared Sapporo Dungeon. The Ministry of Defense will be holding an emergency press

conference at 18:30 today.> There was a long-standing Western confectionery store named Shells located a short distance down Showa Dori from the south exit of Koiwa Station that female high school students like my friends and me loved to sit and chat in. At ¥250 a slice for strawberry cake, ¥300 a slice for Sachertorte, and ¥500 for a cake set together with a drink, it was extremely affordable for students on allowances. What's more, everything was delicious and homemade. Until a short while ago, even ¥500 seemed like an incredible expense to me. Now, when I equated the amount to a single goblin, it didn't seem so out of reach anymore. My monthly allowance was now worth a hundred goblins, or ¥50,000, which was more than enough for me to hang out with my friends. (As an aside, Kazu-san was like, "That's too much money for a high schooler to be holding," and had taken to giving my salary to my mom directly!) "Mari, it's your uncle that the news is talking about, isn't it?"

"Mh-hmm. He did say that he's visiting Sapporo, so it's very likely him and those in his company."

"That's the world's first ever dungeon clear! They're amazing! Mari, watch out. The guys trying to get into Dungeon Busters are going to flock to you again."

As my friend had mentioned, the head of Dungeon Busters, Inc., Ezoe Kazuhiko, was my relative on my mother's side, and this was a fact that my entire school knew. Last year, Kazu-san had saved me when I'd been accosted by some scary-looking people. It just so happened to have been around the time when news about the boot camp was all over on TV; the friends who had been with me at the time recognized him immediately. The boys in my class pestered me to introduce him so much that I had no choice but to give him a call on the spot. I still remembered how disappointed all the boys had looked when Kazu-san had immediately replied with "Tell them to register as adventurers first." We high school students could not register as adventurers.

"Are you going to become a dungeon adventurer when you graduate, Mari?"

"Honestly, I'm not sure. Mom told me to do whatever I want, but Kazu-san... My uncle is against it. He told me to go to college, and that I could still be an adventurer on the side while studying."

“In your case, you can even make it big as an idol. Ugh, who was it that said everyone is born equal?! The heavens are clearly picking favorites here!”

My friends and I continued chattering for a while longer, then went to karaoke together. Utayuuen, which was close to the station’s north exit, offered a student package of only ¥125 for thirty minutes, complete with all-you-could-drink. I really loved these times.

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[Sapporo — Ezoe Kazuhiko]

On January 4, at 18:30, Director General Ishihara of the Dungeon Adventurer Administrative Bureau was hosting a press conference regarding our successful dungeon clear from the press conference room within the Ministry of Defense. The three of us were having dinner while watching the broadcast on 1-seg.

“This is so good! Mongolian barbeque is delicious!”

We were having what the locals called Jingisukan or Genghis Khan in a restaurant named Beer Keller Sapporo Pioneer Story within Sapporo Factory mall. We had started by ordering ten peoples’ portions right off the bat. Due to being a beer hall, the place had an extremely extensive menu. In addition to crab salad and eisbein (a German dish of pickled ham hock), we even ordered a platter of twenty coarse ground sausages. Of course, we did not forget the craft beer. We even had it served in special beer mugs.

Sapporo had numerous Genghis Khan restaurants of renown, but most of them only had counter seats. We ended up going to this one because it had VIP rooms—not so much because we were worried about being recognized, but because we wanted to watch the broadcast.

“Mucchii, you’ve gotta eat the vegetables too! And *I* was the one who put that meat on the grill!”

“I need to consume more protein now that I’ve reached Rank E. Haven’t you heard of ‘first come first served’?”

“You two... Why fight when we can just order more? Let’s order ten more portions for now.”

My two companions seemed more focused on the meat than the TV. Mutsuo was as hearty an eater as he always had been. At this rate, he just might return to his former size by next year. Then again, he could just lose it all again in the dungeon, so it wasn't all that big a problem. I also reached towards the grill plate—fully loaded with vegetables and meat as it was—with my chopsticks.

<The three civilian adventurers' names are Ezoe Kazuhiko, Shishido Akira, and Tanaka Mutsuo. Together, they formed the Dungeon Busters team and entered Sapporo Dungeon for investigative purposes. At the time, we, as the Adventurer Administrative Bureau, requested that they 'clear the dungeon if possible.' This afternoon, they reached the lowest floor in Sapporo Dungeon—the seventh floor—and came into contact with the object called the Dungeon Core and, in so doing, obtained administrative rights over the dungeon.> On the tablet propped up at the edge of the table, Director General Ishihara was currently giving an outline of what had happened. However, she did not go into detail. Most noticeably, there was no mention whatsoever of the character cards. The only thing she was focusing on was the dungeon clear.

<As the dungeon clear has happened just today, there are many details that we are still in the middle of confirming. That said, there is one piece of information that we feel the need to share with urgency.> As handouts were passed among the reporters, an image appeared on-screen. It was one of the pictures we'd taken of the Dungeon Core.

<This is an object discovered on Floor 7 of Sapporo Dungeon which we are tentatively referring to as a Dungeon Core. When it is touched, the following screen shows up.> The next image sent the reporters all abuzz. This was the very moment when the Status of a dungeon was publicized for the first time in history.

<According to this window, Sapporo Dungeon's official name appears to be No. 103. Its rank is D. This proves the theory that dungeons are also ranked according to the strength of their monsters. The biggest issue is the field below it that reads 'Monster Stampede.' We are still in the process of confirmation and therefore cannot say the following with certainty, but this does appear to be strong support for the Monster Stampede Theory.> "I see. She's aiming to instill a sense of crisis in the people now. Then, while the bureau continues their

confirmations and whatever, the government will use the time to decide how it will react to this information. And I see they've edited the footage to hide the Stampede countdown."

"Which means we should also do so when producing our own video. Do we have a computer with powerful enough specs...?"

On the screen, Ishihara wrapped up her announcement by declaring that all other details were currently under investigation and that the Dungeon Administrative Bureau would continue dedicating all its efforts into clearing dungeons. She then moved onto Q&A, but ended up answering "That is currently under investigation" or "I'm not at liberty to say" to most of the questions. There wasn't much "A" in the Q&A going on.

Then a reporter from Keisan Shimbun asked, <As I'm sure you're aware, the United Nations is currently setting up the preparatory committee for the IDAO, or the International Dungeon Adventurer Organization. Would you be sharing the information obtained from this dungeon clear with the UN and, by extension, the world at large?> <Naturally, we will. This is not an issue that involves Japan alone. Our preliminary understanding leads us to believe that each of the dungeons scattered across our planet has the potential to set off a Monster Stampede. We will need literally every country on Earth working together to face this threat.> <However, this is information that was obtained only after spending significant taxpayer money in setting up our country's civilian adventurer initiative. How will you justify sharing it with the world for no compensation in return?> It's true that from a short-term perspective, it might look like Japan is one-sidedly providing for the world. The other countries don't have to do anything and can simply lap up all the information Japan is sharing. I can see people being afraid of this dynamic. After all, we're even hearing rumors that Gamerica is considering acknowledging civilian ownership over dungeons. If that really comes to pass, then expecting information from them would be futile.

<It is true that this might seem like we are setting ourselves up to be taken advantage of by the rest of the world. However, this disparity in dynamic is because our government was the first to adopt a civilian adventurer initiative. Every other country will be doing the same thing going forward, and as the

framework for global cooperation is set up, our experience and contributions will give us much more authority and speaking power.> <Furthermore,> Ishihara continued, <Dungeon Busters themselves had asked for almost no compensation in their investigation and clearing of Sapporo Dungeon, and then had even unconditionally transferred administrative control over the dungeon to the Japanese government. If these men who have put their own lives on the line to challenge the dungeon are being so selfless, then how can we do any less? In the face of this danger that threatens all of humanity, we must not allow ourselves to be blinded by short-sighted self-interest.> “Uh-oh. Aniki, she’s really painting us as heroes. How’re we supposed to continue enjoying Susukino after this?”

“If someone uploads photos of us going wild and playing with girls onto the internet, it might negatively affect Dungeon Busters’s reputation!”

“Like I care... We fought, and we’re tired. What’s wrong with warriors seeking relief? When we’re done eating, we’re going to hit the streets. We’re partying for the second night in a row!”

“So you’re just going to embrace it, huh. I don’t dislike that part of you, Aniki. Then again, I suppose there’s no point worrying too much about something like this.”

“YOLO!”

Ishihara’s press conference was still going on, but we had seen enough. I turned off the screen and directed my full and undivided attention to the sizzling meat.

* * *

“So, the very same day you finished clearing a dungeon, all of you went partying at a high-class club and even brought girls back for the night? You do realize that you’re famous now, right? What were you thinking?”

“Like I care. Unlike entertainers, our careers don’t rely on popularity. Neither do we have to curry favor with fans like professional baseball athletes. We’re adventurers. We couldn’t care less how people look at us.”

The next day, I was made to listen to Director General Ishihara’s sarcasm in

the JSDF facility set up within Odori Park. When I told her that we had been stuffing our faces with Mongolian barbeque while watching her press conference, her face went through a million different colors within a split second. I couldn't blame Akira and Mutsuo for surreptitiously moving out of frame.

"In regards to the next step, we're currently forming an investigative team. We'll be asking you to help guide them to the lowest floor. However, it's going to take two-to-three weeks to gather the personnel and get things in order. Come back to Tokyo for now. I'd also like to hear your opinion about where we should go from this point forward."

"How was the response from the other civilian adventurers?"

"There are currently twenty-nine registered civilian adventurers. We're in the middle of checking in with them one by one. There are some who haven't responded yet, but the ones who we reached generally seemed fine. Some of them even said they'd already accepted the possibility of a Stampede."

"Then again, most of them are delving just to gather magic stones, so I suppose it doesn't really make a difference either way. But that is an important role in and of itself. How're the power plants coming along?"

"Mitsuba Nitachi Power Systems has succeeded in developing what they called a 'large-scale hydrogen single fuel firing gas turbine' that runs on 100% hydrogen with suppressed backfiring. At the same time, there are plans being drafted for a new one million kilowatt plant in Chiba Prefecture based on the results obtained from the prototype in Tsukuba. The completion date is scheduled for some time within August this year. Once the turbines are finished, the rest is quick. These plants have zero carbon emissions, don't create nuclear waste, are extremely simple and easy to provide maintenance for, and are very accident-proof. We are only a short step away from the dream energy source."

"Now that you mention it, a thought occurred to me when I was down in the dungeon. What do you think about dumping nuclear waste inside the dungeons?"

"Now that's a daring suggestion if I've ever heard one... But this is definitely

beyond what I can decide alone. When you put it that way, I guess the matter of the dungeons is steadily ballooning beyond what a mere bureau can handle."

"I heard that the US is setting up their own dungeon-managing bureau within the Pentagon, but I think they're going to bump into the same issues you're facing now. I believe that our government needs to set up a Ministry of Dungeons and consolidate all administrative rights and deciding power together under one umbrella."

"I'm still in the middle of working out the exact schedule for the talk you were promised. You'll probably have to wait until early next week to get word. When it happens, you should bring it up yourself. Naturally, I'll also do what I can in advance to lay the groundwork for you, but 'he' leans more on executive policy making, so it'd be much more effective to discuss it with him directly."

I nodded and ended the call. When I left the building, the crowd gathered outside was in an uproar. Among the reporters that hailed from every part of Japan, I even spotted those who appeared to be from Woori and Sina. This area of Odori Park was currently sealed off by the JSDF and had only one exit. If we simply walked out like this, we would be completely surrounded and subjected to a never-ending barrage of pointless questions.

"You two, you've got your luggage? We're teleporting out of here."

"Ezoe-shi, weren't we going to eat at Ebisoba after this?"

"There's a branch at New Chitose Airport too, Mucchii. Oh, wait. Would we be mobbed there too?"

The three of us ducked back indoors as if going into hiding.

Chapter 2: The Formation of Dungeon Busters, Inc.

[Tokyo — Ezoe Kazuhiko]

After I returned to Tokyo, I found myself swamped with requests from the media for news coverage, one-on-one interviews, and the like. Never had I so keenly felt the need for a PR manager in Dungeon Busters, Inc. There were far too many for me to consider them one by one, so I sent out a blanket “We are kindly turning down all media coverage until we develop our organization further.”

There was only a little more than two months left until construction on our headquarters would be done. I had until then to gather the number of staff I would need, with the following four departments being an absolute necessity: IT, general affairs, PR, and adventurer management.

Furthermore, I also received sponsorship offers from pharmaceutical companies asking for a steady supply of the various potions in return. They were willing to offer ¥100,000 for normal potions, ¥1,000,000 for High Potions, and ¥50,000,000 for Extra Potions. I would also need a legal department to handle such contracts. There was no way that I could deal with everything by myself.

“Your complexion doesn’t look too good. Are things pretty tough on your side too?”

On January 11, the week after we cleared Sapporo Dungeon, I was at the Ministry of Defense at Ichigaya, sharing a smoke with Director General Ishihara in one of the outdoor smoking areas. The current defense minister apparently loved his smokes, so he had set up roofs over these spaces out of consideration for all the staff who had to otherwise suffer the elements during their smoke breaks. *Hey, it’s hardly the worst expenditure made on taxpayer money.*

I blew out a cloud of smoke and nodded. “We’ve had far too many people knocking on our door. See, if they were licensed adventurers, then I’d be happy to receive them. If it were questions from the Ministry of Defense, then I’d also

be ready to oblige. But the large majority are requests for media coverage from news outlets, support from general citizens, and objections. I wouldn't have time for anything else if I were to address them all."

"Objections? What kind?"

"Supposedly we at Dungeon Busters are committing unjust genocide of the weak, unprotected animals within the dungeons, blinded by our greed for their resources. Or supposedly we at Dungeon Busters are disseminating destructive delusions in an effort to undermine society. You know, the usual."

"Ah, so you've got them too. Honestly, those people..."

"Same here at the MoD?"

"Pretty much. Of course, we get voices expressing support and endorsement too. But it's quite split. We're the first country to introduce a civilian adventurer initiative, and we've shown results for it. The Pentagon and the European Defense Agency have both reached out with official requests for cooperation. Within the past few days, the cabinet support rate has gone up by 5%. The 'NO! Urabe' faction probably doesn't like where things are going."

"I don't want to be involved in any of the politics. I'm neither right-nor left-wing. I think that the Urabe administration's policy and stance towards the dungeons is the most reasonable one out there. That is why I'm cooperating with your bureau. If the administration had issued a law prohibiting the clearing of the dungeons, I would have thrown my lot with the 'NO! Urabe' side."

"I don't think you have anything to worry about on that front. The prime minister is, as he calls himself, a realistic conservative. I expect him to announce dungeon clearing a basic policy within his policy speech at the start of the upcoming regular Diet session. Let's get going. I believe everyone should have arrived by now."

The two of us stubbed out our smokes and headed back indoors. There were twenty-nine adventurers not a part of Dungeon Busters who had to be made aware of what my party and I had experienced. I was going to meet them all.

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[Adventurer — Kusakabe Rinko]

I, Kusakabe Rinko, was the team captain of the naginata club at Seishin Jogakkan College and also an assistant instructor of the Kusakabe-style School of Ancient Martial Arts. The history of Kusakabe-style ancient arts stretched all the way back to the Sengoku period, a time when ways to actually kill using the sword, the spear, and bare-handed combat had been taught and practiced in earnest. However, killing had then been criminalized in the Edo period, so our school had shifted focus towards self-defense. Even today, Kusakabe-style operated a dojo and was involved with providing instruction to the police department. As police in Japan would only ever draw their guns in a major crisis, the bulk of their training was in bare-handed fighting against opponents wielding weapons such as knives and bats.

As a daughter of the very family passing down Kusakabe-style, I had been steeped in various martial arts training since I was young. Although I wasn't as good as my older brother, Kusakabe Seiya—the genius who'd made full instructor at eighteen years old and had been confirmed as the official successor to the school—I wasn't all that bad myself, being talented enough to be accepted as an assistant instructor at nineteen.

"Seiya-san, have you ever sparred with Shishido Akira from Shinmyoukan?"

"Ha ha ha...just once, when I was in elementary school. Phew, it was such a long time ago. I don't remember how it ended."

Even in my eyes, my brother was a genius. The students at the dojo were fully convinced that he was strong enough to rank among the top of the martial arts world right next to Shishido Akira. However, whenever they brought the topic up, my brother would simply laugh and remind them that we were not seeking strength to win matches.

"Our principle is self-protection, remember. Not to participate in one-on-one matches and 'beat' other people. The skills we learn are for protecting ourselves and those important to us. Listen carefully. Killing people is not difficult. What's truly difficult is protecting those we need to protect without hurting our opponents unduly."

At our dojo, our father was the head instructor, my brother was the sole full instructor, and there were a total of four assistant instructors, including me.

The other assistant instructors were all older male relatives, but they were fully accepting of my brother becoming the next head instructor. “The difference in talent between us and him is just too stark,” they would say with a wry smile.

“Brother, have you heard the news about Shishido Akira becoming an adventurer?” I asked one day over dinner. Seeing him shrug his shoulders and shake his head, I asked our father for permission, then turned on the TV. Many people might associate a dojo family with being stiff and traditional, but ours wasn’t all that bad. Our parents were sticklers about etiquette somewhat, but we were otherwise a rather normal family.

<Let’s take a look at the ‘State of the Dungeon Bootcamp’ footage publicized by the Ministry of Defense.> Even at the college I attended, the Dungeon Outbreak Phenomenon was all anyone talked about. Some of the girls in my naginata club had even mentioned wanting to become swordswomen. I shared a bit of what they were feeling; I too was curious just how effective all the martial arts that I had learned so far would be against monsters.

There were two men on the TV screen facing off against what looked like large rabbits. One of them, Shishido Akira—who I secretly thought of as my brother’s rival—unleashed an incredible punch. *So strong. Could he actually be stronger than my brother?*

My brother, however, simply picked up another mouthful of rice with his chopsticks and ate it, looking unperturbed. I returned my gaze to the TV just in time to see the other man fight. Unlike Shishido Akira, he was holding a weapon—a shovel. *Can he really fight with something like that?*

“What on—?! What was with that speed just now?!”

Belying my expectations, the man swung his shovel, and a rabbit practically exploded into nothing. The footage had been mosaicked, but I could tell. Whereas Shishido Akira’s punch had sent his opponent flying, this man’s shovel had moved so fast that *his* opponent’s body had burst apart before any momentum could take hold. He was unbelievably fast. What he had just displayed was not humanly possible.

“He’s...surpassed human limits,” my father murmured.

My brother nodded in agreement, his face colored with interest. “Mm, that

man is no longer human.”

I could not believe it. Although my brother often acted easygoing, he hated losing with a passion. And yet here he was, taken aback by another man’s strength.

“Do you think you’d win if you fought them, brother?”

“Against Shishido Akira, it might be a close match. But not so against that man. Even if father, you, and I all rushed him at once, we might still lose. Look at him.”

My jaw dropped as I watched the man running ten meters along a wall. I almost thought I was watching a movie. His physical strength and explosive power were clearly far beyond what normal humans could achieve. In my eyes, it was the man, not the rabbits, who seemed more like a monster.

“And yet there are fiends that cannot be beaten even with such strength...”

My father closed his eyes for a short while, then resumed eating.

* * *

After that dinner, I asked my father and my brother for permission, then took the dungeon adventurer exam. It wasn’t so much that I was seeking strength as I was just plain shocked by the way the man fought. My father told me that he wouldn’t pass the dojo down to me even if I got stronger than my brother through dungeon delving. He also reminded me to always be mindful of how easy it was for people to drown themselves in power beyond what they can handle.

After saying that, however, he still gave me and my fellow assistant instructors his blessings while seeing us off. I took that as an indication that even he was taking the threat of the dungeons seriously. Of course, I had no intention of drowning in my power, but what I did want was to demonstrate the worth of martial arts in a time like this. If we weren’t going to lend a hand in addressing the dungeons filled with monsters, then how could we expect anyone else to do so?

“The killing methods cultivated during the Sengoku period should prove useful when fighting against the monsters.”

I was in my room the day before joining the Dungeon Bootcamp, performing maintenance on my katana and mentally going over the hidden techniques passed down only within the successor family of Kusakabe-style.

Then I joined the Bootcamp. At first, we were made to simply walk around in the dimly lit space wearing weights. Perhaps due to the strange air within the place or the stink of the monsters, many of the participants tired extremely quickly. There was a former sumo wrestler who seemed to be injured somewhere, judging by the trouble he was having with the stairs at the entrance.

Whenever someone got too tired or found the muscle pain to be too much, they were given a potion that apparently took away all their exhaustion and restored their stamina. I wasn't so soft as to complain about this level of exertion, so I turned down the potion and immediately went to sleep.

"Oh, wow. This is the first time we've had participants so proactive about fighting ever since Ezoe-san and Shishido-san."

Two weeks later, we finally got into the actual adventurer training. We were all equipped with shortswords provisioned by Dungeon Busters and made to fight the rabbit-like monsters ourselves. Honestly speaking, I found the experience a slight disappointment. Although the monsters *looked* like yaksha demons, their fighting strength was almost nil. As long as I remained wary against their bites, killing them did not require much effort. I even found myself wondering if the footage on TV had been staged.

Regardless, I reminded myself that I was in a dungeon and kept my guard up. And soon enough, I did feel a marked improvement in the physical abilities of myself and the other participants. *I see. So this is the effect of Enhancement Element.*

* * *

After our group of four from Kusakabe-style became officially licensed as adventurers, we delved into Yokohama Dungeon again by ourselves. However, we were soon bored of the mechanical repetition of monster killing and proceeded to set up training regimens for ourselves that involved things like adding more weights or purposely fighting bare-handed.

Even so, spending several days inside the dungeon proved to be quite agonizing. The other three all treated me like their little sister, but I was a twenty-something college girl. Being alone with a crowd of men required extra care, and not being able to bathe for several days on end was absolutely excruciating.

Just as I was worrying whether I could actually continue being an adventurer, I received a summons from the Ministry of Defense. To hear tell, there was going to be an information sharing session regarding the recent clearing of Sapporo Dungeon. All adventurers were being gathered. Naturally, that included the Dungeon Busters team.

“If I meet Ezoe Kazuhiko-shi, I might get an answer to my hesitation. And what’s more, I’m curious whether his strength is for real or not.”

I really looked forward to meeting the man who had left such a strong impression on me. But when I entered the meeting room at the Ministry of Defense that day, I felt my heart sinking a little at the distinct lack of a sense of emergency in the air. Only a tiny handful of the other adventurers were emitting an aura different from apathy and unconcern.

“Hey there, beautiful. You’re an adventurer too? Would you like to pair up with me?”

There was a guy who casually approached me. He looked extremely shallow. Now, if his had been a superficial shallowness used to cover up actual substance —something that both my brother and Shishido Akira did—I would not have turned him away so bluntly. However, I felt no such indication coming from him.

“Excuse me. I don’t have business with you, so can you not talk to me, please?”

I proceeded to ignore him completely and took a seat. The man’s complexion changed, and he seemed about to say something but then got spooked by the three assistant instructors following behind me and made himself scarce. I believed that a guy trying to hit on a girl ought to do it seriously. If the guy had tried to chat me up and actually meant it, I would have been much more civil, although I probably would still have turned him down.

Just as I was about to sigh, I felt a presence behind me that sent chills down my back. My fellow assistant instructors also turned around. A slight buzz went up as the other adventurers noticed in turn.

“There they all are. What a view.”

“Interesting... There are a few who seem quite strong in here.”

“Today’s the first time all the adventurers of Japan are meeting in one place. Maybe we should take a picture.”

A man who appeared to be in his thirties entered the room as part of a group of three. One of those behind him was unmistakably Shishido Akira. The other was Tanaka Mutsuo, the subject who had demonstrated the effectiveness of the Bootcamp for dieting on TV. And last but certainly not least, the man at the front was none other than the world’s strongest adventurer, Ezoe Kazuhiko. I could not help but smile a little when I laid eyes on him; the aura that he was emanating was worlds apart from that of anyone else’s. It was almost as if the air around him were roiling with flames. I was sure that if my father had been present, he would have made a comment about how similar he seemed to our deceased grandfather. This was the presence of someone who had walked the tightrope between life and death in countless fights and lived through them all.

He’s the real thing. There’s no doubt—he is *the world’s strongest adventurer.*

The meeting was about to begin, but there was still a bit of time. Unable to control myself, I stood up and walked forward like a moth drawn towards a flame.

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[Ministry of Defense — Ezoe Kazuhiko]

When I walked into the meeting room at the Ministry of Defense, I found the twenty-nine adventurers who had fully graduated from the Dungeon Bootcamp, a program launched in December last year for the purpose of training aspiring adventurers, waiting for us. These twenty-nine men and women were the only other existent civilian adventurers in this whole world at the moment. Naturally, as fellow adventurers, Akira, Mutsuo, and I had also been called.

Information control was strict at the Ministry of Defense, with there having

been checkpoints both at the entrance to the building and the entrance to this room. Before entering, all of us had to hand over all electrical devices—phones included—and walk through a metal detector.

When the screening was finally over and the three of us walked into the room, all twenty-nine pairs of eyes turned towards us.

“There they all are. What a view.”

“Interesting... There are a few who seem quite strong in here.”

“Today’s the first time all the adventurers of Japan are meeting in one place. Maybe we should take a picture.”

Under the watchful eyes, I was just about to grab one of the available seats when a woman, together with three men in tow, suddenly approached us. The woman had long, black hair that was tied up at her back and was not wearing any makeup whatsoever. Her being here meant that she was at least a college student, but she had a dignified bearing that made her seem younger than twenty.

“Ezoe Kazuhiko-shi, I presume? I am Kusakabe Rinko, an assistant instructor of the Kusakabe-style School of Ancient Arts. I was licensed as an adventurer at the end of last year. Behind me are eminent practitioners at our dojo. It is an enormous honor to meet the world’s strongest adventurer.”



Honestly, as a complete amateur to the world of martial arts, I have no idea what's different about ancient ones and modern ones. Akira's just smiling amusedly, and Mutsuo...is muttering something to himself?

"Here comes another staple of the isekai genre, a proud female knight archetype! She's definitely going to be captured by orcs and go, 'Kuh! Kill me already!'..."

All right, I'll pretend I didn't hear that. I directed my attention back to the woman before me.

"Yes, I am Ezoe Kazuhiko of Dungeon Busters. These are my members: Shishido Akira and Tanaka Mutsuo. It is our pleasure having the opportunity to meet other adventurers. However, allow me to make one correction. I am not 'the world's strongest adventurer.' Akira here surpassed me during our clearing of Sapporo Dungeon. I am but a normal middle-aged man who has lived a life entirely unrelated to martial arts."

"Surely you are jesting...or maybe not, but even if that is the case, you are still far more powerful than any of us. I myself am only Rank E at the moment..."

"That is merely a difference in experience. It will not be long until you reach Rank D and, soon after, Rank C."

"I can only hope so. Ah, thank you for your time."

Seeing Director General Ishihara and several of her subordinates enter the room, Kusakabe returned to her own seat. My group also sat down.

Ishihara looked around the room, then bowed. "Thank you for gathering so soon at the start of this year, everyone. I am Director General Ishihara Yukie of the Ministry of Defense's Dungeon Adventurer Administrative Bureau. It is my pleasure seeing all of you gathered together here today."

"Allow me to get right down to business," she continued. "There are two reasons for today's summons. There is newfound information about the dungeons that we need to share with you all, and I have a request to pose to all of you. Unfortunately, the nature of the information is far too sensitive to be conveyed through email or phone. We will reimburse all transportation costs incurred at a later date."

Ishihara began by introducing the men she'd brought, who turned out to be the directors of the various divisions within her bureau. The Dungeon Adventurer Administrative Bureau was apparently split into the following five divisions: Dungeon Policy Division, International Policy Division, Personnel Affairs Division, Operational Coordination Division, and Research Policy Division.

The Dungeon Policy Division was in charge of coming up with policies for dealing with the dungeons and for overseeing and developing the civilian adventurer initiative. This division had the authority to, through the defense minister, raise suggestions directly to the Cabinet.

The International Policy Division managed the sharing of information with other countries and the dispatching of personnel to the preparatory committee of the United Nations' International Dungeon Adventurer Organization.

The Personnel Affairs Division served as the reception for the Dungeon Bootcamp and were in charge of managing the civilian adventurers themselves.

The Operational Coordination Division was the largest division within the bureau, tasked with working with the internal department of the Ministry of Defense to manage the dungeons through constructing monitoring facilities and dispatching JSDF personnel. Supposedly, many of the staff within this division had been transferred over from the Bureau of Defense Buildup Planning and the Bureau of Local Cooperation.

The Research Policy Division planned out the research program for things obtained from the dungeons, such as magic stones, monster cards, and cards gained through the Gacha. The actual research, however, was being carried out by the newly established Dungeon Technology Research Center under the Acquisition, Technology and Logistics Agency, a lower branch of the Ministry of Defense.

"Now, I believe that everyone present is already aware, but..."

After introducing the various directors, Ishihara switched gears with the above preface, paused to make sure she had everyone's attention, then continued in a decisive tone, "At this rate, the human race is doomed to annihilation in the near future. The only people who can prevent that are you, the dungeon adventurers."

The air inside the meeting room froze with tension.

* * *

I, Samejima Kensuke, was an employee at Dainippon Pharmaceutical Manufacturing Co., Ltd. I used to be a medical representative in the sales department but not anymore. I had become a dungeon adventurer and was currently sitting inside a meeting room at the Ministry of Defense.

Why was a medical representative here at the Ministry of Defense as a dungeon adventurer? That was because my sales figures had been bad. No matter what I did, I still couldn't close deals. For some reason, I was the only one who couldn't sell anything. People like me did exist. Despite having a fancy job title like "medical representative," I was nothing more than a mere salesperson struggling to meet quotas. The longer I couldn't produce results, the more out of place I felt within the company. On a certain day at the end of last year, those at the bottom of the barrel like me were all gathered together and ordered by our higher-ups to become dungeon adventurers and bring them potions.

My job now was to enter Yokohama Dungeon, kill the monsters within, then gacha for potions using the monster cards I picked up. The payment for the magic stones we also picked up would first be transferred to our company. We were evaluated based on the number of potions we brought back and then paid from the pool of magic stone money—after depreciation, income tax, and whatever else it was that had their go at the money—plus a little more as a bonus. Because our evaluation and payment system was fundamentally different from the other employees, we were all transferred to a new company that had been set up at the end of last year. After participating in the Dungeon Bootcamp, we then got to work as a five-person adventurer party under the name Team DPM.

On January 4, we had a trial first day. Surprisingly, the job duty was extremely easy. The five of us simply ganged up on the rabbits of Floor 1 of Yokohama to clobber them to death, then picked up pebbles weighing three grams. After doing this for eight hours, we returned above ground, reported through our in-company messaging platform, then were allowed to clock out. In about an hour, we'd killed 30 rabbits, which made it 240 rabbits in eight hours. That gave us

seven cards each day, give or take, and about 720 grams of magic stones worth ¥72,000. That worked out to ¥14,400 (before tax) for each of us. Seven cards each day meant having enough to roll the Gacha twice every three days. A daily salary of ¥14,400 might sound low, but the eight hours inside the dungeon only amounted to several minutes above ground. Once we were done turning in the magic stones and whatnot, we were free for the rest of the day. All we had to do was enter Yokohama Dungeon at the reserved time, move about a bit within the dungeon, then come back out. After that, we could go back home to game or go drinking or do whatever we wanted. I honestly couldn't imagine an easier job.

"At this rate, the human race is doomed to annihilation in the near future."

Even after hearing Director General Ishihara's explanation, we still didn't really get it. Don't get me wrong. We understood what she was saying. We knew about Ezoe Kazuhiko of Dungeon Busters, Inc. bringing up his Monster Stampede theory at the end of last year and that he had found actual evidence supporting this theory during the dungeon clear the other day. However, it didn't feel real to us. We were simple salarymen who were only entering the dungeons because our company told us to. Clearing dungeons and saving the world wasn't the job of mere salarymen. Our job was to gather potions through the Gacha using monster cards.

That was why I inadvertently blurted, "Uh, is that *our* job, though?"

The thirty-something director general turned and looked at me with a sharp gaze. *Why're you glaring at me, lady? Clearing the dungeons is* your *business, right? As a salaryman, I'm fine with just living easy and enjoying my day-to-day. I'm sure someone else will do the clearing.*

"This...is a request and is by no means compulsory. I'm sure there are those of you who only wish to involve themselves with earning money by gathering what the dungeons have to offer. However, if we do nothing, all of humanity will be wiped out by the impending Monster Stampede."

"How do you know that for sure, though? When's the Stampede going to be? On what scale? If the monsters are coming out above ground, can't the JSDF take care of them?"

See? There are other people who agree with me. Don't come to us with your "the world is ending" doom and gloom. That's what the JSDF and Dungeon Busters are for. If the Stampede really occurs, I'll be the first to run away. But until then, I'm going to live carefreely, earning as much as I can.

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[Ministry of Defense — Meeting Room — Ishihara Yukie]

It was the higher-ups' decision to keep the fact of the ten-year time limit a secret from the general populace. The Urabe administration decided that we would eventually reveal this through a joint global announcement in coordination with the UN. That left me with the task of instilling a sense of urgency within those in the room without actually specifying how much time we had remaining. After wracking my brain for a long time, I had gone to ask Ezoe for advice on how best to present the problem of the Stampede.

To my surprise, he'd told me that he expected some people to not come on board even if they knew the truth. "I can't imagine the world ending." "We can just leave it to people who know what they're doing." "Someone else will take care of it." "There's nothing I can do that can make a difference."

In fact, he'd claimed that half of all Japanese thought this way. When I'd objected in disbelief, he'd told me to think of our country's voter turnout. "They're not at fault," he had said. "This is a normal reaction."

"Uh, is that *our* job, though?"

When I heard that question, I couldn't help but get a little emotional. If I hadn't been warned of this sentiment beforehand, I just might have raised my voice. "I don't care about what happens in the future"? "What more do I need than to just enjoy each day as it comes"? That was no better than mere cats or dogs. Dialogue with such people was simply a waste of time. Just as I was about to ignore the man and move on, Ezoe raised his hand.

"We have no way of telling when it would be. However, this isn't something we can simply ignore, not when there was an actual field labeled 'Monster Stampede' on the Dungeon Core screen. At least, that's what I personally think, but I'm sure there are those who don't necessarily share my perspective. 'Surely someone else will clear the dungeons. I don't want to work that hard. I

just want to rake in several grand in a few hours and then enjoy my life.' That is *a* way of life, and it comes with a certain amount of satisfaction. Director General, what do you think about separating us civilian adventurers into two categories? We can have a 'miners' group that focuses on gathering resources —or as the internet calls it, 'mining'—and a 'busters' group that focuses on researching and clearing the dungeons?"

A ripple of buzzing spread among the other adventurers. The man who had just asked "is that our job?" looked slightly uncomfortable. This was out of the blue, but a rather interesting suggestion nonetheless. I decided to lend Ezoe the floor a little while longer.

"Tell us more about this idea. Out of everyone in this room, you've spent the longest in the dungeons and killed the largest number of monsters by far. Both your achievements and contributions merit you the right to speak on matters of dungeon adventurer policy."

"Thank you. The way I see it, the Dungeon Adventurer Administrative Bureau's aim is two-fold: to procure magic stones, potions, and whatever other items or technology that the dungeons have to offer; and to clear dungeons both within and outside of our national borders and to manage the administrative rights thereof. With there being two aims, I believe it would be a good idea to split us adventurers into two categories. For example, for the first group, the miners, you could perhaps arrange a monthly ranking system based on the quantity of magic stones and cards delivered and offer payment bonuses to those at the top of the leaderboards. As the duty of those within this group is not to clear the dungeons, there is no need to evaluate them based on strength."

"I see. You're suggesting that because there are two aims, we can apply different management policies to each side. What are you thinking for the other group?"

"Clearing dungeons requires a lot more time and is vastly more dangerous than mining. As such, the busters would need their own incentive system."

"What specifically do you have in mind?"

"After clearing a dungeon, busters with a lowercase 'b' become Busters with a

capital ‘B’ and gain administrative rights over the newly cleared dungeon. They should still hand over the ownership to the state, but how about allowing them to keep their vested rights? This way, any mining done within dungeons will be subjected to a usage charge of, say, 10% of revenue from magic stones, payable to the individual or party who cleared the dungeon and will still maintain administrative rights over the place. How does that sound?”

As the other adventurers exchanged glances, I spotted Shishido Akira fiddling on his phone and Tanaka Mutsuo drawing something. The two of them had most likely already heard this idea from Ezoe Kazuhiko ahead of time.

“That is an extremely interesting suggestion. The bureau will give it due consideration. Moving on...”

“Hold on a moment! You can’t just do that!” exclaimed the man from just now.

From the looks of things, he was disgruntled about the 10% usage charge. I could hardly believe his gall. *Does he truly believe that he, as someone who plans on merely watching, has the right to debate matters with the same authority as someone who is fighting for humanity’s sake with his own life on the line? What nonsense.*

“I only said we would consider it, and it’s not as if we are lowering our purchase prices. We’re merely talking about allowing Busters to charge 10% for using a dungeon they have already cleared. If you don’t like it, you can always quit being an adventurer or join the busters side yourself. You want to take it easy? Fine. You want to wait for someone else to bail you out? Fine. But now you also want to assert your rights? On what grounds, may I ask?”

The man fell silent, scowling darkly. This was fine. It wasn’t my intention to make light of miners; their contribution would be valuable too. However, as long as I was in power, I would not allow them to hold the busters back. If they made a conscious decision to become a mindless ant, then they should just silently do their work and be happy with their lot. They were the ones who had chosen this lifestyle for themselves, after all.

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[Ministry of Defense — Meeting Room — Various Adventurers]

As the times moved on from the Sengoku period to the Edo period, Kusakabe-style shifted from being a means of killing to being a means of self-defense. Even today, it was taught to practitioners and police officers as a way to "protect yourself and those valuable to you." The reason why I had become an adventurer was because there was now a very real and pressing threat in the form of the monsters. A police officer had died at their hands in Osaka. I had joined the Dungeon Bootcamp and became an adventurer to learn how to fight against monsters.

Right now, I was watching the video of the Dungeon Busters party achieving the world's first ever dungeon clear. I had no words beyond "incredible" for the fight itself, but that was hardly the only shocking revelation in the footage. The relief on the ceiling of the lowest floor. The existence of the characters from Legend Rare cards. The suggestive words on the Dungeon Core screen. Every last one of these things vied for my attention.

The Japanese kanji for martial arts, 武, is written with the radicals for stopping (止) a weapon (戈). This is the very time when we need to fully demonstrate the power of martial arts. For the world's sake.

If my sword can help contribute towards stopping the impending Stampede, then I will gladly lend it. But realistically speaking, what can I do? Unfortunately, my current self is nowhere strong enough to participate in dungeon clear runs. Even if I were accompanied by all the strongest practitioners at my dojo, we would still fail long before reaching the lowest floor. That leaves me no other choice but to get strong. And I know how to do that. It's right there on the screen I'm staring at. A paragon of strength who is finishing off the gigantic blue beast even after having lost an arm.

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I, Sumida Masayoshi, was a former sumo wrestler who had climbed all the way up to juuryou, the second highest division of the professional scene. At 193 cm tall and weighing 150 kg, I was genetically very blessed for the profession. However, the damage to my knees and lower back built up to the point where I could no longer perform in the ring, and I had no choice but to retire in October last year. A retired sumo wrestler was nothing more than a fat guy with an insatiable appetite. Just as I was troubled about how I was to make a living, my

coach recommended that I become a so-called dungeon adventurer. If it could heal someone's myopia, then maybe it could do something for my knees and lower back too. As they said, there was no knowing without trying, so I joined a session of the Dungeon Bootcamp close to the end of the year.

The experience was excruciating. Things were fine down in the dungeon itself, but climbing up and down the stairs to the dungeon was hell. Even so, I gritted my teeth and kept at it. Then the strangest thing happened. I didn't know whether it was due to the Enhancement Element or to the potions, but my pain gradually receded, slowly but surely. At around the two-week mark in the dungeon, my weight had gone down to 100 kg, and the pain was completely gone from my knees and lower back.

My parents had come all the way from Suzushi, Ishikawa Prefecture to cheer on a washout like me, and messages of encouragement from fans even reached my room. The only way I had of repaying the debt of my parents rearing the glutton that I was and the support of the fans who had been with me since the start of my career was to become a fine dungeon adventurer and make it big. It was this thought that had motivated me to become an adventurer.

The moment I saw the words "Monster Stampede" on the Dungeon Core screen, the first thing that came to my mind was the faces of my parents, my younger brother, and my younger sister. Then rose the faces of my coach and his wife, followed by those of the juniors who had helped me out as my attendants during the short time we had been together. And last but not least were my fans, the ones who had cheered for me at Ryogoku Sumo Hall with flags and banners in hand. I did not want to see even a single one of those faces twisted in grief and anguish. My one and only asset was my big body. However, this could be just what everyone needed at the moment. For the sake of ensuring that everyone I was indebted to could live safely and freely, I was more than willing to fight against the monsters!

* * *

I, Mukai Junpei, was almost nearing my forty-fifth birthday. Until recently, I had been a banker. For the sake of my beloved wife and two daughters, I'd endured unreasonable orders and suffered through lonely job transfers in far-flung cities, dedicating twenty-two years of my life at a major city bank. Last

year, however, my bank had seen major lay-offs. Because they'd introduced so-called "Robotic Process Automation" on a large scale, I'd lost my job. What I had been doing would be automatically processed going forward, they'd said. I'd felt like I was being told that bankers who could only perform manual work were no longer needed.

I laughed. There was nothing to do but laugh. When I first joined the bank more than twenty years ago, it had been in a terrible state. During the nineties, nobody would give the time of day to the banks that had been teetering on the verge of insolvency—even after all the injections of public funds—due to all the bad debt they had previously accrued. Merger upon merger had happened as we'd entered the new millennium, and just when the banks had seemed about to get back on their feet, the subprime mortgage bubble had burst, direct banks had risen to prominence, and the competition had only got increasingly cutthroat from that point on.

Even so, the state of the banks never truly changed. There was a drama depicting the internal issues of banks, *Baegaeshi*, that had been quite popular a while ago. Honestly speaking, it had hit pretty close to the mark. Wasting time and effort on brown-nosing incompetent superiors. Pointless colluding preventing meaningful decision-making. Faction wars based on which branch everyone started out in. Superiors pushing blame for their failures onto subordinates. When the HR department had come to me with so-called "career counseling to help you live the life you want," I'd thrown my resignation letter in their faces. I was sick and tired of the place.

However, I still had a family to support. University exams were coming up soon for my older daughter, and my younger daughter was just about to enter middle school. As the sole breadwinner for the family, I had to secure a source of income somehow. It was right then that I saw the presentation given by Ezoe Kazuhiko, someone in my age group. I thought, "This is it!" I would become a dungeon adventurer, become filthy rich, build a large mansion, drive around in luxury cars, and fund my daughters' overseas educations. That would show the assholes who had been laughing at my back watching me leave. This thought was the reason why I decided to participate in the Dungeon Bootcamp.

When I learned of the possibility of the Monster Stampede, I cursed the

heavens. It showed me a dream of the future, then closed the door to that future almost immediately afterwards. How much tribulation did the heavens intend on putting me through?! I couldn't afford to die; the livelihood of my entire family depended on me. Fighting with my life on the line to clear dungeons was the last thing I should be doing. But if the dungeons were left alone, it was only a matter of time before my family and I came under threat. *Just what should I do...?*

* * *

Akira, Mutsuo, and I were all sitting at the back of the meeting room because we were curious how the other adventurers would react to all the talk about the Monster Stampede. The result was almost as I had expected. In short, I saw the Pareto principle in effect.

The Pareto principle was a social rule of thumb proposed by an Italian economist based on statistical analysis. It stated that the richest 20% of the population owned 80% of the overall wealth and that the remaining 20% of the wealth was spread out among the other 80% of the population. This principle—also referred to as the 80/20 rule—could be observed in multiple facets of society. For example, 20% of the employees at companies generated 80% of the added value of the company's services. Similarly, 80% of the code of a program could be completed within 20% of the overall development time. This phenomenon could sound quite unbelievable, but it had certainly been observed in many different fields.

One derivative of this principle was the Worker Ant Principle, also known as the 2:6:2 rule. Given a certain number of worker ants, only 20% of them would work hard, 60% of them would work moderately hard and rest half the time, and 20% would just slack and do nothing. Strangely enough, if you gathered a group of only superworker ants, 20% of them would start slacking off. I personally thought this an interesting study. Some of the ants even died from overwork just to support the livelihood of the freeloaders.

In an organization, these freeloaders were actively harmful and needed to be removed without impunity. The reason was because freeloaders were "infectious." There were studies where the number of freeloaders had ballooned so high that the nest could no longer maintain itself and fell apart. On

the other hand, aiming to raise *everyone* to the level of those within the top 20% was a fool's errand, as it would mean the collapse of the entire system should even one person fall. The key to increasing an organization's overall productivity was to constantly refresh the workforce while carefully pruning away the freeloaders. The name for this method of thinking was human resources management.

Dungeon Busters, Inc. needed to be an organization filled with working ants. In other words, of those currently in the room, only the "top 20%" and the "60% that would work" were potential candidates as new members. The empty-headed guy who'd just spoken up was part of the bottom 20% of the social barrel that existed in every society. No matter the situation, these people simply "can't get serious." Even if they changed jobs, were left to their own devices, or were given notice that the Monster Stampede was almost upon them, they would not be able to put in the effort right up until the very moment they died. We did not need such "slacker ants" in our company.

"I am Ezoe Kazuhiko of Dungeon Busters, Inc. As fellow adventurers, being able to exchange information would always be my honor. I am pleased to make your acquaintance."

When we entered a break, I went around approaching those who had caught my eye during my observations from the back, handing them my business card. It was my hope that some of them might express an interest in joining Dungeon Busters. And not long after, I did have people getting back to me.

"My name is Sumida Masayoshi. I'm a former sumo wrestler. I wish to clear dungeons together with you, Ezoe-san."

"Same here. As someone from a family with a martial arts legacy, I cannot overlook the threat of the dungeons."

The former sumo wrestler named Sumida Masayoshi was even larger than Akira in size. Despite that, all his muscles were properly tucked in and tightened. He could be an immediately effective asset. The young woman named Kusakabe who had approached us before the meeting had Akira's stamp of approval. The three men following her also seemed to be quite strong. Both Sumida and Kusakabe had come up to me with a serious light in their eyes, and

both of their expressions shone with the distinctive zeal of someone who was acting for someone else's sake.

"We are currently still in the middle of constructing our headquarters. However, I can see that you two wish to start as soon as possible. Let's set a later date where we can get to know each other better and I can give you a more detailed introduction to Dungeon Busters."

We exchanged contact info, and I promised to set up an appointment as soon as possible. Aside from these two, I also got to know a few others who I had approached earlier. As luck would have it, there was a former banker who just might have the necessary skill set to handle our accounting and general affairs. When I brought it up, his face practically radiated enthusiasm. Apparently he wasn't all that particular about being an adventurer.

What about the unmotivated bunch from before, you ask? No idea. They had already been erased from my memory.

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[The Kantei — Chief Cabinet Secretary Kasuga]

On January 11 at 18:30, Chief Cabinet Secretary Kasuga held a press conference at the Kantei to release further information regarding the dungeons. When he announced the existence of the Legend Rare cards with actual personalities, all the reporters in attendance naturally hoped to meet and interview one of these personalities in person. However, they then learned that the only way for these characters to appear above ground was to be materialized by a Buster and that Ezoe Kazuhiko was currently the only Buster in existence. They grew despondent, as all of them were quite familiar with Ezoe's blanket refusal of all media coverage.

"Unfortunately, we have no way of understanding what this 'DE' is referring to at the moment. The Monster Stampede field has of course been turned to OFF for Sapporo Dungeon. The JSDF will be dispatching a research team to Floor 7 two weeks from now to perform further detailed study of the Dungeon Core."

When it came time for Q&A, almost every single reporter raised their hand. Questions including the keywords of "LR card," "Card Materialization," and "Stampede" came one after another in quick succession.

“Has the old man who appeared in the video been questioned? Furthermore, will the government acknowledge ownership of the cards despite the clear presence of self-will?”

“We are currently requesting the cooperation of Dungeon Busters, Inc. in the analysis of the LR cards and the arranging of an interview with the old man.”

“Being able to use cards above ground means being able to summon monsters above ground. Would this not be dangerous?”

“Currently, the only individual who possesses the Card Materialization ability is Ezoe Kazuhiko-shi. If a monster appears above ground, he would immediately be the lead suspect. Under such circumstances, it seems highly unlikely for him to adopt this method even if he intended to sow chaos within society.”

“If the Monster Stampede now seems so sure to happen, many countries would certainly focus on bolstering their own militaries. Will the JSDF also be seeing an increase of budget?”

“The strengthening of the JSDF is something that we have already been working towards without direct relation to the Monster Stampede. As the large majority of Gamerican forces continue their withdrawal, the onus for national security now falls on our own shoulders. We believe that the citizens understand the necessity for this change.”

I sighed as I watched Chief Cabinet Secretary Kasuga tenaciously answer each question one by one. Even though I had issued a blanket statement that I was refusing all media coverage, the requests were still coming in nonstop. *At this rate, it might do more harm than good to continue insisting on waiting until the end of March. I suppose I should go ahead and get the organization set up first ahead of time. After all, administrative tasks can still be performed from rental office space.*

I picked up my smartphone to call up a real estate agent I knew.

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[Edogawa City — Rank A Dungeon “Abyss”]

We’re turning the clock back a little to some time before the meeting with the other adventurers at the Ministry of Defense.

Two days after clearing Sapporo Dungeon, we members of Dungeon Busters, Inc. were gathered within Abyss, the Rank A dungeon located in Shishibone, Edogawa City. That meant me, Kinouchi Mari, Shishido Akira, Tanaka Mutsuo, as well as the LR cards Akane, Emily, and Liu Fengguang. Mari had also brought out Myu, her rabbit-like monster pet, and Purin, her Japanese dwarf flying squirrel-like monster pet. This was the full roster of the entire company as of the moment.

“Ho ho ho! What a cute lass we have here,” the huge old man said while patting Mari’s head.

Whereas I’d expected Mari to be afraid of him, she instead looked back up at him with a smile. “You can call me Mari if you want! Do you want me to pour you more tea, Grandpa Liu?”

“What a delightful offer! Honestly, the men have no idea how to be considerate,” Liu Fengguang rumbled as he sat down on a chair that creaked in protest, despite having a maximum load of 150 kg, and sipped from the cup that Mari had made him before.



I had asked Akane and Emily about the old man, but they told me that they did not recall anything about the rest of the 108 Stars of Destiny, likely due to the information having been erased from their minds.

“Old teacher Liu, please honor me with a spar!” Akira asked right off the bat.

However, Liu merely turned towards him with a scowl and snorted. “‘Old teacher’? I am only 103 years old! Call me ‘Shifu’!”

Uh, he looked really happy when Mari called him “Grandpa Liu” just now, didn’t he? And even in Japan, a country famous for its aging population, 103 years old is still quite... No, let’s drop it.

I walked forward to stand in front of Liu Fengguang. “Shifu Liu, you mentioned being willing to lend us your aid the other day when we first met you in the dungeon we’d just cleared. There is indeed something that we need help with, and I believe you’re our best bet.”

“And what is that something?” Liu asked, stroking the snow-white mustache trailing down from around his mouth and smiling with amusement.

“I unfortunately have no proper training in fighting. All this time, I’ve been relying on the advantage of rank superiority, but Floor 4 of this Rank A dungeon made me realize the limits of this strategy. If even monsters use proper fighting techniques, I cannot possibly make progress in Rank B or Rank A dungeons without them. Would you please teach me how to fight?”

“Interesting... The large majority of First Contacters so far have simply used the dungeons for self-gain before meeting their demise together with their world. Looks like that’s not the case for this world. I don’t mind teaching you, but before that, I want to know what is in your heart.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“Why do you fight? A world dungeons appear in is doomed. The Dungeon System has been activated in many a world before, and every last one of them has perished. Clearing the dungeons in an effort to thwart this fate is akin to shaking your fist at the heavens. Almost all First Contacters despaired in the face of such adversity and chose instead to enjoy the remaining ten years of their lives to their fullest.”

“Ah, yes, I’ve heard that before. Almost all of them end up that way, right?”

Akane had been the one who’d told me. Supposedly, the Dungeon System had appeared in numerous worlds before ours and wiped them all out. There should have been as many First Contacters as there were such worlds, but only a tiny percentage of them had attempted taking the System on.

“What is it that motivates you? A sense of responsibility from being First Contacter? Desire for the riches sleeping within the dungeons? Craving for fame and the acknowledgment of others?”

“Hmm...”

I thought about it a little. *Why* am *I delving into the dungeons? It’s true that I do feel some responsibility. If I had been more cautious, we might have delayed the activation of the Dungeon System. As a direct result of my carelessness, casualties have occurred. I do feel responsible for that. However, that is not the only thing compelling me.*

“I...have several motivations. I do have friends and relatives. It’d be a different matter altogether if I were the only one dying, but if the entire world is at risk, then I cannot remain an idle spectator. However, responsibility and altruism are not the only things I feel. Within me exists a separate urge that is equally undeniable.”

“If you are to put a name to that urge?”

“Curiosity. I...want to know. What kind of existence is the Dungeon System’s designer? What were they thinking when designing the System? Why did they introduce the System to so many worlds, and what do they feel when they look at all of them lying in ruins? What is the meaning of the relief on Floor 7 of Sapporo Dungeon? What would become of the dungeons after we clear them all? Would Akane and Emily be freed from the System and allowed to live on in our world as normal human beings? I have a whole mountain of questions. The biggest of all, though...”

I felt my mouth curling into a smile as intense pleasure flooded through me from the thought alone.

“When everything is over, I want to meet the designer of the Dungeon

System. And I want to ask them this: Now that we've beat you at your own game... Are you mad, bro??"

"You know the 'u mad, bro' meme!" Mutsuo chortled in delight.

Akira gave me a thumbs up, whereas Mari nodded in agreement while continuing to stroke Myu's head. Akane and Emily puffed out their chests in a seeming show of pride.

Most importantly, though, the old man before my eyes burst into laughter.

"HO HO HO HO HO! Interesting! Interesting indeed! I don't believe there's ever been another First Contacter who's stood up to the Dungeon System with such a clear will. Even if the chance of success is but one in a million, that's still better than the guarantee of failure from giving up. Your answer has been more than satisfactory. Let's do this," Shifu Liu said before rising to his feet. With a sharp glint in his eyes, he continued, "I suppose I'll start with a bit of warming up on Floor 1. I do need to raise my own rank, after all. The rest of you, come along. I wish to see how familiar each of you are with using your body."

All of us leaped to make our preparations.

* * *

"This is strange," I murmured. "There are far more monsters than usual."

Mutsuo nodded. "And is it just me, or are they rushing towards us?"

Floor 1 of Abyss, the Rank A dungeon in Shishibone, was occupied by goblins. These were one-meter-tall monsters not equipped with any weapons, so it wasn't as if they were a threat to us. However, there were a lot more of them than usual today. So much so that we were seeing several of them rushing us at the same time.

"Ho ho ho! Watch carefully."

Shifu Liu dispatched the goblins one after another in quick succession using palm strikes and knifehand strikes that seemed extremely reminiscent of Sinese kung fu. Akira watched his movements closely. *As a fellow martial artist, there must be a lot to learn from his example, I imagine.*

"When facing multiple opponents, you need to deal with each of them using

only a single hand like this. Though I suppose these goblins are going down too quickly to see much."

The old man's movements were not fast at all. Rarity aside, he was still only Rank F. Despite that, I still could not help but be drawn in at the sight of him fighting. There was a certain beauty about it.

"Do you see it? The way he moves his head, the footwork he uses...everything is at the very pinnacle of refinement. He makes no unnecessary movement at all. It's as if space itself has been held captive so as to frame each instant like a painting."

It seemed as if Akira could go on and on with his commentary, but I did not understand half of what he was saying. What was more interesting to me, rather, was the reason why the monsters were gathering.

Akane offered, "Master, it might be the effect of the Disciple Cultivation skill that Liu Fengguang possesses. The more monsters there are, the more Enhancement Element there is. Which in turn should lead to faster ranking up."

A large part of fostering subordinates was in allowing them to experience things firsthand. In order for that to happen, they needed to be assigned tasks where they could accrue that experience. Delegating tasks to subordinates was exactly the job of someone in a managerial position. *The skill must be drawing in these "experiences" to foster growth.*

"Shifu Liu, may I have a go?"

Unable to merely remain on the sidelines any longer, Akira stepped forward to take on the goblins rushing towards us. He brandished both hands in imitation of what he had just seen, making progress through the mob with movements like flowing water.

"Ho! You grasped the essence of it by simply watching! The crux of this technique is not in the wrist but the shifting of your center of gravity. You can last much longer in battle just by improving the way you hold your head, the positioning of your waist, and the placement of your foot."

"Hmm, I should give it a try."

I assumed Akira's place and tried doing the same thing he was doing.

However, Shifu Liu shook his head and pulled me back by my collar.

“I suppose there’s no helping it, but you truly do appear to lack the talent for battle. There is no point perfunctorily going through the movements alone. It seems as if you will be needing quite a bit of practice.”

Oh, please. I am a former management consultant. I fought using words, not fists. Don’t lump me together with you muscleheads.

My personal opinion aside, I now understood the helpfulness of Liu Fengguang, our newest Legend Rare card. His training would be helpful not only to us, but to all future members as well. That power to draw monsters over was a huge boon to efficiency. Specifically, we killed eight hundred goblins within a single hour. This was the highest record we had achieved within the entire past six months. *If I bring him to Yokohama Dungeon, the pace of gathering magic stones should also be improved greatly.*

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[The United States of Gamerica — The Pentagon — January 4 (EST)]

The United States of Gamerica’s combined command over the Army, the Navy, the Air Force, and the Marine Corps was located in the Department of Defense’s headquarters in Arlington, Virginia. The building was called the Pentagon because of its shape, with the name often being used as a metonym for the entire Department of Defense.

All military commands of the US were separated into distinct unified combatant commands composed of units from the four branches listed above. The aim of this was to provide a unified command structure overseeing the theaters in each part of the world. Aside from the unified combatant commands based on geography, there were also ones based on function, such as Cyber Command and Strategic Command. As of October of last year, the functional unified combatant commands saw a new addition in US Dungeon Command (USDUNCOM, or USDC for short), which was responsible for military operations against the dungeons that had emerged throughout the country.

“Command Chief, here are the documents on the information released by Japan,” a beautiful woman with blonde hair and blue eyes announced while walking into the office of the Command Chief of USDC inside the Pentagon.

The other person in the room, a silver-haired young man wearing a white coat, glared at her. “Rebecca, how many times do I have to tell you not to call me ‘Command Chief’? Call me ‘Guildmaster.’”

Normally, the highest authority in an unified combatant command would be a general or admiral. However, this was not the case for USDC. The defense secretary had personally scouted this civilian, Isaac Roland, in the capacity of a dungeon expert to take up this position.

Isaac was a prodigy. He’d gotten into Princeton University at eleven years old and had obtained a medical license at fourteen. Then his interest had shifted from the human body to the world of physics. At fifteen, he’d entered Massachusetts Institute of Technology, and graduated at eighteen with a doctorate in physics. Rumor was that his IQ was over 200, but he couldn’t care less about that. When he did find something that interested him, however, he would pursue it with his full faculties...then simply move on once he became bored. The day after he’d published a groundbreaking thesis on quantum mechanics, he’d gotten hooked onto Oriental astrology. That was the kind of man he was. In fact, he had probably forgotten the fact that he held a doctor’s license.

It was the pronouncement at last year’s G7 that had sparked this whimsical genius’s interest in the dungeons. Everything about the phrase “pocket spaces where time flows 144 times faster” sounded intentionally selected to tickle his fancy. He had proceeded to dedicate two weeks to mastering Japanese, then had finished reading through all published light novel works in the dungeon genre. Three days later, he’d published a thesis related to what he called “Dungeon Energy Theory.” He posited that if the dungeons were truly other-dimensional spaces, they must be constantly supplied with energy in order to maintain their connection to Earth’s dimension and generate monsters. His published hypothesis included mathematical proof for the involvement of imaginary space and zero-point energy.

The first one who’d shown an interest in that thesis was not the academic scientific world, who were not familiar with even the word “dungeon” as of yet, but the Department of Defense. The world’s greatest genius had taken an interest in the dungeons. Eager to take full advantage of this, the secretary of

defense had visited Isaac to solicit him in person. He couldn't go so far as to make Isaac army commander over a dungeon force, so instead he'd appointed Isaac command chief and entrusted him with the studying of the dungeons and the formulation of policies regarding them.

Right now, Isaac was in the middle of going over the information on the world's first dungeon clear that had been announced in Japan earlier that day. One wall of the office had been converted into a giant whiteboard and there were sheets of paper lying all over the floor. Part of Rebecca's job duties as his secretary was to clean up the messes he made and return documents back to their respective storage folders. As was common among geniuses, Isaac was absolutely hopeless when it came to organization. And he wasn't much of a stickler for manners either, judging by how he was sitting cross-legged on top of his fancy, imposing desk.

"This Ezoe character... Something seems off about him," Isaac murmured. "His actions don't make sense."

"What is it that you find 'off' about him exactly?" Rebecca replied.

As it turned out, listening was also another one of Rebecca's important duties. Isaac gestured for the file marked "Ezoe, Kazuhiko," so she handed it to him. He opened it without giving her even a word of thanks, then stared intently at Ezoe's profile page while fiddling with his earlobe.

"Think about it. One day, a forty-something-year-old management consultant suddenly ups and becomes an adventurer. Why? Someone who'd been dealing with desk work and giving seminar lectures drops all that out of the blue to go kill monsters and collect magic stones in the newly appeared dungeons? That's like a chess player suddenly taking up pro wrestling."

"Can't it be because of the really good pay? Or because he felt a sense of crisis from the Dungeon Outbreak Phenomenon?"

"The ¥100 per gram thing? How could he determine how much he could earn at a time when there was no way for him to know how many grams he could gather in a day? And the possibility that he was concerned about the Monster Stampede seems unlikely too."

"Why is that?"

“It’d be a different matter altogether if he was an otaku deep into light novels, but he was a management consultant. In other words, he’s capable of logical thought. Back when Japan held its first ever civilian adventurer exam in October, nobody knew anything about the dungeons. Certainly there wasn’t enough information out in the public to deduce the Stampede. It would have made more sense if he had been an otaku with inflated delusions of grandeur towards becoming a dungeon adventurer.”

“Who’s to say he’s not an otaku who was making a living being a consultant? I mean, he *is* a citizen of the country of anime...”

“Fair point. But...Rebecca, have you watched the interview he did at the end of last year?”

“Ah, yes, I did watch the translated clip yesterday.”

“That’s no good. Japanese is a language where nuance is important. Once it’s translated into English, you lose the meaning between the lines. How about you learn Japanese too, Rebecca? It shouldn’t take more than a month.”

“Unlike you, I am a normal person. Even a year wouldn’t be enough, I imagine. So then, what was it about that interview?”

As was also common among geniuses, Isaac had trouble understanding why other people could not do what he could. In turn, Rebecca had gone beyond respecting him for speaking ten languages without ever having left the country to simply giving up trying to understand how his brain worked.

Oblivious to Rebecca’s emotions, Isaac continued, “I more or less now understand what kind of person Ezoe is through that interview. He is an extremely intelligent person and is certainly not someone who’d do anything on delusion alone. But there was something else in him, something other than intelligence. He’s deadly serious about clearing the dungeons. His resolve was there, plain to see, and he is willing to do whatever it takes to destroy the dungeons, even if it means putting his own life on the line. So the question is where this resolve is coming from. Just what it is that’s motivating him?”

Rebecca thought back to the video, then nodded. “It’s true that his tone was quite emphatic. He sounded so vehement when insisting on the need for clearing the dungeons that it almost seemed as if he felt personally responsible

for doing so.”

“Personally responsible?” Isaac froze, then his shaking fingers reached for his earlobe once again. “That can’t... But it would explain everything. And the probability is quite high...”

“Com— Guildmaster?”

Isaac muttered to himself furiously, his ears no longer registering Rebecca’s voice. “Thirty-six days before July 30 would be June 24 or June 25. What does he know? What did he see in that first dungeon?”

After a short while, Isaac finally lifted his face back up. “Rebecca, we’re going to Japan. And schedule me an appointment with Kazuhiko Ezoe.”

Slight panic assaulted Rebecca as she saw her superior stand up. If left alone, this genius would book an economy class ticket and fly to Japan by himself, official channels be damned. *Oh wait, he can’t. Phew.*

“In that case, you’re going to need to apply for a passport,” Rebecca said with a smile.

Isaac sighed and hung his head.

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[Ministry of Defense — Ezoe Kazuhiko]

The existence of the character cards whipped up a storm of debate that involved not only the Dungeon Adventurer Administrative Bureau, but also the Japanese government and the courts. The crux of the debate was simply, “Are character cards human? And if so, are they Japanese citizens?” The trigger that had sparked all the clamor was a certain opposition member of the Diet famous for being noisy about human rights telling the press corp that “This violation of human rights must be stopped!” When I was trying to enter the Ministry of Defense building, I found myself mobbed by reporters asking about human rights violations and monster genocide, so I voiced my refutation in no uncertain terms.

“I do not consider the character cards humans. To anyone who says that they are human, I tell them: bring me someone you know who can turn into a card. If

a normal Japanese citizen who can Cardify themselves exists, then I will admit that I am in the wrong."

Protests from citizens' groups and animal rights advocate groups were practically flooding Dungeon Busters's mailbox. If this hubbub kept up, I just might be called into the upcoming regular Diet session for questioning as a material witness. However, I actually wanted that to happen. I didn't care if I was facing the left wing, the right wing, religious groups, or whoever else; to borrow the language used on the internet, I was ready to "completely destroy" anyone who proved to be an obstacle to the clearing of the dungeons. Fighting with words was *my* field of expertise.

"And as for the monsters, are they really animals? In my forty years of life, never once had I seen an animal that would disappear into smoke after dying. I consider the monsters as organic robots generated by the dungeons. In other words, they are not animals, and therefore do not fall under the purview of animal protection. If you insist that the monsters require protecting, then first go 'protect' all the robots being sold commercially. Isn't the focus of these animal welfare groups supposed to be on spreading awareness and preventing the abuse and abandonment of pets in the first place? Funabashi Dungeon is filled with monsters that look like insects. If they're calling for a ban on killing *those* monsters, then shouldn't they also be calling for a ban of all insecticides?"

There probably are well-informed activists who speak and act with actual conviction, but in my experience, they're in the minority. The large majority are just asserting themselves by loudly protesting something and have no interest in actually doing anything to help realize what they're fighting for. Do they honestly think that their "ideal world" will just happen by itself if they simply repeat a bunch of phrases through a loudspeaker and do a strip tease in front of the National Diet?

Within a democratic society, the way to realize one's own political ideals was to gather enough of those who shared the same sentiments to form the majority and make the changes they wanted with legislative power. That, or plot an armed uprising to destroy the existing power structure. All activists not actively working towards either of those things were shams. At the very least, that was how I saw it.

“In Australis, there have been demonstrations staged by pro-environment groups to protest the exploitation of—”

“That’s for Australis’s government to handle. This is Japan.”

“However, with so many people objecting...”

“Specifically, how many people are objecting? What percentage of the population are we talking about? Anyone who’s against the clearing of the dungeons can start their own political party. If support for their assertions is indeed in the majority, they’ll win the elections. Then they can set whatever law they want to set. Don’t get me wrong; I’m not denying anyone their beliefs or their opinions. However, in turn, I ask that people do not deny me my beliefs or opinions. Freedom of thought and freedom of speech are basic human rights.”

After saying what I wanted to say, I ducked inside the Ministry of Defense’s building. Answering so many questions had been more tiring than I’d expected. A sigh escaped from my lips.

To the extent of my knowledge, the modern countries who curtailed freedom of speech after World War II had been all the socialist countries. Nothing has changed since the time of the Franzian revolutionary Maximilien Robespierre and his Reign of Terror. Idealists will do whatever it takes to eliminate those who oppose their ideals. The so-called government budget screening process in Japan ten years ago had borne the same hallmarks; once again, history appears to be repeating itself in the so-called “eradicate deep-rooted evils” movement that’s happening in Woori right now.

“I need a change of pace. If I remember correctly, the smoking area is outside...”

The meeting room where the civilian adventurers were meeting was in Building D, so I headed for the smoking area right beside it. I sympathized with the poor government workers who had to smoke outside in the cold January air even as I ducked underneath the roof of the place. And there, I found a woman in a black suit and high heels with a thin cigar between her fingers.

* * *

After the gathering of the other civilian adventurers at the Ministry of

Defense, the Kantei officially acknowledged the possibility of the Monster Stampede. This was sure to prompt other developed countries and the UN to take action, but personally speaking, I felt like we had only just gotten to the starting line. *That said, we do still have more than ten years left, so maybe this can be considered a good pace.*

"So then, about the higher-ups' decision on the handling of the character cards..."

At the moment, I was drinking with Director General Ishihara at a cocktail lounge named Kira located between Ichigaya and Kojimachi. Despite being so small as to only have room for four seats, the place had a surprisingly large selection of drinks. I had ordered a domestic whisky on the rocks, whereas the director general had ordered a cocktail named Balalaika. Her preferred way of drinking it was with a bit more vodka than normal for that slightly drier taste.

"Our bureau will be leaving character cards with those who gain them. The fuss being raised by the human rights groups seems to be dying down."

There was a talk and variety show yesterday that had hosted a lawyer who had made a case for the safeguarding of the character cards alongside a light novel author who had countered with "If we see the appearance of elves, dwarves, beastkin, and maybe even demons and vampires in the future, will we be safeguarding *them* as well?" The lawyer was at a loss for an answer. If he said yes, he would have had to deal with the question about national security. If he said no, it would become racial discrimination.

"That author is the one who wrote that series about the JSDF fighting in another world, right? He used to be a JSDF member himself, if I recall correctly."

"He's knowledgeable about our country's national security policies and about the JSDF, and he's based his career thinking about the interaction between our world and other fictional ones. He was the perfect candidate to represent our point of view."

"I see, so you had a hand in it. But thanks, I needed that. The LR cards are an absolute necessity for dungeon clearing. The way I currently am, even Yokohama Dungeon is beyond me."

I took a swig of my drink. The burning sensation that flowed down my throat

seemed to help dull the sense of impatience tickling my insides. The director general had apparently switched to drinking a glass of gin-based White Lady.

“I don’t plan on ordering one with a rum base. At least, not within the next ten years...”

A drink made in the same way as a Balalaika but with rum in place of vodka was called an XYZ and meant “there’s nothing after this,” which some interpreted as “eternal love.” Whereas Balalaika meant “love is to be taken slowly and with patience,” White Lady meant “genuine,” as in, “I will act as my heart dictates.”

Deciding to respond with a cocktail of my own, I asked the bartender for rum, lime juice, and syrup to be shaken together and served in a short glass. I lifted my Daiquiri—the drink of “hope”—and downed it all in one gulp.

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[Rank A Dungeon “Abyss”]

At the moment, we were nowhere near strong enough to clear even Yokohama Dungeon. Therefore, Akira and I were focusing on fighting inside Abyss under Shifu Liu’s guidance. Akane and Emily were with us, but not Mari, because we had forbidden her from going down any further than Floor 3. She was likely going to become a dungeon adventurer in the future, but at the moment, she was only a part-timer. Therefore, I had tasked her with gathering money in my stead, and assigned Akane and Emily to take shifts accompanying and protecting her.

Name: Purin-chan Title: Kinouchi Mari’s Pet Rank: D

Rarity: Uncommon Skills: Flame Magic (Lvl. 4), Flight (Lvl. 1), _____

Upon reaching Rank D, Mari’s pet Japanese dwarf squirrel-like monster had gained the Flight skill, which enabled it to actually fly instead of merely gliding. Now, Purin could unleash fireballs from up high à la carpet-bombing, with any monster managing to make it through to the other side finding a Myu-chan Punch waiting for it. This battle strategy was almost cheating. Never had I imagined that using monsters to fight could prove to be this effective.

“Ho ho ho! Mari-chan, you just fight at the pace you feel most comfortable with, all right? Young maidens shouldn’t need to get all sweaty and dirty with fighting.”

“What?! I’m the same age as her! Why aren’t you saying the same thing to me?!”

“You’re a member of the 108 Stars of Destiny! That fact in itself means that you’re probably several thousand years old in actual years!”

Uh-oh. Nothing good ever comes out of bringing up a woman’s age. I cleared my throat loudly to change the subject. “Ahem! So, our goal now is for Akira and me to reach Rank B. At the same time, I will also need to arrange a meet up with the others who I spoke with at the gathering the other day. Dungeon Busters is going to grow a lot larger very suddenly. It will be necessary to properly think about how to initiate them and train them up.”

“I think the Safety Zone here at Abyss is getting a bit too crowded to also serve as the base for the new members’ training. Wouldn’t it be better to do it in Yokohama Dungeon?”

I nodded in response to Mutsuo’s suggestion. Our headquarters, which would include company housing for employees, was slated to be completed at the end of March. There was no other choice but to delve into Yokohama Dungeon with them for the time being.

“I plan on talking with each of the candidates one by one within this week. The end vision is to gather all of them here in Edogawa City, but that would be after March. Dungeon Busters is a clan. The way we treat each party will become important.”

“Are you talking about charging a registration fee through their magic stone revenue?”

Unlike Akira, Mutsuo seemed quite interested in this kind of topic, possibly because it tickled his gaming senses somewhat. I didn’t mind answering, but he and I weren’t thinking about the same things. Earning money was very low on my list of priorities.

“No, we will not be charging any registration fee. Neither will we be charging

rent from those who will be living in the company housing currently under construction. In fact, we will not even be charging for the company meals that we'll be providing. The operational costs for all those things will come from somewhere else."

"F-From where? Are you *sure* we'd be able to maintain such unbelievably cushy benefits?"

"We will. In the end, I expect Japan to have eleven or twelve dungeons in total. And we will be clearing all of them. You were there when I suggested the 10% usage charge to the director general the other day, right? If we gain the rights to all the dungeons within the country, Dungeon Busters will have an annual income of over ¥450 trillion without lifting a finger. Assuming that we have 150 employees, that would still be ¥3 trillion per head. There's no way we'd be able to use it all. Everything left over after operational costs will be poured into cultivating new adventurers."

"You're already thinking that far ahead, Aniki?"

"Naturally. I'm not sure about anyone else, but I can say with certainty that Director General Ishihara has caught on. I mean, we *do* have a really significant head start on the other adventurers. So, because dungeons appear in places with high population density, it is almost guaranteed that there will be dungeons in Nagoya, Hiroshima, and Hakata, and chances are that most of them would be Rank B or Rank C. Our road map for the near future is to train up the new members in Yokohama Dungeon as well as to train ourselves up while steadily clearing Yokohama, Funabashi, and Sendai one by one. Once we have multiple Rank A adventurers within the clan, we will finish clearing Abyss by the end of June!"

Akane spoke up. "Kazuhiko-sama, the other dungeons are one thing, but I believe that the one in the place called Osaka is a Rank S dungeon. What will you be doing about it?"

"We will need to investigate and eventually clear it, but it wouldn't be for quite a while ahead. In fact, I don't even know for sure how long it'd take us to reach Rank A; all I'm working off of at the moment are estimations based on all our experiences so far. I can't imagine what Rank S would be like, but I expect

to encounter Ultra Rank monsters, the kind which are probably based off of cultural mythologies. We won't be able to deal with them until we ourselves grow much stronger."

"So we're talking monsters like true vampires, ancient dragons, and maybe even Fenrir, right?! I so can't wait to draw them!"

"How effective would a straight punch be against a dragon, you think?"

"Fenrir is a fluffy dog, right? If we get it to join us, make sure to play nice with him, all right, Myu-chan?"

"Myuu!"

Mari dear, are you gathering monsters to make a zoo here? In the first place, Fenrir is not a dog but a wolf. I mean, they're similar enough, so it's fine, I guess. It's reassuring to see how unworried you are about Rank S monsters, though.

"With there being more than five months to the System's full activation, you have already cleared a dungeon and broadcast it to the entire world. I do believe you're the first First Contacter who's been able to make such progress so quickly. Who knows? Maybe we do have a fighting chance here," Shifu Liu murmured as he sipped from his cup of tea and stared up into midair.

However, there was a faint "but" at the end of his words that only Akane—as a fellow LR card—and I had managed to pick up on. I saw her face cloud over a little.

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[Yokohama City — Ezoe Kazuhiko]

On January 12, the three of us full members of Dungeon Busters, Inc. met up with five other civilian adventurers in a rented conference room close to Yokohama Dungeon.

"I suppose I'll go first. I am Kusakabe Rinko, an assistant instructor of the Kusakabe-style School of Ancient Martial Arts. I can't wait to get started."

"I'm Sumida Masayoshi! I'm a former juuryou sumo wrestler. It's an enormous honor getting to join Dungeon Busters!"

"My name is Satou Souta. I was a sophomore at college, but I dropped out to

become an adventurer. The reason why I'm joining Dungeon Busters is because I want to clear the dungeon in Osaka."

"Kirihara Amane. Looks like I'm the oldest in this group. I'm twenty-seven. Former police superintendent. I served as the deputy commissioner at Kanagawa Police Station."

"I'm Shinohara Hisato. I'm nineteen years old. I'm entering Dungeon Busters because I want potions."

After all five of them finished their self-introductions, I found myself marveling once again at how variety we had in the group. I turned to Satou Souta first.

"You also mentioned Osaka Dungeon when we first met. Why that one specifically?"

"My old man was Satou Kouji, a sergeant at Sonezaki Police Station."

"Ah..."

The reason why I had approached Satou Souta after the meeting at the Ministry of Defense was his eyes. Despite being so young, he had been entirely focused on what the director general was saying, not distracted by his phone or anything else. There was even anger burning within his eyes. I was sure that he had a story; that was why I talked to him.

At the time, the only thing he said to me was that he wanted to clear Osaka Dungeon. Now it all made sense. There was no way I could forget the name Satou Kouji. He was most likely the second human to come into contact with the dungeons, with the encounter having cost him his life. If I had activated the Dungeon System just one day later, he might not have died. That was why I had resolved to go visit his grave after clearing Osaka Dungeon one day.

"I see. I'm sorry about your father."

On July 30 last year, two police officers had entered the dungeon that had appeared in an underground parking lot in Umeda, Osaka to investigate it, but only one had made it back out alive. The one who hadn't was Satou Kouji. And his son was currently sitting right before me.

Akira leaned in towards me and murmured, “Aniki,” in a small voice, in response to which I nodded slightly. I had to find time and talk to this young man one-on-one. I had to tell him that I was the one who had triggered the events that led to his father’s death.

* * *

“So, Kirihara-san. Seeing as how you made deputy commissioner at such a young age, would I be correct to assume that you were in the career track in the force?”

“That’s right. I entered the National Police Agency right after graduating from a national university. My first job as a deputy commissioner was to set up the Yokohama Shindo Detour Route to get around the dungeon that had appeared inside Kanagawa Ward. When I was done with that, I quit to become a dungeon adventurer. Public servants aren’t allowed to have side jobs.”



“The reason being...?”

I closely observed the woman while waiting for her reply. Kirihara Amane seemed reminiscent of Director General Ishihara in some way. They were both ambitious, could identify what they needed to do to climb higher, and possessed the drive to realize those plans. Kirihara was overflowing with confidence. I had no doubt that she had been extremely effective in her position of deputy commissioner. In fact, I did remember being astonished at how fast Yokohama Shindo Detour Road had been completed. *Why would she still quit, then?*

“My eyes are on what will happen thr—no, one year from now. I predict that within the year, the police department will find itself facing criminals that it cannot handle. By that, I mean former dungeon adventurers, of course. There will be a need for a specialist organization for dealing with things like card trading on the black market and arresting criminals with supernatural abilities, such as magic. After a year or two, the National Police Agency is definitely going to establish a Counter Criminal Adventurers Unit. My strength will be needed when that happens.”

“I see. So we’re a stepping stone.”

“Hey, I’m all onboard for clearing dungeons. Those things are harmful to humanity just by existing. However, it’s the humans who gain power from the dungeons who are the bigger destabilizing factor. I was sure you’d get it.”

I had no choice but to smile wryly and nod in agreement. Honestly, there really wasn’t any other way to react when told “I’ll be using you” straight to my face. *That said, this isn’t a bad deal for us either. The issue simply hasn’t come up yet due to how few adventurers there are at the moment, but criminals using magic and items gained through the Gacha are sure to appear. And in response, we will definitely see boneheads clamoring for the dungeons to be closed and for all adventurers to be put under surveillance. What she’s aiming for should help address such concerns, which by extension would help protect our interests. Letting her use us sounds like a win-win.*

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“Lastly, Shinohara-san. You mentioned wanting potions.”

“I have a younger sister who is suffering from something called pulmonary hypertension. The only treatment is to get a lung transplant, which would cost hundreds of millions of yen. She’s sixteen, but instead of going to school, she’s stuck in the hospital with tubes in her nose. I heard on the news about the woman from the adventurer exam who got her nose back thanks to a potion. I want to get a potion that can heal my younger sister.”

I nodded, then retrieved a card from my bag and materialized it. One of the rewards from the System for being a Buster was the ability to materialize cards even above ground.

“This is what’s called an Extra Potion. Its rarity is Rare. I believe we are probably the only people in the entire world at the moment who possess this card. This potion is capable of healing lost limbs and incurable diseases. I will sell it to you.”

Shinohara Hisato’s eyes were nailed to the potion sitting on the table. “How much?” he asked, apprehensive.

“Ten years. I will sell it to you in exchange for the coming ten years of your life. Within those ten years, you will join us in clearing dungeons all around the world. I even have a contract drawn up.”

“There’s no need for it. If this can save my younger sister, you can even have twenty years of my life let alone ten!”

“All I need is ten years. Looks like we have a deal.”

“Hold on a moment! If you have it, then why not just give it to him?!” Satou Souta exclaimed angrily. “Why do you have to add the condition of the ten years?!”

What a hot-blooded young man. I don’t hate guys like this. But he’s not thinking things through.

“We’re not running a charity here. We do not help people for nothing in return. True, we can get our hands on Extra Potions much easier than other people can. Do you want us to pass it out for free to every last one of the millions of people all over the world currently suffering from incurable diseases? We’ll be completely swamped with requests.”

“But you did give one away for free during the exam, didn’t you?”

“That was done as a favor to the JSDF. Doing that made our dealings with them afterwards that much smoother. The mission statement of Dungeon Busters, Inc. is to clear every last dungeon on Earth. In order to realize that goal, I’m willing to make any deals and trade anything.”

“You dirty asshole...!” Satou Souta growled as he rose to his feet.

Akira immediately stood before him. “You’re misunderstanding Aniki’s intentions. He’s not doing any of this for personal gain. This ‘trade’ is more for Hisato-kun’s sake than anything. Pharmaceutical companies around the world are all willing to pay astronomical sums just for this one bottle. If Aniki just gives it to Hisato-kun with no strings attached, he’s going to be eaten alive. And this equivalent exchange also grants him a goal for the near future, a goal that he can be proud of.”

“But...”

“Please stop!” Shinohara Hisato shouted, drawing Satou Souta’s attention. “I understand that it has to be this way, and I’m fine with it. This is *my* choice to make, not yours, Satou-san. Ezoe-san, thank you for the offer. I’m buying.”

After saying those words, Shinohara Hisato picked up the potion. Satou Souta clenched his fists, his head hanging, and his back turned to us.

“What will you do?” I asked. “Will you leave us? It’s not too late. You can still be an adventurer without entering Dungeon Busters. But if you stay any longer, you will hear things that’s going to make it difficult for me to let you leave. If you don’t like the way I do things, I would recommend that you step right through that door.”

“You... Who do you think you are? You actually think you’re in the right here?!”

“But of course I do. There are as many ‘rights’ as there are people. Someone might have an opinion that’s the exact opposite of mine, and we’d both think we are in the right. It is with this understanding that everyone chooses what they think is right and forges ahead. When we realize that we were in the wrong, then we change our ways and take responsibility for what has

happened. That's what it means to be an adult."

Satou Souta walked out without another word, his head still bowed. I could not help but continue staring at the door for a little while longer after it closed after him.

"Ezoe-shi, wasn't that a bit too harsh? He's twenty, right? He's still just a child," Mutsuo murmured quietly.

"Perhaps. But we don't have time to nurture his character back into shape. We only have ten years left."

I had no problem at all with people having their own will. I didn't mind our company being used as a stepping stone either. However, the one thing that I required was for members to subscribe to the "justice" of prioritizing the clearing of the dungeons above all else. Anyone who could not do so would only harm the organization.

I finally turned back around to face the other members. "I will be clear. Here at Dungeon Busters, we prioritize the clearing of the dungeons above anything else. I mean it. By this, I am talking about the roughly three hundred places that should have appeared so far, as well as any others that will be appearing in the future. And we will be doing this within the next ten years. For the sake of this goal, I will not hesitate to negotiate, bargain, and compromise. I might even resort to lying or deception. Pretending to *not* see something is on the table, as is abandoning things or people, should there be a need to. Everything I do, I do in order to eradicate the dungeons. If anyone objects to this policy, then I invite you to also leave this room right now."

Everyone's faces were filled with nervousness.

Kusakabe Rinko cleared her throat. "I'm here because I'm in support of clearing the dungeons, so no objections from me. But there is something I want to know. Why are you so obsessed with dungeon clearing? It's not just because of the possibility of the Monster Stampede. What I sense from you is certainty. You're *certain* that the Monster Stampede will occur. There's no other way to explain the resolve I see in you."

"I agree with her," Sumida Masayoshi chimed in. "Your resolve even seems grim, somehow. I feel like I'm looking at the back of a grand champion stepping

up to the ring for a deciding match.”

The others also nodded. *I suppose it makes sense for those who aren’t fully informed to see things that way.*

I took a deep breath, then exhaled it slowly. “Sorry about that. And I didn’t mean to exude grimness. Maybe I took that a bit too personally. Just as all of you said, I do feel a conviction to clear the dungeons. I will show you where it comes from. But I warn you, when you see this, there is no turning back. Are you all sure you have the resolve for this?”

“Hmph. If we weren’t resolved, we wouldn’t be in this room,” Kirihara Amane declared.

So I had everyone stand up and gather together in a circle. Then I used Teleportation to bring all of them to Abyss, the Rank A dungeon in Shishibone, Edogawa City.

* * *

“This is the true form of Dungeon Busters, Inc.”

The four members of my audience looked stunned and somewhat confused.

The oldest one, Kirihara, stared closely at the door, then turned towards me. “That’s a dungeon door, isn’t it? In other words, we’re now in a dungeon? This...is a dungeon?” she asked, gesturing to everything in the room.

“Yes it is. This is the Safety Zone on Floor 1 of the dungeon in Shishibone, Edogawa City. I installed the floorboards and brought in the bunk beds myself.”

“Edogawa...” Kirihara repeated, still in a daze. “Wh-Who else knows about this?”

“Director General Ishihara. The head and two other members of the Yokohama Dungeon Engineer Brigade. One high school girl and her mother. And us. However, I suspect there are others who might be catching on.”

“So, it was you. And that’s why you’re so frantic...”

“Kirihara-san, what is happening? What is this room?”

The other three seemed to have only just recovered from the shock of the

teleportation.

Kirihara explained, “The reason why Ezoe-san is so bent on clearing the dungeons is because he is the one who set off the Dungeon Outbreak Phenomenon! This is surely the world’s first ever dungeon, the one that he found!”

“That is right. This is Abyss, a Rank A dungeon located in Shishibone, Edogawa City. Thirty-six days, twelve hours, and fifteen minutes before the emergence of Osaka Dungeon on July 30 last year, I discovered this dungeon and touched its doors. As a result, the Dungeon System became activated.”

Shinohara Hisato came to a start as if he had just thought of something. “Wait, in that case, then Satou-san’s father’s death...”

“Is on me, yes. Because I carelessly went down the mysterious stairs that suddenly appeared in my yard, his father, Satou Kouji-shi ended up dead. I bear the responsibility for it.”

“Then why did you chase him away?”

“I said it, didn’t I? Clearing dungeons is the utmost priority for us here at Dungeon Busters. I can’t very well allow a destabilizing factor into the company just to allay my own feelings of guilt. We only have ten years left!”

I took out my three LR cards from a drawer and summoned Akane, Emily, and Liu Fengguang. I invited the four new members—who were astonished yet again—to take a seat and proceeded to explain everything that had happened so far.

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“There will be a total of 666 dungeons throughout the world, and the world is ending ten years from now by Monster Stampede...” Kirihara Amane muttered before covering her eyes with one hand and laughing in despair. A trickle of tears streamed down her face. “HA HA HA... Ha ha... We’re so screwed. There are 666 of *these*? And we only have *ten* years? I shouldn’t have asked. If I didn’t know, I could have just focused on my career without being any the wiser.”

“We need to announce this right now! The world needs to know the truth! Then—”

“Hah!” Kirihara scoffed, interrupting Shinohara. She looked at him like she was looking at a child. “You try doing that, the entire world will panic, and next thing you know, riots would be breaking out in every country and governments would be collapsing one after the other. Then how’re we supposed to know where the new dungeons are? The planes being grounded would be the least of our worries.”

“Why?! The UN can serve as the center of command and dispatch adventurers to clear dungeons in a systematic way—”

“What you’re describing is a dream. An ideal. That’s why Ezoe-san was keeping this a secret. Isn’t that right?”

“That’s right.” I nodded in response to Kirihara’s question, then I elaborated on why I chose to not go public with what I knew. “What do you think people will do when they learn that the world will be ending in ten years? Do you think they’ll band together and cooperate to prevent it from happening?”

“That’s...but we’ll *die* if we don’t. There’s no other choice but to band together and—”

I raised a hand to cut Kusakabe Rinko off. “It’s the other way round. There are people who would actually welcome the world ending in ten years. We wish to save the world because we think we will still have a life ten years from now. But don’t forget. More than half of the world’s seven billion people are so poor that they struggle to find food each day. Among the nearly two hundred countries in the world, how many of them are affluent enough where citizens can take showers everyday, everyone owns a mobile phone, and the streets are lined with convenience stores and fast food restaurants? The dungeons appear in the Middle East, in South America, and in Africa all the same. They appear in countries with hyperinflation where twelve-year-old girls have to sell their bodies for seven measly dollars. Don’t doubt that there are people in those countries who would think, ‘Suck it! We have nothing to lose. The only people with anything to lose are the rich. It’d be the people in Gamerica, in Japan, and in the EU!’”

Everyone fell silent.

I continued, “Dungeon Busters’s greatest enemy is not the dungeons. No, our

archenemy will be the nihilists who will stop at nothing to make sure that we *don't* finish clearing all the dungeons in time. Our greatest adversary will be *humans*."

A heavy silence filled the Safety Zone room.

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[Kanagawa General Hospital — Shinohara Hisato]

After graduating from high school last year in March, I had been left with no other choice but to join the part-time workforce. I had wanted to attend college, or at least go to a technical school, but had given up in light of my family's circumstances. Specifically, my younger sister had fallen ill with pulmonary arterial hypertension. In a minor case, the patient could live a largely normal life as long as they refrained from intense exercise. But my sister's case was severe. There was no cure for it, and complications could develop the longer it lasted. A lung transplant might save her, but the cost of the operation was several hundred million yen. Because my parents had to tend to her almost 24/7, I had to take on part-time jobs just to earn my own living.

I did not resent my sister for this. Rather, I felt sorry for her. Ever since she was young, she had always been bad with playing outside and would run out of breath with the slightest exertion. And yet, I still forced her to play outside with me, again and again. Every time I thought back to it, I wanted to punch myself. She had likely already been sick at the time.

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Down inside the dungeon supposedly in Shishibone, Edogawa City, the four of us newest members of Dungeon Busters signed contracts on what looked like parchment, worked out the days we'd be delving together, then were dismissed. I didn't even properly read through what I'd signed. All I could think about was bringing the extra potion to my sister as quickly as I could.

I immediately rushed into Kanagawa General Hospital, where my sister was hospitalized.

"Rie! This is medicine! You're saved!"

My sister was lying on her back, the usual tubes protruding from her nose. A

nurse just happened to be in the room, changing out her IV bag. When she saw me rushing in, she became alarmed and tried to stop me. When I thought about it later, I could see why—I wasn't holding fruits or snacks, but a bottle of unidentified liquid that was supposedly "medicine." As a nurse, it only made sense for her to stop me.

"Hold on there! What is that? What are you making her drink?!"

"Don't get in my way! This is a potion. I got it from Dungeon Busters. It can heal any disease! Rie, drink it!"

The extra potion was a small glass bottle filled with about two mouthfuls of a pink liquid. The nurse pushed the call button in a fluster before trying to hold me down. *Aren't hospitals places for making people better?! Why is she getting in the way of me giving Rie her cure?!*

"Let GO of me! Rie! Believe me!"

I held out the hand holding the bottle. Rie hesitated a little, then accepted it.

"Don't drink it, Rie-chan! The doctor needs to check it first!"

Seeing the nurse try to take it back caused me to erupt into a rage. "DON'T YOU DARE!" I bellowed as I pushed her aside. But then more nurses arrived and pinned me down. I shouted desperately, "DRINK IT! HURRY!"

"Stop her!" the nurse I pushed aside cried out. "She's holding something weird that he gave her to drink!"

Another nurse snatched the potion back out of Rie's hands in a fluster. I roared at the top of my lungs in despair.

* * *

"How is he?"

"He's still in an excited state. We've already contacted his parents and the police."

Shinohara Rie's attending physician nodded, then lifted the little bottle on his desk.

"Did you find out what this is?"

“That’s... According to the brother, that’s a potion from one of those dungeons that were on TV. He claims that it can heal any disease and that it’s extremely expensive.”

“How did he get his hands on something like that?”

“He said that he joined Dungeon Busters and they gave it to him. As for whether this really is a potion or not...”

“The rep for Dungeon Busters would be the man named Ezoe, I believe? In any case, confirming with Shinohara Rie’s parents comes first. If this really is the real thing, and it really can heal any disease, then its worth would be a number neither you nor I could ever even dream of.”

The nurse nodded with a pale face, looking intently at the bottle in the doctor’s hand. Two hours later, Shinohara Rie’s parents arrived. They, together with the attending physician and a police officer, went to where Shinohara Hisato was being held to listen to his account.

“Dad! Mom! You’ve got to believe me!”

His parents were at a loss for how to respond to this desperate plea from their son. On the police officer’s suggestion, they went through Hisato’s phone and called the number registered under the name “Ezoe Kazuhiko.” The call was picked up almost immediately.

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[Kanagawa General Hospital — Ezoe Kazuhiko]

“I’m terribly sorry for the ruckus caused by our employee,” I apologized as I lowered my head towards Hisato’s parents, his sister’s attending physician, the nurses, and the police officer who had arrived on scene. Hisato himself had been—with his parents’ permission—put to sleep with tranquilizers. Thankfully, the medical staff that he had an altercation with had not been injured.

Couldn’t he have passed the potion quietly? No, this is on me. He cares about his sister so much that he became an adventurer. I should have seen this coming when I just handed him the potion.

I could not help but sigh in disappointment at my own lapse in judgment.

Hisato's parents shook their heads and apologized in turn. "No, no, we're the ones who are sorry about the commotion caused by our son. He did tell us that he was going to become an adventurer, but never did we imagine he would become a part of the famous Dungeon Busters..."

"He is a good kid who loves his sister very much, and that love is what will make him a good adventurer. That's why I hired him. I am at fault for handing him this potion. I heard that your daughter is in a severe condition and thought it might be best to let him bring it to her as soon as possible, but what I should have done instead is properly give you my greetings and hand it over to you in person."

The doctor interrupted excitedly, "So this *is* the real thing?!"

"Yes it is. If you doubt it, feel free to contact Major General Katsuragi at Yokohama Dungeon or Director General Ishihara of the Dungeon Adventurer Administrative Bureau. This bottle is medicine that can heal any disease."

"This is a medicine... How many of these can you get?! If you can get a lot of them—"

"Before anything else, I would like to ask you to return that potion. It is something that an employee of our company obtained in literal exchange for his life. You being the patient's attending doctor does not give you the right to hold onto it."

The doctor hesitantly handed me the bottle. I returned it to card form, then turned towards Hisato's parents.

"The efficacy of extra potions has been confirmed. It healed the nose of the woman from the adventurer licensing exam incident at Yokohama Dungeon. I myself used one when I lost my entire arm, and as you can see, I am fully healed. This is the most potent potion that can be obtained from the dungeons, capable of healing all incurable diseases and restoring lost limbs. Currently, less than ten of these exist in the world. In exchange for this one bottle, your son joined Dungeon Busters and promised to join us in our efforts to clear the dungeons. This potion here *is* his life. That said, the decision to administer it or not ultimately lies with you, the legal guardians of the patient. What do you think? Will you believe your son and give this potion a chance?"

Hisato’s parents looked at each other, then nodded.

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[Kanagawa General Hospital — Shinohara Hisato]

I could only faintly make out someone walking towards me through my foggy consciousness.

“It was rash of me to hand you the potion directly. I’m sorry. Would a potion work against tranquilizers? Oh, wait, an antidote potion would probably be better. Hold on a second. It’s your role to hand your sister the extra potion.”

Unfortunately, I couldn’t make out what the person was saying. Then something was poured into my mouth. The next instant, my consciousness suddenly came back to me as if a switch had been flicked. A weight seemed lifted from my body. I leaped up.

“RIE!”

However, I found myself immediately pressed back down into my seat. I tried struggling but to no avail.

“Calm down. The Extra Potion is in safe hands. Your parents are also here.”

“E-...Ezoe...-san?”

“Call me Kazuhiko. Or Kazu-san, if you like. In Dungeon Busters, we call each other by our first names. I’ll also call you Hisato. So, have you calmed down? Let’s go, then. Give your sister her health back with your own hands.”

When I heard those words, tears sprang unbidden from my eyes. I wiped them away with my sleeve, then nodded.

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[Kanagawa General Hospital — Attending Physician]

“I can hardly believe it. This...this is our world now...?”

I was at a complete loss for words. Right before my eyes, a patient who had been struggling just to breathe mere moments before had gotten up, taken deep breaths, and started laughing loudly. In fact, she seemed ready to run outside right this moment. We had yet to do any tests, but my intuition as a

doctor told me without a doubt that this girl had made a complete recovery. And whereas someone who had been in bed as long as she had been would need rehabilitation to regain their motor skills, she was having no trouble standing up. If all of her tests came back green, she could literally walk out of the hospital as soon as tomorrow afternoon.

“How can we ever repay you...?!”

The patient’s parents were repeatedly bowing towards a certain man, tears streaming from their eyes. Of course they were. Their daughter, who had been afflicted with a terrible condition treatable only through organ transplant, had just been restored to full health with a single bottle of medicine. If this medicine hit the markets, the entire healthcare profession would be rendered obsolete. All of humanity would be freed from the shackles of disease. I would be out of a job, but I still thought this an incredibly amazing thing.

The parents also thanked me, but I could only shake my head. I hadn’t been able to do anything for their daughter at all.

“Doctor, the world is not going to move on beyond the healthcare industry because of Extra Potions. These bottles are incredibly valuable. And what’s more, those of us at Dungeon Busters are aiming to clear the dungeons. Worst case, there might not be potions available anymore after we’re done.”

It seemed like Ezoe was trying to reassure me. What he said made sense. Even so, I could not help but pray. I prayed for a world where this medicine could liberate so many more people from their pain and suffering.

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[Aoba Ward, Kanagawa Prefecture — Shinohara Hisato]

I shuddered to imagine what would have happened if Kazu-san hadn’t come for me. After my sister got all better, I apologized to him. He didn’t get angry at me. Instead, he simply nodded and told me to think about how I should have handled it instead.

When my head finally cooled down, I realized that I had been far too impatient. Rie’s condition was severe, but it wasn’t as if she were teetering on the verge of life and death. I should have told dad and mom about everything,

gone to the attending physician together with them, and *then* given her the potion. Then it wouldn't have blown up into such a big thing.

"You're always like that, big brother. You just run ahead without looking and end up causing trouble for everyone around you. You're going to become an adventurer now, right? Make sure you don't cause trouble for Ezoe-san and your other colleagues, all right?"

"Look at you, mouthing off at me already."

The next afternoon, Rie had practically skipped out of the hospital. The doctor had said, "Her recovery is nothing short of miraculous. There is no reason whatsoever for keeping her hospitalized any longer. Rie-chan, go and make up for all the time you've lost. Enjoy your life to the fullest!"

"Big brother, I want a parfait! Treat me!"

"Mom said we're having hot pot tonight. Well, I mean, I guess one parfait wouldn't hurt."

We were having a big party tonight to celebrate Rie's discharge. We even got cake. It had been ages since I'd last seen mom laugh so brightly. This morning, dad swore that if needed, he would shove all his work onto his subordinate to clock out on the dot and come straight home. Both of my parents were so happy that they were practically bouncing around. And without all the medical costs, our family's finances were back to having leeway. Last night, dad asked me if I wanted to go to college. But I shook my head.

I would become an adventurer. Then I would get strong and get my hands on a lot of Extra Potions. I would save as many people suffering from incurable diseases as I could. I would eliminate incurable diseases from this world. This was my new dream. As a member of Dungeon Busters, Inc., I would be going around the world clearing dungeons for the next ten years. *A dream this big is just the right size for an adventure that big, isn't it?*

"Big brother, hurryyyy!" Rie shouted while running towards a cafe close to Azamino Station.

I laughed loudly as I chased her back.

◇ ◇ ◇

[Shishibone Dungeon — Kinouchi Mari]

Back when I first joined Dungeon Busters, there was Kazu-san, Akane-san, Emily-chan, and Myu-chan. They took me walking through Floors 1 to 3 in the dungeon and fought the monsters until I got used to the environment. At the time, Kazu-san and Akane-san were already too highly ranked to gain any more growth from fighting orcs and skeletons, which meant that they were doing so just for my sake. I understood that I could not monopolize their attention and time forever, especially not with how big the company was growing. That was why I was trying to become strong enough to enter the dungeons by myself.

“But it’d be so much more fun if I could do this with my friends from school...”

“Myuu?”

“Kyuu?”

As I continued petting Myu-chan from its place on my lap, Purin-chan clambered up my shoulder to rub itself against my cheek. It was thanks to these two that I didn’t feel lonely in the dungeons. And though she wasn’t human, I did have a friend here with me too.

“What do you think, Mari?”

“Oh my gosh, you’re so cute!”

Emily-chan came out wearing my school’s uniform, which had a navy-blue blazer, plaid pleated skirt, and a ribbon at the chest. Because she had really pretty features, she looked good in everything. I couldn’t help but clap in appreciation.

“I don’t think I’ve ever worn something like this before,” Emily commented pensively. “Because I’m always just wearing my mage outfit, I’ve been wanting to try something like this for the longest time ever.”

“I’ve brought magazines too! There are so many different kinds of fashion above ground like you wouldn’t believe! Once you are able to appear outside, let’s visit Harajuku together!”


FIFTEEN

Kazu-san and Akira-san were busy training the newest members of Dungeon Busters in Yokohama Dungeon. Every once in a while, he'd drop by to check in on us. He had to take showers above ground, but because my Holy Magic allowed me to use Cleaning, I could remain hygienic the whole time. *Nothing beats the comfort of taking an actual shower, though.*

"I guess that'd be a while yet. You can't become an adventurer until you're eighteen, right?"

"Kazu-san is pushing what he's calling an 'apprentice initiative,' but apparently there are a lot of people who are against it. They're saying that there's no telling how Enhancement Element might affect those of us who are still growing."

Emily-chan narrowed her eyes. "Your boobies are already this big. How much more growing do you plan on doing?!"

I shrieked a little in surprise as she suddenly circled around me and started kneading my chest. It was true that they had grown a little bigger after I joined Dungeon Busters; the new bras that I had bought were already starting to feel tight. Lately, I was growing a bit conscious of all the looks that I was getting from guys. *I guess they really do like them bigger?*

My friend laughed loudly, then ducked behind the curtain to change back into her own clothes. After we did another four-hour block, we could call it a day and have dinner. As it turned out, Purin-chan's Fire Magic was really effective against skeleton knights. We were collecting so much money even though I wasn't doing anything. Thanks to this, mom had cut down on the number of hours she worked part-time to focus on improving her cooking skills. Once the company building was done at the end of March, she would be hired to take care of all the cooking. *Her food is really delicious. I'm sure Kazu-san will love it!*

As I continued waiting for Emily, I looked at the item in my hand. "This really is useful. I've got to tell Kazu-san about it next time I see him."

Name: Monster-Calling Bell

Rarity: Rare

Description: Attracts monsters on the same floor when rung. Requires caution—might cause the user to become encircled depending on positioning.

Purin-chan was capable of firing fireballs in all directions, so we would be fine no matter where enemies came at us from. Just to be safe, however, I only ever used the bell on straight paths. Thanks to its effects, we were killing around five hundred skeleton knights each hour. The money we picked up would go towards the capital investment for Dungeon Busters, and of the twelve or thirteen cards dropped, I'd get to keep half.

"Mari, I'm done."

"Okay. Let's go, then."

"Myuu!"

"Kyuu!"

Our group headed out into the dungeon area once again.

◇ ◇ ◇

[Shishido Akira]

All the new members had gone through the Dungeon Bootcamp. However, there were two of them who were still Rank F. This was through no fault of their own, of course—it would be unreasonable to expect normal people to start off at the same level as a practicing martial artist and a former sumo wrestler. Our short-term goal was to get all of them to Rank D.

Name: Kusakabe Rinko

Title: None

Rank: E

Possession Limit: 0 / 26

Skills: Card Gacha, Staff Mastery (Lvl. 1), _____

Name: Sumida Masayoshi

Title: None

Rank: E

Possession Limit: 0 / 22

Skills: Card Gacha, Shield Bash (Lvl. 1), _____

Name: Kirihara Amane

Title: None

Rank: F

Possession Limit: 0 / 29

Skills: Card Gacha, _____, _____

Name: Shinohara Hisato

Title: None

Rank: F

Possession Limit: 0 / 27

Skills: Card Gacha, _____, _____

“Amane-chan and Hisato-kun, let’s focus on getting you two to Rank E for now. Rinko-chan and Yosshii, you’ll be heading to Floor 2 together with Shifu Liu. Hmm? What’s wrong?” *Why’re they looking at me with their mouths hanging open? Did I say something weird?*

The oldest, Amane-san, spoke up as if on behalf of the others. “Shishido-san, you are our senpai, so we understand you calling us by our first names. But having ‘-chan’ suffixed to our names is a bit troubling. Seniority-wise, you wouldn’t need to use ‘-kun’ either, and ‘Yosshii’ is just...”

“Really? I’m just using whatever feels most natural to me. Don’t worry about it so much. Feel free to call me Akira back!”

Amane-san seemed like she wanted to say something but swallowed it down. After a brief pause, she managed, “Allow me to call you ‘Akira-san.’ In turn, please just call me by my name, with no suffix. As for the CEO, Ezoe-san...”

“Oh, if it’s Aniki, you can call him ‘Aniki’ too. Or Kazu-san, if you prefer that. I

don’t think he’d mind Kazucchi either!”

“Then ‘Kazu-san’ it will be. It appears that the company culture of Dungeon Busters isn’t all that strict on the way employees refer to each other.”

“It’s best to just go with whatever feels most natural. After all, we’ll be fighting together as a team. We don’t want to be wasting time being correct with ‘CEO, sir!’ or ‘Kirihara-san!’ in situations when every split second counts.”

After a bit more discussion, it was settled that everyone would call Aniki “Kazu-san” and me “Akira-san.” In turn, I would be calling them “Amane,” “Hisato,” “Rinko,” and “Yosshii.” Honestly, “Amane-chan” and “Rinko-chan” came more naturally to my tongue, but they seemed rather vehemently opposed to it, so that was that.

“All right, before we begin, Aniki’s prepared welcoming presents for all of you. That’s what I’m passing out now. Everyone gets a hundred Rank D monster cards to gacha with for Rare weapons. Oh, Yosshii, you might want to go for the Equipment Gacha instead. I imagine you’d need a shield to use ‘Shield Bash,’ right?”

“I don’t actually know how to use a shield. What kind of fighting style would require Shield Bash?”

“I’ll answer that,” Shifu Liu spoke up. The wealth of knowledge about fighting that he possessed never ceased to amaze me. “When adventurers fight together, one important position is that of the ‘tank.’ Their job is to stop all the incoming monsters and make split-second decisions about which monster to divert to which party member. Shield Bash is the tank’s own method of attack. If I am to describe it with terms from your ‘sumo,’ stopping attacks would be ‘tachiai,’ and Shield Bash would be ‘kachiage.’ Well, it might be easier to understand if you actually try it.”

Aniki had handed me five hundred cards ahead of time. The remaining one hundred were for me to roll on Shifu Liu’s behalf. *Now then, what are we going to get this time?*

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[Sumida Masayoshi]

I was told that my large body made me a good candidate for serving as a so-called “tank,” whose job was to “stop all the incoming monsters and make split-second decisions about which monster to divert to which party member.” To do so, I would need a shield, which Akira-san said should come from the Equipment Gacha. So I did as he said and rolled it six times first, intending on rolling something else for the remaining five if I got a good shield early on. According to Akira-san, the chance of getting what we actually needed was proportionate to how many rolls we did. I kept my fingers crossed as I tried using this ability for the first time in my life.

Name: Mithril Greatshield

Rarity: Rare

Description: A greatshield made of mithril. Possesses high magic resistance. Comes with a peephole for observing the enemy while bracing.

Name: Steel Chestplate

Rarity: Uncommon

Description: A chestplate made of tempered steel. Sturdy, but heavy. Size automatically adjusts to the wearer.

Name: Steel Helmet

Rarity: Uncommon

Description: A helmet made of tempered steel. Sturdy, but heavy. Size automatically adjusts to the wearer.

Name: Durable Shirt

Rarity: Uncommon

Description: A shirt resistant to slashes and fire. Washable.

Name: Steel Shinguards

Rarity: Uncommon

Description: A pair of shinguards made of tempered steel. Sturdy, but heavy.

Size automatically adjusts to the wearer.

Name: Leather Wraps

Rarity: Common

Description: Wraps made of tanned leather. Provides slight protection against slash and bite attacks when wrapped around the arms or shins.

“Whoa, looks like you’re a pretty lucky guy, Yosshii! You got a Rare card from only six pulls, and the rest all seem usable as well. How about using your remaining pulls on another gacha?”

“Th-Thank you. I’ll do that.”

Just as Akira-san recommended, I went with the Item Gacha for my remaining rolls. To my surprise, I got another Rare. *Looks like today really is my lucky day.*

Name: Unmovable Leather Boots

Rarity: Rare

Description: Shoes that help blunt the shock received from attacks. Helpful when battling on the edge of cliffs and on slippery surfaces.

Name: Monster Sachet

Rarity: Uncommon

Description: A sachet that draws attacks from monsters. The scent will dissipate in three months’ time.

Name: High Potion

Rarity: Uncommon

Description: A highly potent potion that is effective even against bone-deep wounds and brain damage.

Name: Potion

Rarity: Common

Description: A common tasteless and odorless potion. Can be drunk to heal colds or applied as a salve.

Name: Antidote

Rarity: Common

Description: Effective against snake bites and poisonous mushrooms. Does not work for all poisons.

Of the five pulls I made, two turned out to be Common. Supposedly Ezo—Kazu-san had rolled the gacha using Rank D cards a staggering number of times and empirically determined that the rates were 10% Rare, 70% Uncommon, and 20% Common. Having received two Rares and only three Commons with my eleven pulls meant that I had gotten pretty lucky this time. *That was pretty fun. I'd like to try it again someday.*

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[Kusakabe Rinko]

To my surprise, the first skill that the dungeon gave me was Staff Mastery. Not that I had a problem with it, of course—the staff was held in quite high esteem within the Kusakabe-style School of Ancient Martial Arts. Another school that specialized in the staff, Shinto Mugen-style Staff Arts, even had a famous poem about this weapon: "A spear when thrust,

naginata when swept,

and tachi when struck,

many forms the staff takes;

To discipline and to correct,

Yet inflict no injury or wound;

What else could do the same?"

The Kusakabe-style school had incorporated staff arts into the school during the Edo period. Unlike the Sengoku period, this was a time of peace when emphasis was placed on *not* killing people. Kusakabe-style evolved accordingly

by classifying lethal techniques as “arcane techniques” and non-lethal techniques for apprehending as “open techniques.” As all female descendents of the family were compelled to learn the naginata, this art had also been passed down through the generations, ultimately ending in the form of modern-day competitive naginata.

Name: Ruyi Bang

Rarity: Rare

Description: A staff that can shrink and grow on command. Made of magic wood blessed by spirits. Very difficult to snap.

“The name ‘Ruyi Bang’ is a direct reference to the weapon used by Sun Wukong in *Journey to the West*, isn’t it? Let me try a few swings with it.”

There was no standard staff length for practicing staff arts with, but I personally found ones around my height the easiest to handle. So I adjusted this Ruyi Bang to be 168 cm long and adopted the middle stance from Kusakabe-style’s open techniques.

“Hmm, I like the feel of it. Its weight and thickness seem just right. Hah!”

I unleashed a few thrusts and sweeps in quick succession against an imaginary opponent. Seeing that, the character card Liu Fengguang materialized a steel spear and stood in front of me. He held his weapon behind his back, with the butt end directed towards me. I did a double take. *There is no opening in his stance whatsoever!*

“This is called gùn art, or as others call it, rod art. It looks quite similar to the staff art you use, don’t you think?”

I nodded, shifted to a tachi stance, then rushed at him. Liu-sensei spun around, slamming his spear against my staff repeatedly with loud clacks. With a smooth, flowing motion, he thrust the butt of his spear at my throat. I changed the hand I was gripping my staff with in order to redirect the attack, then leveraged the reach of my weapon and my footwork to attempt a sweep of my opponent’s legs. But then he threw *his* weapon to his other hand and stopped my staff while returning his spear to his back. We were now standing where the

other had been at the start of the match.

After a brief moment of studying each other, Liu-sensei showed me the palms of his hands to indicate that he was done. *He's so strong! It's as if he's the living embodiment of martial arts. He can definitely make me much stronger if I learn under him.*

"You've been trained quite well in spite of your youth, and you've got a pretty good sense for battle. It will not be long before you exceed Ezoe. That man has almost no talent whatsoever."

"Surely not. Kazu-san is extremely strong, isn't he?"

Though it had been a video, I had seen him moving with inhuman speed. Even now, the sight was seared onto my retinas.

Liu-sensei laughed and shook his head. "Physical prowess is something that you will obtain automatically just by fighting within the dungeon. Conversely, talent for fighting is a gift from the heavens. It is not something that can be compensated for with Enhancement Element. That said, do not misunderstand: Ezoe is strong. He is terrifyingly strong but in a different way from you. The strength of a human is not necessarily only how well they can fight. You would do well to remember that."

There was no other way to respond but to nod. It was indeed true that I could not do what Kazu-san did. He had challenged the dungeons by himself, killing monsters day in and day out until his kill count had reached the hundreds of thousands. Not only that, he'd even gone so far as to make detailed notes about how much time he'd spent and how many he'd killed in order to derive laws about the place. I had shuddered when I'd been shown a part of Ezoe's records and imagined the sheer amount of time and effort that had gone into accumulating so much data. My heart and my mind would have snapped long, long ago if I had been in his shoes.

"Anyone who fights enough battles can become strong enough to become the leader of a team. However, it takes an entirely different kind of strength to bring multiple teams together into a group. Young lady, I recommend that you aim towards becoming the leader of a team first."

He's right. My three fellow assistant instructors, the ones who became

adventurers together with me, are not here. We will meet back up eventually, and at that time, it will be my duty to lead them. We are going to form Team Kusakabe underneath the umbrella of Dungeon Busters to clear dungeons together. In order to stop the coming Monster Stampede, we need to demonstrate the power of martial arts. That is what I am striving towards. We must do the name of the Kusakabe-style School of Ancient Martial Arts proud!

◇ ◇ ◇

[Kirihara Amane]

I thought I'd felt the veins in my temple bulge briefly when I heard myself being called "Amane-chan." As a woman on the career track within the male-dominated police force, I was in a position where I had to issue orders to regular officers who were men older than me at times. I knew that quite a few of them who were less than pleased with being subordinate to a woman secretly called me "Amanee-chan" behind my back; as if splicing my name with "nee-chan," like how they would talk down to a girl serving tables at a pub, was the only way they could assuage their hurt pride. *I much rather prefer being called by my first name without the honorific altogether, thank you very much.*

"Well then, off to Floor 1 we go. It's just beating monsters up with a club, so take it easy, yeah?"

I hated frivolous guys, and Shishido Akira spoke like a frivolous guy. However, his strength was unmistakable. Ezoe-san (*I will call him "Kazu-san" only after I receive express permission from the man himself!*) had confirmed Shishido as being the strongest adventurer on Earth, which meant that he was very likely quite serious at heart. No martial arts world was so pathetic as to allow someone who didn't take things seriously—even if he was a prodigy—to walk home with the global championship six years consecutively.

"Once again, the aim is to reach Rank E. No gacha-ing until then, all right? It's much more effective to first see your new skills and determine the direction of your growth before rolling for weapons and equipment."

Shinohara Hisato—a fellow new member who, at nineteen years old, was younger than me—and I were still Rank F. That was why we were still only wearing equipment brought from above ground—cut-resistant outerwear,

safety boots, and helmets—and armed only with clubs. Our first order of business was to raise our physical prowess far enough to become Rank E. I might not have looked the part, but I actually had quite a bit of confidence in my stamina, due to having kept up swimming ever since middle school. *I still do so at a sports gym at least twice a week, and I even run too. I might be twenty-seven, but I'm not going to be outdone by a nineteen-year-old kid.*

Or so I'd thought until I found myself completely out of breath one measly hour after starting, in spite of my experience at the Dungeon Bootcamp. The reason was clearly all the weights I was wearing. Right out of the gate, I was given a 20 kg weighted vest, 3 kg weights for each leg, and 2 kg weights for each arm for a total of 30 kg. It was almost as if I were undertaking training from a certain hermit in a popular shonen manga! The only consolation was that the nineteen-year-old Hisato was also as out of breath as I was. *In other words, it's got nothing to do with our relative age!*

"Hmm, looks like the JSDF really are taking it easy with the Bootcamp," Shishido said with an easy smile. "I guess they kind of have to, considering how they're accepting applications from such a wide age range, but it'll be a problem if graduates from the adventurer course are getting tired from something of this level. Making that last push just when you're feeling tired is key, so let's rest after the two of you both kill fifty more rabbits each."

He looked as if he were merely taking a stroll through the park, despite wearing 7 kg on each foot, 3 kg on each hand, a 30 kg vest, 20 kg diving ballast weights on his waist, *and* shouldering a rucksack containing water and rations for all three of us. He wasn't even sweating. *He's the true monster. Is he even human anymore?*

"Here comes a rabbit. How about you take the first one, Amanee-chan?"

"Argh..."

I SAID not to call me "Amanee-chan"! I poured all my anger into my club as I brought it down on the head of the rabbit monster.

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[Ezoe Kazuhiko]

Located roughly ten minutes away from Tokyo Station was Otemachi Twin Towers, an office building with rentable units managed by a foreign capital company, Regal Office Service. With the neighborhood being what it was, an office on the fourth floor of the East Tower was priced at ¥100,000 per tsubo, or $250 USD per square foot. *It's only a short-term lease, and it's a necessary expense. Yep.*

"Daaamn! What an amazing office! How much do these high-backed chairs even cost?!"

"About ¥90,000, give or take? But that aside, let's get started. Everyone, thank you for choosing to work for us."

The back office staff of Dungeon Busters, Inc. was starting off with a total of six employees. The former banker that I had met at the adventurer gathering, Mukai Junpei, was going to serve as the manager of general affairs and accounting. I had assigned him two assistants: Yamashita Ayumi, who had previously been employed at Lounge ROCO at Mizue; and Kashiwagi Reina, the woman to whom I had entrusted my watch when I'd first entered Yokohama Dungeon and then remained in contact with ever since. With Mukai's supervision, Yamashita was going to handle the accounting and Kashiwagi the admin work.

"Dungeon Busters, Inc. is a newly established organization. Mukai-san, I understand finance and legal to be the crux of a company's defense. If you ever have any advice or suggestions, feel free to come find me."

"Thank you very much. When I quit the bank, I never imagined that I would go on to become entrusted with such a great honor. I will serve with everything I have."

Our IT department, which would be responsible for all matters of information transmission, was headed by Tanaka Mutsuo, as expected. He was joined by two others who had been part of his doujin circle. He had explained to me that one would be focusing on creating content as the other focused on maintaining our website, but honestly, I didn't understand most of the technical mumbo-jumbo he said. I trusted him enough to give him free rein, and that was that. He was apparently even thinking about developing an app or some such. *The scale*

of our operations grows larger and larger.

After the standard greetings, General Manager Mukai (that was the title on his business card) immediately came over to work out our general direction for the near future. Right off the bat, he started by asking, “Ezoe-san, do you plan on moving this office eventually?”

It’s true that this office is wonderful, but ¥100,000 per tsubo really is quite pricey. “Yes, most likely. Considering the inconvenience of Edogawa—especially Shishibone—there’s no need to go to the trouble of gathering the back office staff at the new headquarters. I was thinking of looking for some other place in Otemachi or Akasaka when things are a bit more settled.”

“If I may, I would actually recommend having all of us together at the headquarters in Edogawa.”

“The reason being?”

“Each and every dungeon adventurer possesses power beyond that of the common person. This is something that will likely cause a certain amount of unease among the general public. The best way to get ahead of this would be to make ourselves seem as relatable as possible. Part of it will involve remaining transparent about our operations, but physically locating ourselves among the ‘ordinary folk’ will also go a long way.”

“I see. So you’re saying that we would be giving off the impression that we are ‘raking it in’ by keeping our office in this kind of neighborhood?”

“When I was working at the Hiroshima branch of my previous place of employment, part of my duties included managing a community-based supermarket. That supermarket poured all its money back into the store and almost nothing towards the office building itself. As human capital is going to be our greatest asset at Dungeon Busters, we can’t very well be that extreme, but I fear that we might garner a certain amount of ill will once it becomes publicly known that we are based in a fancy office in Otemachi.”

I rubbed my chin and nodded. *It might be difficult to have our office in Edogawa at the moment, but it might be a good idea to develop ourselves as a community-based enterprise once the company housing is complete and the staff move in. In fact, we probably* should *do so. We need to build rapport with*

the local community in order to soften the impact when we reveal Abyss's existence. We need them to think, "Rank A dungeon? The folks over at Dungeon Busters can handle it just fine."

"Very well, I will definitely take that into consideration. For now, please finish our final income tax return and balance sheet by the end of March. The company building should be completed by then. I'll start making arrangements now so that the back office staff will be able to start working from the new building starting in April. I know an assemblyman of Edogawa; I'll work out any necessary political groundwork with him."

We were going to need a legal team and a dedicated HR department later on down the road. Seeking out former salarymen over sixty years old with a wealth of managing experience and making them go through the Bootcamp could be a pretty brilliant idea—this would resolve our labor shortage *and* keep medical fees low, both issues that Japan at large was also struggling with. Naturally, doing so would require a lot of planning and strategizing beforehand.

After Mukai and I finished our talk, Mutsuo came over next. To be honest, part of the reason why I had positioned Mutsuo so high up was in hopes that his carefree personality could serve as a good counter to the grimness that could easily pervade the atmosphere in a company dealing with something so tied to death and the end of the world.

"Ezoe-shi! We're supposed to meet the prime minister tomorrow, right? Do you know what I'm supposed to wear? Should I go in a tuxedo? Or would a crested kimono and hakama be more appropriate?!"

Uh, we're not visiting the Imperial Palace—a tuxedo would probably be overkill for the Kantei. And what's with the crested kimono? You plan on attending a coming of age ceremony afterwards?

"A normal suit and tie would suffice, I believe," I replied.

Mutsuo looked crestfallen. "I don't have one. Not one that fits me after my 20 kg loss, that is."

I sighed heavily. *Come on, man. Having a suit as part of your formal wear that's ready to be used anytime is one of the basics of being a working man. Oh, wait. No, Mutsuo came from an exploitative IT company. He probably wasn't*

blessed with any decent mentors or superiors to teach him these things. Since it's the prime minister that we'll be meeting, I can't very well let him embarrass himself in a cheap suit. There's no time to get one tailored, but this is Otemachi. Marunouchi Naka-Dori Avenue, the street nicknamed "Brand Street" for all the brand-name stores that line its length, is only a few minutes' walk from here.

"Then let's go visit Marunouchi and Ginza. But just saying, you'll be paying for everything yourself, all right?"

After saying goodbye to everyone else, I headed out with Mutsuo.

Chapter 3: Dungeon Busters, Inc. Moves [A certain country in South Gamerica — ?????]

"*AHYEEEEEEE!*" a skinny man cried in an unsettling screech as he brandished his sword. The grotesque monster he was facing disappeared into a puff of smoke, but was shortly replaced by more that lunged at him in attack. The man seemed so deranged that a third party might have had trouble telling which side was the true monster. During a brief moment of respite, the man turned to his side and pissed on the stone wall. The young girl looking on from behind clapped her hands. After hundreds of thousands of battles, the man had finally broken free from his human shackles.

"Congratulations. You've reached Rank C."

"Hee hee hee hee! This means I can finally kill 'em all, right? I can't wait to find out how well I do against modern weapons, hee hee!"

The man returned to the Safety Zone on Floor 1 and, with all his equipment still materialized, began climbing the long flight of stairs that led upwards.

* * *

Most slum quarters were ruled by organized crime groups that controlled the distribution of drugs, squeezed protection fees from prostitutes, bought police officers off with bribes, and used violence to suppress the powerless citizenry. The more corrupt the area, the more power these violent gangs held. If left unchecked, they could become so powerful as to shake the very country they were a part of.

This very phenomenon had taken place in this country located in South Gamerica. Half of the capital had devolved into a slum, and the people feared the gangs that ruled the streets more than the government's rule of law.

Today, however, the power structure here was entirely overwritten. And by a single man, at that.

"Wh-What is with you, ma— ARGH!"

A man who looked every bit like a villain was suddenly cleaved from his left

shoulder to his right waist, falling into a puddle of his own blood. His cry caused his fellow gang members to rush out of the building. However, these were men who were used to only cornering weak, helpless citizens. The sight of the gaunt, revenant-like assailant with a sword in hand left them completely dumbfounded.

“Hya hya hya! You’re all packing, right? I see the bulges! Go on. Use them!”

The gangsters all drew their guns and pulled the triggers in unison. The crack of gunshots filled the air. The next moment, however, screams pierced the cacophony and fountains of blood sprayed everywhere. One by one, the arms holding guns were cut off by the apparition that disappeared and reappeared repeatedly like a ghost.

“Y-You monsteeerrrrr!”

The last man fired again and again but to no avail. His assailant, who was merely several steps away, easily dodged every bullet by curving his upper body with unbelievable speed. More and more bullets were fired, but he either evaded them or sliced them with his sword as if he were a character in a movie.

Soon enough, the gun started making a different sound. It was out of bullets. The gangster dropped his weapon and raised both his hands, trembling like a leaf. Seeing this, the other man’s face broke into a wide grin and he closed in.

He placed a hand on his prey’s shoulder and drew his face close to speak directly into his ear. “Now... Tell me. Where is your boss?”

The gunman clenched his eyes tightly with fear as a hoarse scream squeezed through his throat. He was scared to death. Then he thought he felt something wrapping around his neck. Everything went black after that.

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[The Kantei — Ezoe Kazuhiko]

The Prime Minister’s Award is given to “honor those who had contributed to the country and/or society with remarkable achievements.” The incumbent prime minister would publicly present the award—at times, together with a monetary gift—to the recipient individual or group, examples of which include the first-ever seven-title-holder of the Japanese board games of go and shogi.

Aside from this, the prime minister is also invested with the authority to bestow the People's Honor Award. As professional athletes were not eligible for receiving the Prime Minister's Award, the People's Honor Award was set up slightly later on to recognize a wider range of achievements, its creation prompted by the feat of a certain baseball player breaking the world home-run record. In terms of relative prestige, the People's Honor Award was held in higher regard than the Prime Minister's Award.

"The recipient of the award is Dungeon Busters, Inc. Your organization has, in achieving the world's first-ever dungeon clear, displayed an indomitable spirit and proven to the world that humanity does possess the strength and potential to triumph over the enigmatic dungeons. Against the backdrop of fear that has seized our world in the wake of the Dungeon Outbreak Phenomenon, this remarkable deed bestows the entire human race with hope for the future. In acknowledgment of this laudable accomplishment, I hereby confer upon you the Prime Minister's Award. Reiwa 2, January 19. Prime Minister Urabe Seiichirou."

Flashes of light and the sound of shutters going off filled the room in equal measure. The Prime Minister's Award was given out to roughly two people each year, so this wasn't a particularly unusual occasion. However, the draw of the word "dungeon" was such that there were more than double the usual number of journalists present, with some of them representing broadcasters and newspapers from Woori and Gamerica.

After we exchanged inoffensive small talk about the dungeons for a little while, I jumped into what I was really here for. "Prime Minister, may I ask for a bit of your time please? There is a matter that I wish to consult with you on."

The ninety-eighth prime minister of Japan was taller than I had expected. In fact, he was almost as tall as I was myself. My first impression of him was that of an affable gentleman in his sixties, but I reminded myself that this was the man who was shouldering the lives and property of all one hundred twenty million Japanese citizens and that he held the fate of the entire world in his hands. Without his help, clearing the remaining 665 dungeons was going to be an absolute impossibility.

"It looks like a matter that would be difficult to discuss in front of the media.

Very well.”

Prime Minister Urabe sent his secretary a look, who nodded in acknowledgment and proceeded to inform the journalists that all further coverage was prohibited. Many voiced their protests but more than half obediently complied, indicating that they had likely been informed of this arrangement beforehand.

It’s finally time for the part that actually matters.

* * *

“So this is the world’s first-ever dungeon? It looks like an ordinary room.”

Right after Akira, Mutsuo, and I stepped into a separate room with the prime minister back in the Kantei, I was able to teleport our entire group over to Abyss immediately, thanks to the groundwork laid out by Director General Ishihara. However, the prime minister was not alone; with his identity being what it was, I was also obliged to bring along two of his SPs.

“My men have a duty of confidentiality. Anything that you say, outside of any clear indication of criminal intent, will remain in this room. So, what is it that you wanted to consult me on?” Urabe asked, settling down onto the sofa I had gestured him towards.

I materialized Akane, instructed her to make us tea, then sat across from the prime minister of Japan. Akira and Mutsuo leaned against a wall.

“Mr. Prime Minister, I believe Director General Ishihara must have already told you this, but the dungeons will continue appearing in thirty-six-day intervals until June 24 of this year. By the end, there will be a total of 666 dungeons, with this one, Abyss, being one of them. At that time, the dungeons will be in a state called ‘Full Activation,’ and the countdown will begin.”

“By which you are referring to the number that was displayed on the Dungeon Core that you found on the lowest floor of Sapporo Dungeon, I take it? And you are saying that number will begin decreasing?”

“Yes, sir. The number that was displayed equates to exactly ten years in aboveground time. If nothing is done, monsters will begin spilling out from every single dungeon on Earth at the end of that time and plunge our planet

into destruction.”

“We have already announced the presence of the ‘Monster Stampede’ field on the Dungeon Core window to the world at large. The issue is the countdown. Do you believe this to be something we ought to announce as well?”

“I would recommend keeping it under wraps, if it is possible to do so. At the very least, until the locations of all 666 dungeons have been confirmed and ways of reaching all of them have been plotted out. I’m sure you understand why.”

Urabe went quiet for a little while, then nodded. When he took a sip of Akane’s tea, he made a soft exclamation in slight astonishment. During that time, I placed the two other LR cards in front of him.

“There are apparently a total of 108 of these in existence. The place where they appear is entirely random. Sometimes the Dungeon System may grant one as a reward for an accomplishment; I’ve been told that they might also just drop out of the blue for no reason whatsoever. I believe these cards to be an important key for stopping the Monster Stampede. The cooperation of other countries will be crucial towards gathering as many of these as possible. The diplomatic power to reach them lies solely with the Cabinet.”

“Talks at the UN’s IDAO preparatory committee are largely coming to a close. Thanks to your successful dungeon clear, we’ve gained quite a lot of influence on this stage. As a general rule, dungeon adventurers will not be allowed into the dungeons of other countries. However, an application system will likely be instituted in order to allow adventurers to apply for an exception for a fixed period of time with the sole intended purpose of clearing a dungeon. This policy is likely going to be ratified. That said, we are seeing objections from a certain minority, namely, the Kingdom of Ko, the Republic of Woori, and the United States of Gamerica.”

Wait a minute—I’d understand if it were Ko and Sina objecting; why is Gamerica on that list too? Is this also one of the effects from the return to the Monroe Doctrine that President Howard announced?

“Ko would be one thing. To think that even Gamerica would be against it... What is the reaction from the EU’s member states?”

“They are all in agreement, as are all ASEAN members. Ko and Woori claim to be in the middle of talks about cooperation and therefore are rejecting interference from all other countries. Gamerica’s stance is likely based on worries about the decline of their influence as a global leader after the dungeons are gone. They can’t afford to request foreign aid in clearing their dungeons after having withdrawn all their overseas troops for that very purpose.”

“After the dungeons are gone... I can only hope that such a day comes to pass. I’m sorry, but I really must ask. *Sina* is in agreement?”

“Many seem to misunderstand, but Sina is an extremely realistic and pragmatic country. Remember, this is the country that gave rise to the famous Sun Tzu. Unlike half a century ago, the concepts of communism for the sake of peace and equality no longer drive the nation’s policies. In a way, this is a state that is more capitalistic than even Japan. Sina is trustworthy as long as there is clear mutual benefit involved. At the very least, that is how I see them.”

I was somewhat surprised to hear Prime Minister Urabe’s rather high evaluation of our mainland neighbor. He did have a point, however; Sina was indeed a country that prioritized profit. Profit was the motivation behind their territorial dispute with Japan and their rare earth embargo. As soon as the cost outweighed the benefit, they would revoke similar policies without a moment’s delay. They had maintained their anti-Japan stance throughout the years because it was beneficial to do so. From this perspective, it could be said that Sina was easier to deal with than the country on the southern half of the Korian Peninsula.

“In that case, after we finish clearing all the dungeons within Japan, we will prioritize the ones in Sina, southeast Asia, and the EU sphere. Once they see the benefits enjoyed by other countries with cleared dungeons, Gamerica might change their tune.”

“We have already received requests for cooperation from Formosa, Filipines, Namviet, and Muangtai regarding the establishment of their own dungeon adventurer initiatives. As soon as the headquarters for IDAO is fully set up, it should promptly begin establishing branches in ASEAN countries that should help smooth the cooperation process.”

“That is wonderful news. The world is moving quite a lot faster than I had dared hope. At this rate, we just might be able to stop the Monster Stampede. No, we *will* stop it, come what may.”

Thanks to Japan being a role model, the chaos caused by the Dungeon Outbreak Phenomenon was remarkably more subdued than what it could have been. I nodded in satisfaction as Urabe seemed to study me.

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[Shishibone Dungeon — Urabe Seiichirou]

Back when the dungeon adventurer initiative was being formulated, the topic of “the danger posed by adventurers” had immediately come up as a fierce talking point. There had even been voices that had clamored for the admission of civilians to be put on hold until we knew for sure just how strong humans could get from spending time in the dungeons. I, however, had chosen to believe in the general innate goodness of our citizens. I’d made the case that mandating fingerprint registration and limiting applications to those without priors would be enough to suppress the probability of there being criminal adventurers, then had pushed the policy through.

As I looked at the man before my eyes, I thought back to something that he had said before. “Dungeon Busters places heavy emphasis on motivation. Whose sake do you fight for? Anyone who stands in the dungeons with only a self-serving reason wouldn’t last long.”

There was little doubt that the achievements of Dungeon Busters, Inc. were great contributions to not only Japan but also the world at large. However, I felt a certain wariness towards this man. From what I could tell, the clearing of the dungeons took priority over absolutely everything else in his mind. Anyone or anything that stood between him and that goal—be it individuals, organizations, or even countries—would be eliminated without prejudice. He was not doing this for Japan’s sake or the world’s sake. I suspected that there was something else driving him.

The rest of the members of Dungeon Busters did seem to be fighting for the sake of their loved ones or to save the world. But what about Ezoe? I felt as if he were clearing dungeons for the sake of clearing dungeons.

This was why, after sharing details of the international scene with him, I asked, “Why do *you* feel so convicted to do this, Ezoe-san? It may be true that you are the person who triggered the phenomenon. However, it was an entirely unpredictable occurrence, one that you hardly deserved all the fault for. It seems to me that you are making it your personal responsibility to clear all the dungeons in the world. What is it that is making you take all this onto your own shoulders?”

It was far too late for cheap answers like money or fame to suffice. Depending on his answer, I thought I would have to reconsider our—the government’s—stance towards Dungeon Busters, Inc.

Ezoe responded to me in a way that I had not expected—he opened the black window called a “Status window” and showed it to me. “Mr. Prime Minister, this is my Status. Please take a look.”

Name: Ezoe Kazuhiko

Title: First Contacter, Species Limit Breaker, First Buster Rank: C

Possession Limit: 0 / ∞

Skills: Card Gacha, Recovery Magic (Lvl. 5), Inducement (Lvl. 5), Teleportation, _____, _____

It was my first time seeing one of these so-called Status windows in person. *I see. This does look like the interface of a video game.* However, I could not understand what Ezoe was getting at.

“Sir, what I am most curious about is this ‘Title’ field. Why does it exist? I believe that currently, the only people who possess titles are Shishido Akira and myself. However, there is something that is clearly different between the two of us, and that is the very first title in my list, ‘First Contacter.’”

It does say that on his list. But what about it?

“I feel like there is something unique about this title. The other titles are likely obtainable by other people, or at least some version of them is. But not so for this one. It removes my card possession limit, enabling me to carry an infinite number of cards on me while in the dungeons. Furthermore, not only did it

expand my skill slots to six, it even allows me to choose what skills I want when I rank up. The bonuses bestowed along with this title are distinctly far greater than those of other titles."

"And you believe there is a reason behind this?"

Not being an adventurer myself, I could not fully grasp the scale of what Ezoe meant by "distinctly far greater." I could only take him at his word; if he said it was significant, then it was significant.

The man before me nodded in response to my prompt. "I described the 108 Stars of Destiny as a key earlier. However, I am of the mind that there is another key: the person who possesses the First Contacter title. In other words, I myself am yet another crucial key within the scope of the Dungeon System. That is the conclusion I arrived at. There's no other way to explain the disproportionately favorable treatment that came with this title."

I understood his reasoning, and as far as I could tell, he wasn't lying. However, that wasn't the answer I wanted. What I wanted was to hear his own personal sentiments. Title or no title, resisting the dungeon meant fighting day in and day out and that was a soul-crushing thing. Any normal human would have gone mad going through what he had gone through. What was it that kept him going? What was it that he was relying on for support? So I asked him this. I would never forget the face that he made then—it was the smile of a child.

"I want to know. What is it that I have encountered? What is it that I have turned into? What kind of existence is it that designed the Dungeon System? I continue delving into the dungeons because I believe that one day I will find answers. At my very core, what moves me and what supports me is curiosity. It's the burning desire to unravel the unknown and to learn what I did not know yesterday."

I burst into laughter. *So that's what it was! Now it all makes sense. And if the fire in him is that of a thirst to know, then indeed, no one could ever extinguish it. This man... This man is a true adventurer.*

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[Shishibone Dungeon — Ezoe Kazuhiko]

My talk with Prime Minister Urabe went a lot better than I had expected. *I really ought to give Ishihara thanks for laying all the groundwork.* Urabe never brought up the topic of what Abyss was dropping, merely commending me with a "Good luck with the dungeon clearing" as we parted. With that out of the way, it was time to focus on reaching Rank B, or else we might not be able to clear Abyss within the remaining five months allotted to us.

"Ho ho ho! Stay sharp; there's more coming!"

Currently, Akira, Akane, Emily, and I were fighting goblin soldiers on Floor 4 of Abyss. Shifu Liu, who had climbed to Rank C in the blink of an eye, was giving us advice while helping out here and there.

"Listen well. When your opponents are fighting as a team, the worst thing you can do is rush in without a plan. Who is going to draw how many of them? Who is going to deliver the finishing blow on each enemy? The team leader has to discern the answers to these questions instantaneously and give out the appropriate orders. *Think* about how you fight."

There were the four of us against groups of six goblin soldiers. We began each engagement with me slamming a shield, which I'd gotten through the gacha, into the goblin soldiers to break their formation and disrupt their teamwork. Then Akira, Akane, and Emily finished off the monsters in turn—when fighting one on one, those of my party were far stronger than goblin soldiers.

"As a tank, your job isn't to kill the enemy, but to separate them. Goblin soldiers are Rank C, but their fighting style is simplistic. They possess Sword Mastery, but conversely, that also means they *only* know how to use a sword. Your team's arsenal includes martial arts for close-range, the spear for mid-range, and kunai for long-range. So use that advantage. Chain your attacks together. And, just as you would for a chess or a shogi problem, crush the enemy one by one."

The goblin soldiers consistently showed up in teams of six, likely affected by Liu Fengguang's "Disciple Cultivation" skill. At first, it took us more than five minutes to finish off a team, but we continued improving that time. We were both learning how to better use our strengthened bodies—well, Akira and I were—and how to fight together as a team.

Name: Leather Shield

Rarity: Uncommon

Description: Sturdy shield made of layers of tanned monster leather. Requires oiling after use.

“This is serving me quite well for a UC item. Depending on how I use it, it’s more than making up for its lower rarity.”

I parried an incoming sword with my shield and pushed it away in the same motion. Without much significant resistance, the goblin soldier flew all the way to crash against the far wall. However, there was no way that a Rank C monster would die from something of that level. What I was doing was buying time. Another sword came down on me from behind, but I smoothly deflected it with my shovel, swept the goblin soldier’s legs from under it, then sent it flying back with my shield too. As long as I wasn’t worried about actually doing damage, I could easily handle two or three opponents at the same time. It was the job of the other three behind me to ensure that they died. My job was to open the enemy’s ranks to make it easy for them to do so.

“Hmm?”

Around when we’d managed to get the time for killing a group of six goblin soldiers down to four minutes, I noticed something was different. Right after I slammed one such monster against the wall, as I had been doing repeatedly for a while, it promptly turned to smoke. I had experienced this shift before. By this time, we had spent 2,400 hours in the dungeons, killed more than 100,000 monsters, and gathered more than 3,000 cards. I thought I had finally reached Rank B, but it turns out I was still short.

“Ho! You’ve finally reached ‘upper end of C.’ Let’s head back first so that you can put on more of those weights that you like so much. A hundred kilograms should do.”

“I’ve done this kind of training before to develop my trunk and core muscles, but...isn’t the number getting a bit too ridiculous?” Akira murmured.

Following the example of a certain hermit from a famous manga, I had also started custom-ordering weights. What I’d ordered specifically was a cylindrical

bag made of tarpaulin material that measured 80 cm long and 30 cm wide and was filled with 30 L of water. In addition, I also put on 7 kg on each leg, 3 kg on each arm, a 30 kg vest, and 20 kg around my waist. All together, I had exactly 100 kg on my person. If my body tilted just a little, I immediately felt like I would lose my balance.

"You should reach Rank B when you become capable of fighting the goblin soldiers easily even while wearing all this," Shifu Liu declared. "For now, maintain constant focus on your center of gravity. The moment you overreach, the water will pull you off balance and leave you wide open to attack."

It's true that this is heavy. However, this is probably only barely enough to get me to Rank B. The time needed to rank up is starting to take significantly longer. I'm sure it will only get worse going from B to A, then from A to S.

"Akira, you will be wearing exactly what Ezoe currently has on soon enough. Prepare yourself." Shifu Liu laughed in his distinctive booming voice, stroking his white beard.

* * *

Although it was true that we were on a tight schedule, our minds wouldn't be able to take it if we only pushed ourselves to work. This was the same for myself as well. In light of how those in the main office in Otemachi operated on a flexible five-day work week—as in, they could take any two days off each week, not necessarily the weekend—I thought it a good idea to give the delving group a much-needed respite as well.

"So that's why you all have this Saturday and Sunday to yourselves. Good work, everyone."

With that, Akira disappeared to have a date with some girl he knew in Mizue, Mari went to go shopping with her mother and see a movie with friends, and Mutsuo headed home to work on a figurine. Even the new members all seemed to have their own plans for enjoying the time off.

"Which leaves...me. What should *I* do?"

I seemed to remember occupying my time with quite a few pastimes before the emergence of the dungeons. However, I now had more money than I could

spend but no idea what to do with it. If I wanted to read books or watch movies, I could do so down in Abyss to much greater efficiency. Considering how it was January, I couldn't just go to Shinozaki Park and take an afternoon nap either.

"When I suddenly have time on my hands, I realize I don't really have anything to do..."

In the end, I just went back into Abyss to review our current status on the whiteboard and plot out our direction going forward. I couldn't help but to laugh a little in self-mockery. *You've forgotten how to have fun, Kazuhiko.*

"So, things that will need managing are the following: 1) the progress of each dungeon's clearing; 2) the recruiting of new adventurers; 3) the running of Dungeon Busters, Inc.; 4) advising government policies; 5) confirming the locations of every dungeon around the world..."

My marker flowed smoothly over the whiteboard. In order to meet the deadline of clearing Abyss by June 24, the date of Full Activation, I myself will have to have reached Rank A at least, preferably Rank S if possible. And in order to reach Rank S, I would need to be Rank A by the end of May at the latest.

"There should be another wave of dungeons emerging on January 29. In the end, I predict there will be eleven or twelve within Japan. We will need to investigate all of them concurrently—not only to determine the difficulty of clearing them, but also how appropriate they are for hosting Dungeon Bootcamps."

I had drawn out a tree diagram on the whiteboard. Under "1) Progress of each dungeon's clearing," I drew bubbles labeled "Rank up" and "Investigation of each dungeon." The second bubble on the first tier, "2) recruiting new adventurers," was going to be closely linked to the Bootcamp as well, and quite possibly might involve the transferring of JSDF members. I myself was fine with it, but obviously this was a matter that I would need to consult Director General Ishihara on. In light of this, I drew bubbles underneath this one labeled "Expanding the Bootcamp," "Referrals from members," and "Transferring from JSDF."

I stared at "3) Running of DB" and crossed my arms, groaning a little. "I've

thought this before, but consulting a company as an outside contractor and actually managing a company myself are two entirely different things. Hmm... I can't please everyone, and I'll need to think of everything within the grand scheme of things. It will also be important to convey everything to the employees in a transparent manner..."

Dungeon Busters, Inc. was a company with a very clear mission and vision. Thanks to this, we could set up rather clear and specific mid-and long-term goals. What we needed, therefore, was clarification of the strategies, policies, operations, and personnel that would be necessary for realizing those goals. *Maybe we can do a simplistic Nadler-Tushman Congruence Model analysis.*

"To establish an optimized organizational structure, we will need appropriate policies. To develop the employees and facilitate smooth in-company communication, we should also be careful in setting up systems for personnel evaluation and task management. It would be nigh impossible for me to handle all this by myself. If only I had a chief operating officer..."

I did have contacts who were former department heads of human resources and corporate planning, and even General Manager Mukai was doing a rather splendid job keeping everything running so far. However, I wasn't sure I could entrust the position of COO to any of them. The only person within my circle who I knew was truly fit for the job was Director General Ishihara.

"Seems like I've hit a dead end. Guess it's time I gave it a bit of a rest. Let's get back and grab a bite to eat."

I scanned the whiteboard, printed it, then returned above ground. Just as I was enjoying a smoke, my smartphone buzzed. It was a message. The sender turned out to be the Dungeon Adventurer Administrative Bureau. A grim look came over my face as I read through it.

<The Command Chief of Gamerica's US Dungeon Command has requested an interview with you regarding "the starting dungeon." Kindly provide several available dates and times at your earliest convenience.> Other countries are finally catching onto the existence of Abyss and my true identity, huh.

I took a deep drag, then expelled all the smoke back out in a long, sustained exhale.

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[Airspace Above the Pacific Ocean]

The Boeing C-32A is a transport plane that, at times, serves as Air Force One to transport the president and other important leaders of the United States of Gamerica. And today, one of the six C-32A's in existence had just taken off from Joint Base Andrews, a military base located in the state of Maryland.

"Why'd we have to fly in a military plane? It would've been faster to just buy a ticket to Haneda Airport. You know how far it is from Yokota Air Base to Ichigaya in Tokyo?"

"Although you were an outside hire, Guildmaster, your effective rank is that of a major general. As this is an official diplomatic visit, we cannot have you using anything other than proper military transport. Furthermore, this is one of the very few planes where we would not have to worry about information leakage."

Finding himself at a loss for a comeback, Command Chief Isaac Roland of the US Dungeon Command irritatedly ran his hand through his silver hair a few times before picking up the documents before him in resignation.

"The aim for this trip we're taking to Japan is to draw out whatever information we can from the man Kazuhiko Ezoe. According to my deductions, he is deeply involved with the Dungeon Outbreak Phenomenon. It is generally believed that the phenomenon began on July 30 in Japanese Standard Time, but I suspect that there was already another dungeon within Japan by then. He is very likely the person who discovered it."

"It still sounds like a bit of a stretch to me. I agree that Ezoe's proactiveness and sense of responsibility does seem to hint at something, but I'm not sure that's enough to base such a large speculation on."

"Hey, if I'm wrong, then I'm wrong. He *is* still the world's first-ever Buster. A talk with him would still be worth the time. As things currently stand, the earliest we can expect him in Gamerica would be more than a year away. That is more than enough time for Japan to pull so far ahead of us that we won't ever be able to catch back up."

Isaac's ominous-sounding declaration elicited a somewhat despondent nod from his secretary, Rebecca. Currently, Japan was far ahead of the rest of the world in regards to their handling of the dungeons. And yet, instead of capitalizing on that advantage, it remained proactive in sharing what information it learned. In contrast, Gamerica had closed its doors, fully intending on "managing somehow" on its own. Isaac couldn't do anything about the direction that President Howard had decided on, but as the one installed to head the country's anti-dungeon efforts, he was understandably rather disgruntled about the circumstances that he had to work with.

"However, Guildmaster, will Japan really give us the information you want for free? Even if you manage to meet Mr. Ezoe, will he really honestly admit to being the first man to discover the dungeons?"

"He probably won't. But the thing about being the first one to discover the dungeons is just my ticket in. My suspicion is that the Japanese government is still hiding something. The reason why they released information about the LR cards, the Dungeon Core, and other information that would normally be kept under wraps most likely means they know something much worse. Now *that's* what I really want to know."

"It's not like he'll just tell us if we ask him, right? Do we have a bargaining chip of our own?"

"I'll give him what he wants most right now," Isaac replied confidently.

When she heard what it was, Rebecca's face turned white as a sheet. What Isaac was planning on offering was nothing short of top secret intelligence.

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[Ministry of Defense — Ezoe Kazuhiko]

On January 28, I found myself within the building of the Ministry of Defense in Ichigaya, looking over information on the command chief of the USDC. It had supposedly been in English, but someone in the ministry had translated it into Japanese. Director General Ishihara was sitting across from me, her legs crossed.

"The job of the command chief of USDC is to devise the administrative

policies that Gamerica will be adopting to deal with the dungeons. All in all, it sounds really similar to what I do. And as you can tell from his profile, he has a pretty interesting past."

"It's true that if I had to describe him in one word, it would be 'genius.' Within the confines of being an academic, that is."

"Oh? That's a surprisingly low evaluation."

"Just like how there are very few economics professors who go on to create successful start-up companies, being able to teach something does not mean being skilled at putting that very thing into practice. In all likelihood, it is the same with this Isaac character. I cannot imagine him being able to use effective negotiation techniques. If I were him, I wouldn't have put something so blatant as 'the starting dungeon' in the original message. Just saying 'I want your advice' would have been enough to get me to make time for him, but he failed to catch on. In other words, he's likely quite inexperienced in dealing with people. Just watch—he's most likely going to try pushing through with reasoning alone during today's meeting."

"But that reasoning is still quite formidable, is it not? We are talking about the world's supposed top genius scientist. His ability to think logically is likely off the charts. Don't let your guard down."

I simply shrugged my shoulders in response. During my time within the corporate world, I had met countless people with brilliant minds. However, not all of them had necessarily been good at their job. Business was not something that could be "done well" in isolation. At the very bare minimum, a client—in other words, a second party—was needed. As such, it could be said that the ability to deal with people was *the* most important skill when doing business. And within my experience, having a sharp mind did not naturally correlate to being good at building up personal relations.

"If I am to liken him to a computer, I would say that he had incredible hardware but a faulty operating system. Communication is all about the OS's ability to be compatible, something that is usually lacking in the OS of a genius. That said, I'm also looking forward to this meeting quite a bit. It'll be my first time ever meeting someone with such a brilliant mind."

* * *

I finally came face-to-face with Command Chief Isaac Roland inside one of the reception rooms within the Ministry of Defense. He looked younger than I had expected. He was supposedly in his mid-twenties, but his appearance was that of a teenager. Despite being unofficial, this was still a meeting between countries, and yet, he wasn't even wearing a tie. *Does he think that just wearing a suit jacket is enough?*

"Nice to meet you. I'm Ezoe Kazuhiko of Dungeon Busters," I said towards our translator.

To my surprise, however, Isaac Roland responded directly himself. "Ah, I can speak Japanese just fine. I'm Isaac Roland of the USDC. Being able to meet *the* famous Ezoe-san from Dungeon Busters is an honor."

He even sounds fluent. I remember his dossier mentioning him being proficient with multiple languages, but Japanese wasn't on the list.

"Your Japanese is quite good. Have you perhaps lived in Japan before?"

"Oh, no, I picked it up reading light novels at the end of last year when I got interested in the dungeons. I read through more than a hundred volumes of modern low fantasy series that depicted dungeons appearing in our world, worlds with dungeons in them, and dungeons appearing in people's homes. Things like that."

"I see. How helpful did you find them?"

"They were great for learning the language itself, but not much help in terms of realistic policies that we could actually apply. Many of them were based on a leveling up system; many focused merely on a few developed countries despite there supposedly being dungeons all over the world; many failed to depict the reaction of the various religious powers despite the supernatural nature of the phenomenon, or otherwise depicted rather unrealistic imaginings of the effects of the dungeons on the world. Why would a high school student enter a dungeon in the first place? That very premise seems misplaced. The stories depicted teenage protagonists killing monsters and gathering resources as if it were any other part-time job, but this is normally something that any reasonable parent would stop their child from doing, right?"

“Well, these *are* works of fiction. Being so realistic would detract from the entertaining factor, wouldn’t it? They’re palatable because they portray a more forgiving version of reality. Ahem, talk of light novels aside, I see now that you are indeed quite fluent in Japanese, so I will take you up on your offer and continue this meeting in Japanese. The lady beside you...”

“Oh, she’s my secretary. She doesn’t know Japanese, but don’t worry about it. I’ll translate the recording for her myself afterwards.”

I nodded. *Looks like he’s the kind to talk a lot and do it really fast, as so many other geniuses do. And he did not check our faces for social cues even once, simply going on and on by himself. I wouldn’t go so far as to say “how Gamerican,” but at the very least, he wouldn’t do well in a Japanese corporate setting.*

“So, let’s get down to business. The reason why I came to Japan, Ezoe-san, is because I wanted to strike a deal with you.”

“A deal, you say?”

“That’s right. I’m offering to exchange the information that we at the USDC possess for the information that the Japanese Ministry of Defense possesses.”

“That sounds like you don’t need me here, then.”

“Ah, but I do, don’t I? What we’re talking about is deeply tied to *your* personal information. Ezoe-san, my deduction leads me to believe that you are the reason behind the Dungeon Outbreak Phenomenon. Somewhere in Japan, on June 24 of last year, you came upon the very first dungeon and entered it. It might have been somewhat of a force majeure event, but it was your actions that triggered the activation of the Dungeon System. At that time, you were granted a mission. Probably something along the lines of ‘clear all the dungeons.’ In order to fulfill this mission, you were bestowed information regarding the dungeons. What do you think? Am I close?”

“That’s a rather interesting story you’re telling. However, even if it is as you deduced, did you think I would admit it? To you, someone who’s representing another country?”

“Probably not. But I don’t really need you to. As I said earlier, I’m here to

strike a deal. I believe that when you see what information I have to offer, you will definitely respond in kind."

"Bold claim. Incidentally, what is it that Gamerica wants to know?"

"The three pieces of information that the Japanese government is still hiding from the rest of the world. One, how long the Dungeon Outbreak Phenomenon is expected to last. Two, how many dungeons there will be by the end. Three, how long we have until the Monster Stampede. You, and the Japanese government by extension, know the answer to these three questions. I'm sure of it."

"Ha ha ha! And what makes you so sure?"

"The speed at which you were taking action. What you have achieved within half a year of July 30, the date of the 'first' wave of dungeons, is nothing short of incredible. Japan already has a civilian adventurer initiative up and running—heck, you've even cleared a dungeon!—while Gamerica and the EU are still deliberating our own policies. And you were the driving force behind all that. You founded Dungeon Busters, Inc., gathered allies, brought the possibility of the Monster Stampede to light, and proved that it was indeed possible to clear the dungeons. It would not be an exaggeration to say that Japan is currently several *years* ahead of the rest of the world. The reason why you are rushing so much is because time is limited. You know the number of dungeons that will need clearing and the amount of time allotted to do so. There's no other way to explain your rush."

I shot a look at Director General Ishihara, who was sitting next to me. She nodded, then addressed the talkative genius.

"Even if we do possess this information and we pass it to you, what will you do with it? Announce it to the world?"

"As if! Even our limelight-hungry president isn't that stupid. No, no, we will be keeping that information to ourselves at USDC for a while yet. It's just that we need these answers in order to decide what policies to formulate and adopt, with the most important being the one about how much time we have left. If it's a hundred years in the future, great. But judging from Ezoe-san's actions, it's not that far off, is it? It could be twenty—no, maybe only ten years away even.

This is something that we need to know in order to protect *our* own citizens."

"Isn't your side fully capable of protecting your citizens without such information?" Ishihara asked, sarcastic. "That's what you withdrew all your overseas forces for, right?"

Isaac merely shrugged his shoulders. Instead of responding to her sarcasm, he looked at me. "The information that we at the USDC have to offer for this deal is something that I'm sure you really want."

"You've said that before. Surprise me."

Isaac gestured to his secretary, who took out a document written in English. "To put it simply, I'm offering you intel on the location of every dungeon around the world. Very few know this, but every dungeon generates a small electromagnetic pulse and disturbs the local gravitational field. Our reconnaissance satellites have coverage over the entire planet, and we've accurately pinpointed every such instance that's occurred over the past few months. In the same vein, we are the only country on Earth that has the resources to guarantee the continued provision of such information. So this is the deal I'm offering: the location of all dungeons that have appeared and will appear in exchange for the answers to the three questions I posed just now. Especially the last one."

To be honest, Isaac definitely had me at this moment. What he was offering was something that I would be willing to pay any amount of money for—it was more than equal in worth to the information we held. Dancing in the palm of Gamerica's hand irked me a little, but this would be an exchange that would benefit both sides. *He's got himself a deal. Look, even Ishihara's smiling and nodding.*

"I see. We would gain intel on the location of the target dungeons, and you would gain the intel you need to set appropriate dungeon countermeasure policies. It does sound like a win-win deal."

The tension in the air dissipated after Ishihara's words. However, just when it seemed like the deal was going to be sealed, the expression of the woman next to me underwent an abrupt change as she crossed her legs and took on the demeanor of a queen.

In a cold voice, she said, in English, “However, we refuse. Don’t underestimate us. How much information has Japan provided to the world for free so far? You learned your information sitting in a comfortable office staring at your monitor. We learned our information from our people risking their lives. One man even lost an arm. And you say that they are equal? Don’t make me laugh. Intel on the dungeons’ locations is something that should be provided to the UN for free!”

As it was in English, I had no idea what was being said. All I knew, however, was that Queen Ishihara’s sudden transformation had left Isaac with his jaw on the floor.

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[Ministry of Defense — Isaac Roland]

My negotiation strategy had been perfect. I’d started by talking about light novels—a topic that the Japanese were greatly familiar with. Then I’d shaken things up by throwing all my deductions at them at once. As a clincher, I’d clearly laid out how both sides stood to benefit from this exchange. Ezoe had looked like he was ready to accept the deal, but then the woman next to him had seemed to turn into a totally different person out of the blue. She’d belittled us, then had even gone so far as to declare what we had to offer “worthless”!

In slight alarm, I slipped back into English. “Mister Ezoe, this lady...”

However, Ezoe simply shrugged his shoulders and replied in a thick accent, “Ah, so-ri. Ai kyannot supeaku Engrishu.”

This indicated that the intellectual and rational Ezoe had stepped out of the ring, leaving me to persuade a woman who seemed determined to be irrational. *C’mon, really? I don’t want to deal with someone having a hysterical fit. What’s she saying anyways? That we should sacrifice our bargaining chip for nothing? Just because they did so?*

“Naturally, we are not against passing this information to the UN. But...”

“No buts or ifs. Japan has done our best to cooperate with other countries in dealing with the dungeons. We have provided so much information with nothing in return. If you want to negotiate with us, you should also cooperate

with international efforts and provide information to the world. Currently, Gamerica is prioritizing only your own interests. Honestly speaking, we cannot trust you. Do President Howard and your secretary of defense know of this deal?"

"Ugh..."

I said *that this information is top secret, didn't I?! Of course they don't. If it gets out that I tried to barter it away, my head would fly. I mean, I don't care about getting fired. What I do care about is losing access to the necessary resources for continuing my research into the dungeons.*

"We ask for two conditions: the intel on the location of the dungeons, and Gamerica's support of the suggestions we make regarding the Adventurer HQ being established by the UN right now. Once the HQ is set up, then we will give you the information you are asking for. I'm telling you, approaching Prime Minister Urabe will not help you. With the US-Japan Security Treaty effectively broken off, Japan has no obligation to do what Gamerica says."

Like hell President Howard will say yes to that! He's the kind of person who thinks "what's yours is mine and what's mine is mine." If we don't elect a Democratic president open to the idea of international cooperation later this year, it would mean five consecutive years of the Howard Doctrine. If that happens, we'll fall far behind in terms of dungeon policy, which means my research would also get delayed.

"It's true that we want the information that you are offering, but we don't need it right now," the woman continued. "We are already in contact with the ASEAN and EU countries, and we also have our own intel. The value of the information offered on both sides of this deal is not the same, so we cannot accept. We wish Gamerica all the best. When you change your stance, we can talk again."

And then the meeting was adjourned. *Aren't the Japanese supposed to be a people of compromise and cooperation? How can she be so vehement in her refusal?!*

For the first time in my life, I experienced the feeling of defeat.

* * *

“Well, that went horribly. I’d thought Ezoe the key person to talk to, but boy was I wrong. Looks like when it comes to dungeon policies, *she’s* the key person —Yukie Ishihara.”

I couldn’t help but grumble a little in the car as we made our way back to Yokota Air Base from the Ministry of Defense. When I mentally revealed what had been said during the meeting, the conclusion I arrived at was that Ishihara really had been illogical and emotional. If they really prioritized the clearing of the dungeons as much as they claimed, they should have accepted my offer.

“Japanese bureaucrats are excellent,” Rebecca replied. “We’ve just never been on the receiving end of them at their most vicious so far because they were prioritizing our diplomatic relations. Clearly, President Howard’s speech at the beginning of the year is already taking its toll. Japan might be beginning to part with us in regards to their national security.”

“And we can’t really complain about it either—not when we’re the one who broke the treaty in the first place.” I sighed. “Seriously, that president of ours. Gamerica First is good and all, but can’t he think a bit more before speaking?”

“President Howard wants anyone who is interested in Gamerica’s market to listen to him. Once the issue of global energy inequality is resolved by the magic stones, Japan just might take Gamerica’s place as world leader.”

“The shift is already occurring. It’s a problem, but not one which we can do anything about, I suppose. For now, Ezoe and Ishihara’s reactions have proved that there is a specific deadline for the Monster Stampede. Let’s develop our policies around that fact.”

Let’s set it as twenty—no, let’s say ten years. There are currently seventeen dungeons within the US. A reasonable assumption would be to expect that number to double—so, thirty-four in total—with ten years to clear them all. Let’s work with those numbers in mind. What? Report to the defense secretary? I’m sure Rebecca will do a good job of it.

Shucks. I really wanted to see the Dungeon Core for myself!

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[Ministry of Defense — Ezoe Kazuhiko]

As the conversation had shifted to English halfway through, I didn't understand what had been said. The result, however, was clearly a breakdown in negotiations. We failed to gain the intel on the location of the dungeons, and the other side failed to gain our information. In game theory terms, it was the prisoner's dilemma.

"It didn't work out?" I asked. "Pretty drastic choice, don't you think?"

Ishihara snorted. "I didn't like his attitude from the get-go. Acting all smug like 'I know your secret' and pretending to be a big shot for learning Japanese through reading light novels. An impertinent brat; that's what he was. He's ten years too young to be negotiating with me."

"However, we really do need the intel on the dungeon locations..."

"Don't worry about it—Gamerica will be the first to fold. In the meantime, you go around clearing the dungeons in the countries willing to cooperate. After you do, Japanese firms can expand into their markets and set up joint ventures within the hydrogen energy generation industry, working towards equalizing access to energy. Of the seven billion people in the world, we will make 6.6 billion of them our allies. Ten years from now, Gamerica will be pushed off the throne of leader of the world and reduced to being a mere first world country."

"Do... Do you have a grudge against Gamerica or something?" I asked, somewhat curious about the personal inflection in Ishihara's tone.

She grimaced, then turned to look out the window. "I probably shouldn't say this, being on the career track at the Ministry of Justice and all, but... That country really pisses me off! Year after year, they push us to buy their stupidly expensive fighter jets! And those louts who don't understand a single thing about conserving energy—they even keep their air conditioners running throughout the three months they're off!—come asking *us* for reimbursement for their sky-high 'garrison operating expenses'! 'Country of justice'?! Have they already forgotten the Great Tokyo Air Raid and the *two nuclear bombs they dropped on us*?! Even today, they're still sending their armies everywhere, stirring up wars and committing war crimes like it's nothing! And what do they do after completely messing up the place? They go right back home, taking no responsibility whatsoever! If there were a way to restrict it to Gamerica alone, I

would actually *want* the Monster Stampede to occur!”

“I... I see...”

Ishihara’s outburst almost had me saluting and going “Yes, ma’am!” Clearly she had been bottling up quite a lot of emotions regarding Gamerica. *Or is this due to the hormonal imbalance from menopause?*

After continuing to disparage Gamerica a while longer, Ishihara suddenly seemed to come back to her senses. She exhaled, then turned around with a smile. “Well, as you can see, I can keep going for quite a while. However, Gamerica is still one of Japan’s important allies. We acknowledge them as a valuable partner, both in terms of our economies and national security. The Ministry of Defense strongly values the relationship we share with Gamerica.”

Uh, who’re you saying that to?

* * *

On January 29, the world saw the emergence of a fresh wave of dungeons, one of which was indeed located within Japan. Contrary to my expectations, however, it was not in a major city.

“Early this morning, a new dungeon appeared in the parking lot of the head offices of Hokusei Bank within the Korinbo district of Kanazawa, Ishikawa Prefecture. Our local correspondent, Shigeta, is currently on scene. Shigeta-san _”

This was when I turned the TV off. Honestly, I had not expected the Dungeon System to choose Kanazawa, a Kyoto-lookalike with a population of only four hundred thousand. The area around the newly-established Shinkansen station was seeing a certain amount of growth, but this was a city that was otherwise a whole hour away by bus from the closest access to the outside world, Komatsu Airport. Even now, it was considered part of a rather isolated economic bloc, and a large part of its market was composed of long-standing generational businesses. I had been to this city a few times before.

“So it’s Kanazawa after Yokohama, huh. Then I’ve got to visit Katamachi, and I definitely must drop by Number 8 Gyoza Restaurant.”

I would have a large platter of gyoza at Number 8 Gyoza Restaurant for lunch,

oden at the famous Miyuki for dinner, drinks at the beer garden at ollo building afterwards, karaoke somewhere close, then a few bowls of dashi chazuke at the specialist store Shinano—a place where you yell “Yafuu” at the owner chef for everything—to end the night. *Yep, sounds like a plan.*

“Though of course, my main goal is the dungeon,” I reminded myself as I flipped through my planner.

The research branch of the Ministry of Defense really wanted to look into the Dungeon Core in Sapporo Dungeon, and I was the only one who could operate it. In other words, I had to escort them to the lowest floor. Not that I minded, of course. Rather, I thought it a good opportunity. *After finishing up in Sapporo, let’s go down to Sendai, then circle around to Kanazawa.*

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[Sapporo Dungeon — Kurita Hideki]

I, Kurita Hideki, was one of the researchers within the Dungeon Technology Research Center, an organization that had been newly established under the Acquisition, Technology and Logistics Agency (ATLA). Our job ranged from studying the dungeons themselves—such as by modeling their internal structures—to reverse-engineering the products they produced—such as the magic stones, cards, and potions—in the hopes of discovering as-yet unknown technologies. In short, we were so-called “dungeon researchers.”

Almost everything about the dungeons was an absolute marvel to those of us in the scientific community. The physical laws within them seemed to be entirely different from those of our world. Take time, for example. Even though time flowed 144 times faster within the dungeons, the space within had the same gravity as Earth. This was a clear contradiction to the general theory of relativity. The same was true of the Status windows. Everyone’s Status window was standardized with a black background and white text, but these did not seem to be projected by any physical source. It would have been a different matter if it were only visible to the person themselves. In actuality, however, it was visible to everyone else, and could even be picked up on camera. In other words, *something* was emitting light waves. However, our equipment failed to pick up on the presence of any unnatural substance. The phenomenon was so

inexplicable that I heard quite a few scientists talk about looking into paranormal photography in search of hints.

And because the dungeons were so filled with things beyond our current understanding of science, everyone from Nobel Prize laureates to amateur hobbyists were all champing at the bit to have a go at the dungeons. A Gamerican university had launched “dungeon engineering” as a new major, and there were numerous colleges within Japan that had established research centers and were actively exchanging information with each other.

Then there was me, who was currently trembling with emotion as I stood before a black octahedron that looked like a giant diamond on the lowest floor of Sapporo Dungeon. This was a so-called Dungeon Core, and absolutely everything about it was a complete mystery. The moment I laid eyes on it, however, I could instinctively tell that it wasn’t something from our world. It was impossible to artificially create such a perfect octahedron using our current level of technological prowess.

The function of this object on Floor 7 of Sapporo Dungeon was, far as we could tell, to display the information regarding this dungeon. The information panel itself would appear no matter who touched it, so I shakily placed a hand on the cold yet softly glowing surface.

Dungeon No.: 103

Rank: D

Master: Ezoe Kazuhiko

Qty. of Floors: 007

Supplied DE: 717

Resource: Black Magic Crystal Stampede: Off (45,441,973,440)

“What is this ‘Supplied DE’ field? And does the fact that there’s a field for the resource being generated mean that it’s possible to change it? When would the number indicated in the Stampede field begin moving?”

As the others in my team fiercely debated among themselves, I touched each field on the display one after the other. However, there was no reaction. Ezoe-

san had mentioned that when he touched the Stampede field, he could toggle it between “On” and “Off.” In other words, the only person who could manipulate this display was the Buster who held administrative rights over the place.

“Ezoe-san, I’m afraid you’re the only person who can operate this screen. I’m sorry for the bother, but could I trouble you to touch the fields?”

Ezoe-san obliged, going down the list one by one. When he got to “Supplied DE,” a bluish white light emitted from the Status window to create what looked like a holographic projection.

“This...looks like the layout of the dungeon,” Ezoe-san murmured curiously, bringing his face closer to the hologram. When he touched the second floor from the bottom it flew out and expanded. Every small detail about the floor was visible, along with countless white dots moving all over within. Wondering if the white dots were monsters, I asked Ezoe-san to try touching one. When he did so, another screen popped up.

Name: Killer Bat

Title: None

Rank: D

Rarity: Uncommon

Skills: Flying (Lvl. 1), Bite (Lvl. 1), _____

Resource Qty.: F

Setting: Repopulate

“Some of these fields aren’t on the monster cards,” Ezoe-san exclaimed. “‘Resource Qty.’ likely refers to the magic stones, but what does ‘F’ mean in that context? And the word ‘Repopulate’ likely indicates that the ‘Setting’ field is referring to what would be called ‘spawning’ in games, right? The Guardian never respawned, though; does that mean it’s in a different class?”

Nothing happened when Ezoe-san touched “Name” and “Title,” but a secondary pop-up window appeared when he got to “Resource Qty.”, offering the options of “F,” “E,” and “D.” The “Setting” field also seemed to allow

choosing between the two options of “Repopulate” and “Fixed.”

“Pretty intuitive. Interesting.”

Ezoe-san merely thought it “interesting,” but the word was solely inadequate for what I, as a researcher, felt at the moment. First of all, this holographic display was far beyond any projection technology that we humans had developed so far. There was no lens like we would expect from a projector, and there was no obvious source of light. This phenomenon itself already posed a huge number of questions. There was little doubt that our display technology would take an enormous leap forward the moment we managed to understand how this projection worked.

However, Ezoe-san did not seem to notice my excitement. Rather, he was quite occupied messing with the hologram. *Shit, wait, what is he doi*— Rumble, rumble, rumble.

The holographic part of Floor 6 disappeared as the ground under our feet shook a little. Whereas the model had previously shown a total of seven floors, it now only had six.

“So the Dungeon Master can freely alter the internal structure of the dungeon. I see.”

WHAT HAVE YOU DONE?!

“But there’s no change to ‘Supplied DE.’ Should I try erasing all the floors aside from Floor 1 and Floor 7?”

“STOP RIGHT THEEEEEEERE! Ezoe-san, *please* don’t touch it anymore! What are you going to do if you accidentally erase the entire dungeon?! Please give us time to examine what just happened! I beg of you, please just stay put!”

Ezoe-san shrugged his shoulders, then dismissed the holographic display. Clearly, he had the authority to make quite a few changes at will. This in itself would also require studying. And so all of us set up camp on Floor 7, proceeding to study everything about the relief on the ceiling and the Dungeon Core itself as closely as possible.

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[Sapporo Dungeon — Ezoe Kazuhiko]

My personal view was that researchers and scholars were basically otaku. The definition of otaku was “someone with a consuming interest in something who becomes far more knowledgeable about it than the average person.” The researchers currently on Floor 7 with me were so thoroughly obsessed with analyzing the ceiling relief and the Dungeon Core that they were even forgoing sleep and food. They were practically “dungeon otaku” at this point.

“This is truly amazing! So it is possible to alter not only the structure of the dungeon, but even the places where the monsters appear and the quantity of what they drop! What’s more, it’s possible to alter the drops, with there being options other than magic stones! So this is the authority of a Dungeon Master. Does this mean it would be possible to change the gravity and speed of time as well? How about making dungeon floors spacious and illuminated by sunlight? Right, like a giant pasture!”

Uh, now you’re just asking too much.

That aside, we had indeed learned quite a few things during the past few days (dungeon time) spent down in Sapporo Dungeon’s lowest floor. Firstly, “Supplied DE” apparently referred to the energy that was flowing to this dungeon from another dimension. Sapporo Dungeon had up to seven floors, which meant it wasn’t possible to create an eighth floor. The researchers hypothesized that this was because there wasn’t enough energy being supplied to maintain more floors.

Next was “Resource Qty.” This apparently referred to the weight of the magic stones being dropped. The blue slimes on Floor 5 of Sapporo Dungeon dropped magic stones weighing four grams, which was lighter than those dropped by the evil flying squirrels on Floor 2 of Yokohama Dungeon. We attempted to change the “Resource Qty.” setting of the blue slimes to confirm this theory, but the system didn’t let us—it was locked at “F.” In all likelihood, this was also because of “Supplied DE.”

“Looks like it’d be safe to draw the conclusion that the settings of each dungeon are balanced so as to fully utilize the DE it is supplied with. How about we reduce Sapporo Dungeon to having only four floors, with Floor 1 having

Rank F monsters, Floor 2 having Rank E monsters, Floor 3 having Rank D monsters, and keeping the Dungeon Core on Floor 4? That way, we could maximize the size of the magic stones—sorry, the official name is “magic crystals”—being dropped. If we do that, then this dungeon would be great for hosting the Bootcamp in.”

My suggestion, however, was put on hold with a “let’s try that another time” by the researchers, who also expressed great interest in the under-Rank F monsters that populated Floors 1 and 2 and could not be cardified. Suspecting that the un-cardifiable monsters could perhaps be brought above ground without relying on the Materialization skill, the researchers placed a few inside cages and tried to walk out of the dungeon. When they reached the Safety Zone on Floor 1, however, their subjects all turned into smoke.

What was more, there were apparently different kinds of magic crystals that could be generated—aside from black, there was also red, white, and a few other options. In other words, it *was* possible to change what was dropped in a dungeon. If black was for producing hydrogen, then the other colors just might be usable for producing some other resource. In order to pursue similar studies in the “principles of the dungeons,” it was decided that we would be keeping Sapporo Dungeon in its current state.

“Although it ended up slightly different from what the director general had in mind, it turns out it was the right call to not erase the place after all.”

After exiting the dungeon, I reported to Director General Ishihara straightaway through video call. Originally, she’d wanted to convert the dungeon into a location for hosting the Bootcamp as soon as the studies were over, but the researchers protested vehemently. In the end, Ishihara had no choice but to agree to leave this dungeon as-is. At least until the next dungeon was cleared, that was.

“Now that things have turned out this way, we need you to go clear another dungeon as quickly as possible. ATLA is saying that they want another dungeon to compare against.”

“That’s much easier said than done. We’re working on Yokohama at the moment, but do you want me to confirm Sendai’s rank first? I can fly to Sendai

from New Chitose Airport tomorrow morning and take a look inside in the afternoon.”

“Oh? Knowing you, I thought you’d be heading straight to Sendai within the day.”

“I’m still human, all right? Not a dungeon clearing machine.”

“You don’t say. So, what are you eating tonight?”

“Sea urchin bowl and hairy crab— what the hell is with that face?! Anyways, I’m going to Sendai Dungeon tomorrow afternoon. Bye!”

I ended the call in a hurry. *Goodness, she looked like I had killed her parents or something! But no matter. Tonight, I’ll be accompanied by the girl that I had that one-night stand with last time. We’ll be meeting up in front of the TV tower to head to the seafood izakaya Sugino—which is within walking distance from Odori Park—together. The plan is to eat sea urchin, salmon roe, and crab by the kilos. Oh, right, scallops and oysters are delicious this time of the year, so we definitely need to order some of those too. Then we’ll take a taxi to Susukino, hang out at a club for a while, then look for a place that’s famous for miso ramen—right, Ezokuma remains open till quite late. After that, we can enjoy ourselves back at the hotel until the sun rises. I’ll have more than enough time to enjoy the hotel’s soup curry for breakfast before heading over to New Chitose.*

“Playing hard after finishing up a job and fully enjoying the local cuisine at the cities we clear dungeons at. Yep, I definitely want to make this a part of Dungeon Busters’s culture.”

When I arrived before the TV tower at the promised time, I found my slightly bustier-than-average date—just the way I liked it—already waiting for me.

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[Ishihara Yukie]

I honestly cannot tell if that man is there to clear a dungeon or to enjoy himself. Both, probably.

Being an adventurer was to constantly live on the tightrope between life and death. Although Sapporo Dungeon was supposedly the weakest rank, it was still

too tall an order to ask Ezoe to escort the research team down to the lowest floor all by himself. As such, I had assigned five JSDF members who had reached Rank E as support. Sure enough, some of them did get injured. As it stood, our JSDF forces were incapable of clearing even the weakest dungeon by ourselves. We had no other recourse but to rely on civilian adventurers. That was just how things were.

I took out a notebook from one of my desk drawers. It was just what I used to get my thoughts in order, but in light of its contents, I still had to treat it as a top secret document. I once again put my pen to paper as I spoke my thoughts aloud.

"Does he really understand the implication behind the fact that only the Master of a dungeon can change the settings on the Dungeon Core?"

Allowing Dungeon Busters, Inc. to hold administrative rights over the dungeons was fine. As their aim was to prevent the Monster Stampede, they would toggle the Stampede field "Off" even without us having to ask it of them. However, the same could not be said for the rest of the world. It was true that only Dungeon Busters had succeeded in clearing a dungeon so far, but Gamerica and Sina could hardly be expected to just sit there twiddling their thumbs. It probably wouldn't take a year before more Busters appeared in other countries. *Can we really trust all of them to turn Stampede off?*

"The IDAO will be ratified by 190 out of the world's 193 countries. However, there's no way to confirm whether a Buster has turned Stampede off in his or her dungeon without involving an impartial third party. We'll need a whole other system for confirming dungeon clears."

The main topic currently being debated at the UN was the mutual aid agreements between member countries within the context of dealing with the dungeons. A major concern that was being raised was how adventurers could apparently attain supernatural abilities thanks to Enhancement Element. On the off chance that any such person turned to crime, it might become extremely difficult for normal police to catch or suppress them. As a way to combat this, a centralized database of all adventurers, including their names, ranks, skills, and achievements, was going to be set up at the IDAO. Naturally, this information was not going to be available to the general public, but there was simply no

other way to supervise usage of skills like Ezoe Kazuhiko's Teleportation. The hope was that this consolidated database would help to serve as a deterrent against crime.

"That being said, we would have to rely on each country to gather their own adventurers' information, so there's no telling how reliable the database would actually turn out..."

Once a dungeon was cleared, what it dropped could be changed. For all anyone knew, if a dungeon in Central Gamerica was cleared by a criminal gang, it could be made to generate narcotics instead of magic stones. I held no illusions about this becoming an up-to-date database of every single dungeon in existence.

"The final number of 666 seems quite certain now, and the phenomenon should be ending in June this year. We would have to wait till then to work out an accurate map of where each and every dungeon is located. And I suppose this would be the best time to announce the ten-year deadline, right?"

I couldn't help grinding my teeth a little as I recalled the meeting with Command Chief Isaac Roland the other day. It did not seem to have affected Gamerica's stance in any way, seeing as how the withdrawal of their troops was still underway as of February. North of us was the Rushian Federation, and west of us was the Kingdom of Ko and the Oriental Republic of Sina—all of these were nations that we had to remain wary against. That said, our diplomatic relationship with Sina did seem to be shifting. As proof, the other side had abruptly stopped fussing about the Senkaku Islands, and I'd heard from contacts within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs that the amount of under-the-table communications coming in from Sina had suddenly exploded in quantity, with the large majority of them expressing a friendly attitude in a marked departure from the previous status quo.

"If we can actually resolve our disputes about territory and historical understanding, then the burden on the Maritime SDF and Air SDF would be drastically alleviated. In such a scenario, we wouldn't need the remaining Gamerican forces either and could arrange for their gradual withdrawal as well. After that, we can say goodbye to ever allowing Gamerican troops step foot on Japanese soil again."

The Urabe administration's greatest goals were "constitutional amendment" and "independent self-defense." Thanks to the Dungeon Outbreak Phenomenon, public support for both was rising. In all likelihood, the House of Representatives would be dissolved within the first half of the year and a referendum for the constitutional amendment would be called after the Tokyo Olympics.

"Regardless, it's starting to look like we're really going to need a Ministry of Dungeons. There's just too much that the dungeons affect, ranging from national security to politics, economics, and even foreign policy. A single bureau within the Ministry of Defense sorely lacks the authority and resources needed to deal with so many things."

I felt like Prime Minister Urabe also saw this need. In all likelihood, the new Ministry of Dungeons would be set up within the year, composed of the younger employees gathered from each of the various other existent ministries. And I would be the most equipped person to serve as administrative vice-minister by far when that happened.

"A year ago, I would have thrown both hands up in celebration, but..."

The Ministry of Dungeons, when established, would become responsible for the fate of not only Japan but of the entire world at large. The burden on the shoulders of the administrative vice-minister of such a ministry would be incredibly heavy. Just thinking about it was enough to elicit a heavy sigh from me.

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[Sendai, Miyagi Prefecture — Ezoe Kazuhiko]

Sendai Dungeon was located within Kokubuncho district of Aoba, Sendai. As it had appeared within the first-floor parking area of a building along the major Jozenji-dori Avenue, the entire building had to be sealed off. Its proximity to the heart of the city—with Kotodai Park, Sendai City Hall, Miyagi Prefectural Office, and so many other official facilities within walking distance—was causing a rather significant amount of unease among the local populace.

"It's been a while since we've gone dungeon delving with just the two of us, Kazuhiko-sama."

When I reached the Safety Zone on Floor 1 of Sendai Dungeon, the first thing I did was materialize Akane. There were no JSDF members with me this time because of the monster that we would be facing.

“Floor 1 is supposedly occupied by two-headed dogs strong enough to have bitten off a JSDF member’s finger. Based on this fact alone, I’m thinking that this dungeon is higher ranked than Yokohama Dungeon. Worst case, it could even be more difficult than Abyss.”

“A dog with two heads sounds like the Rank E monster lebludor. It is not particularly strong, but still enough of a threat to Rank F humans. Please do not let your guard down either, Kazuhiko-sama.”

With that, the two of us walked straight in. We could hear growling almost immediately. Akane stepped in front of me protectively as I tightened my grip on my shovel. Soon enough, a dog with two heads came into view at the far end of the passage before us. Its size was roughly that of a shiba inu.

“Our welcoming party’s here.”

“Kazuhiko-sama, allow me.”

The disturbing-looking dog lunged towards us. Akane reached towards her back for her new weapon, then her body seemed to flicker for a split second. The next moment, the dog—still in midair—split apart into countless pieces and turned into smoke.

Name: Kurogasumi

Rarity: Super Rare

Description: A ninja sword crafted by a dwarven craftsman. Made of adamantite, which makes it unbreakable. Grants the wielder a boost to speed and slashing damage.

“This weapon feels so very natural in my hand. Thanks to this, I believe we will be able to make quite a bit of progress even with just the two of us, Kazuhiko-sama.”

“That may be so, but it bothers me somewhat that Floor 1 is occupied by Rank E monsters. We would have no problems dealing with them, but this is too

dangerous to serve as a venue for the Dungeon Bootcamp. These dogs seem more dangerous than even the goblins back at Abyss. Could it be that this is a Rank S dungeon like the one in Osaka?”

To my surprise, Akane shook her head, then replied, “In all likelihood, this is a Rank B dungeon.”

“Rank B! That would make it lower than Abyss. What makes you say so?”

“Rank A and Rank S dungeons all possess unique names, with the one you discovered being ‘Abyss.’ The first time someone steps into a Rank A dungeon, the Dungeon System will inform them of the dungeon’s unique name. When we entered this place, however, there was no such announcement.”

“Hold on. Then what about Osaka Dungeon? Both police officers and JSDF members have entered it before, but I’ve heard no such mention. And now, no one’s going in because the bureau has sealed it, but...”

“Many things are different for Rank S dungeons. I suspect that Osaka Dungeon does not have a Safety Zone in the first place. You might have to confirm that for yourself, however.”

I could not help but click my tongue in irritation at myself. All this time, I had just accepted the theory of Osaka Dungeon being a Rank S dungeon as fact and had been putting it on the back burner. Therefore, I had almost no information on it whatsoever, as the possibility of a Rank S dungeon being different from the others had never even occurred to me.

“That’s a problem I’m going to need to address ASAP. Which reminds me, I haven’t even watched the footage of the inside of Osaka Dungeon. Wait, *is* there footage? After the JSDF squad went in and took a few photos, they never let anyone back in, if I recall.”

Clearing the seven Rank S dungeons was going to be crucial if we were to prevent the Monster Stampede ten years from now. There was no telling how many Rank S had appeared already. If all of them were without Safety Zones, however, then they shouldn’t be too hard to identify.

“Once I get back, I’ll need to take a closer look at all the information we have on Osaka Dungeon. If need be, I’ll go pay it a visit in person. If it is possible to

tell a Rank S dungeon apart with just one look, then we should definitely issue a warning to the rest of the world."

In any case, my current focus is on Sendai Dungeon. Once we get to Floor 3, we should have a pretty good idea on the dungeon's rank. After that, I'll have my fill of beef tongue at Kokubuncho, then materialize Akane in the hotel for a "great time" while looking down at the nightscape of Sendai.

The two of us struck off towards Floor 2, my heart beating in expectation of the enjoyment that was to come.

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[Yokohama Dungeon — Shishido Akira]

We were currently busy power-leveling within Yokohama Dungeon. It was basically a rehashing of what Aniki had done for me, but I wasn't as unhi— diligent as he was, so we kept at it for only half of each aboveground day. Even so, that meant two whole weeks inside the dungeons at a time, which was still quite exhausting in both the physical and mental sense.

"Ugh, the magic attacks are such a bother! Yosshii, incoming!" Amane-chan cried.

Yosshii grunted "Mm!" in acknowledgment, bracing himself.

The monsters on Floor 3 of Yokohama Dungeon looked like cute fennec foxes at first glance. However, the rock pellets that they shot at the speed of actual bullets were anything but cute. I myself could see the attacks and dodge them with ease, but I could hardly expect the same from the two members who were still Rank E.

"Ho ho ho! Don't think. Feel. Listen for the whistling sound made by the bullets. Look sharp. It's shooting another round!"

Rinko-chan, who had reached Rank D, barely managed to dodge the incoming attacks and thrust Ruyi Bang forward. To her frustration, the fennec fox generated a small sandstorm around itself, obscuring its form. The metallic clank of her staff striking bare floor rang out.

Name: Devil Vulpes

Title: None

Rank: D

Rarity: Uncommon

Skills: Stone Bullet (Lvl. 3), Sand Wall (Lvl. 1), _____

"Looks like the common theme of the monsters in Yokohama Dungeon is 'fluffiness.' If Maririn caught sight of this card, she would definitely want it as a pet."

"Akira-san! This is no time to be talking about—"

I looked up at Hisato's shout and, realizing that he hadn't noticed the bullet shooting right towards his face, reached out to catch it. My physical prowess, dynamic vision, and reflexes had all surpassed human limits by this point.

"Calm down, all right? Calm down and keep an eye on the timing of the attacks. It's not as if the monsters are machine guns, right? There's a certain interval between each shot. Hide behind Yosshii's back right before they shoot the next one, then leap out and finish off the monster right after. Go on. Try it now."

Within the past few days, Rinko-chan and Yosshii had both reached Rank D, whereas Amane-chan and Hisato had both reached Rank E. All in all, this was pretty good progress. Of course, if it had been Aniki leading them, things would have been quicker for sure, but I suspected that it would have shattered them. *Honestly, I think I'm probably the only person who can actually keep up with the pace he sets at the get-go.*

Right after the latest Stone Bullet was shot, Rinko-chan immediately leaped out. She ran on the wall to land right in front of the fennec fox, with her staff hidden behind her back. While still in midair, she spun around all of a sudden and thrust out her weapon.

"Kusakabe-style Staff Arts, Night Rain!"

The fennec fox, having been caught off guard, had no time to protect itself with magic. As soon as its forehead was pierced through, it turned into smoke. *That's a pretty interesting move. Even I might not have been able to dodge it if I*

was seeing it for the first time. But now that I've seen it, it won't ever work on me though!

Name: Kusakabe Rinko

Title: None

Rank: D

Possession Limit: 5 / 26

Skills: Card Gacha, Staff Mastery (Lvl. 4), Evasion (Lvl. 3)

"Ho ho ho! It's your turn next, Amane. But still, it really is rare to see someone with the Whip Mastery skill. Do you have prior experience in handling the whip?"

"Of course I haven't! This skill is just... Is the Dungeon System trying to spite me?!"

Amane-chan, the former policewoman, had gained the Whip Mastery skill when she'd reached Rank E. Normally, the skill bestowed by the System was affected by what the person was already familiar with. *That can only mean she's been cracking the whip for quite a while, right?*

Name: Kirihara Amane

Title: None

Rank: E

Possession Limit: 0 / 29

Skills: Card Gacha, Whip Mastery (Lvl. 2), _____

A resounding *crack!* reverberated throughout the passage as a painful-looking slash appeared on a fennec fox's torso. I could not explain why, but for some reason, even the *sound* of a whip seemed painful. The monster looked up at us with tears in its cute, button eyes, crooning weakly even as it disappeared into a puff of smoke. Hisato involuntarily rubbed his arms a few times, his face pale. *I feel the same way you do, man.*



Name: Training Whip of Love Rarity: Rare Description: Can only be used by females. Attack power is average, but increases the rate of card drops by 20%. When used against human males...

I'm so curious about the rest of that item's description! But I don't want to be hit. It's a bit late now, but thinking about it again, Aniki would probably have sealed it if he had been present when it came out, right? But wow, Amane-chan's really talented at wielding that whip.

"What? You want me to use it on you?" Amane-chan growled, glaring at me.

That look really suits her too. But this is no time to be impressed. Our next opponent's here.

"Incoming!" Yosshii shouted as he braced with his shield once more.

Yep, looks like it'll only be a few more days until everyone is equally Rank D. But that's where things get a lot tougher, so I should probably ask Aniki to step in again for a while. I'm sure he'll be able to get them to Rank C in a week, which means 144 weeks back to back in dungeon time. They'll probably have about ten close shaves with death each, but they should be able to barely keep up by now, right? Well, as they say, everything's an experience.

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[Sendai Dungeon — Ezoe Kazuhiko]

The monsters occupying Floor 2 of Sendai Dungeon turned out to be bipedal dog-like creatures named kobolds. I had held out a little bit of hope that they were Rank E, but Akane confirmed them to be Rank D. Although they only possessed one skill—Sword Mastery—they were quite fast on their feet. They were likely the one-rank-higher version of the kind of monster that had been found on Floor 1 of Osaka Dungeon. *Not a particularly formidable enemy, but that's no reason to let my guard down.*

"Though I can see how they would pose a threat to a normal person encountering them for the first time."

The weight of the magic stones they dropped was six grams. There is no time like the present, as the saying went, so I decided to go ahead and fight them for

four hours straight. Considering how the large majority of dungeons were going to fall under either the Rank B or Rank C category, the sheer quantity naturally meant that there would be Rank B places that were all the way up there close to Rank A in difficulty.

“Kazuhiko-sama, if we find Rank C monsters occupying Floor 3, then we will know that this dungeon is a Rank B verging on Rank A.”

“Why do I feel like we’re really going to encounter Rank C monsters because you just put it into words?”

And so we descended to Floor 3. Upon making a little headway, a clump of black flames shot towards us from our left. Both of us immediately leaped backwards to evade the attack and turned to look at our assailant. It turned out to be a dog-like monster with its pitch-black fur standing on end in a way that made the creature look alight with black flames.

“It’s a hellhound! It’s Rank C!”

“I knew it! Akane, we’re retreating. Grab my hand! There’s no need to force ourselves here.”

The black monster rushed towards us at incredible speed before lunging forward, brandishing razor-sharp claws. Before the glinting nails landed on us, however, we were already back on Floor 1. I collapsed to the stone floor on one knee, breathing heavily.

“That was close. So it’s confirmed. Sendai Dungeon is an upper Rank B. A Rank B+, if you will.”

“I’m so sorry, Kazuhiko-sama. All because I said something unnecessary...”

“No, no, that’s not related. I don’t actually believe in jinxes. Jinxes are merely a concept devised by those who want something to blame their failure on when things don’t go well because they didn’t properly gather information beforehand and work out a thorough plan of action. So this is not your fault. This dungeon was Rank B+ from the start. What’s more, this served as a good warning. Now we know how stark the difference in strength is between a Rank D and a Rank C monster. We must get every member of Dungeon Busters to Rank B as a minimum requirement. Now I know this for sure.”

In spite of my efforts at consolation, however, Akane still looked dejected. So I gave her butt a rub. Surprise filled her face, but soon gave way to delight. *We're all alone here, so, let's go all the way.*

* * *

"I see. So Sendai Dungeon is not suitable for hosting the Bootcamp program."

"It's not entirely out of the question, but the risk is quite high. Conversely, it might be perfect for busters looking for a place to train themselves. Floors 1 and 2 would be just right for adventurers up to Rank D."

The building with the parking lot where the entrance to Sendai Dungeon had appeared had been appropriated for JSDF use in its entirety. I was currently in one of the rooms, reporting to Director General Ishihara. *I probably won't be able to talk with her casually like this anymore after she becomes the administrative vice-minister of the new Ministry of Dungeons, will I?*

The screen showed Ishihara adopting a thoughtful expression. She was most likely thinking about what to do with this dungeon that had appeared within Tohoku's largest entertainment district.

"The next wave of dungeon emergences will be March 6, right? Will it be possible to clear all the dungeons that have appeared so far by then?"

"That would be tough. If it's just Yokohama Dungeon, then maybe. Sendai Dungeon, however, is very close to being Rank A. It will be too dangerous to attempt clearing that place with anything less than three Rank A adventurers. And even I will probably need a month to get that high."

Ishihara nodded, seemingly having made up her mind. "This is an official request to Dungeon Busters, Inc. Clear Yokohama Dungeon by March 6. After that, investigate Floor 1 of Osaka Dungeon together with a JSDF force composed of members from the Special Forces Group stationed in Camp Narashino."

The most elite unit of the Japan Ground Self-Defense Force, the Special Forces Group (SFGp for short), very rarely made appearances in public. Rumors had them pegged as being as effective as the US's Green Berets, but there was no way to confirm or disprove this, as everything about their training was top

secret. If it were true, however, it would be reasonable to assume that they were all Rank E.

"I haven't seen Kanazawa for myself yet, but we now know that the monsters on Floor 1 of Osaka Dungeon are Rank E. What's more, they're equipped with weapons. Even members of the SFGp can die if they let down their guard."

"I can bet that once the SFGp commander, Colonel Fujihayashi, hears that, he'll start watering at the mouth, calling it 'real-life practice.' I heard that he barged his way into the offices of the higher ups raising a ruckus saying 'how can we call ourselves the JSDF's most elite force when all we're doing is *training* while a forty-year-old civilian is out there actually fighting!' Now that the Monster Stampede has practically been acknowledged as a real, impending threat, the JSDF won't be able to just sit back anymore. They'll be steadily incorporating the dungeons into their training soon enough."

"That is reassuring to hear. That said, leave some for us civilian adventurers, yeah? In any case, I'm heading over to Kanazawa now. Please contact Camp Kanazawa for me."

When the screen went dark, I got up and stretched. The scouting of Sendai Dungeon was officially completed. I had entered in the afternoon, and it had taken less than ten aboveground minutes. My itinerary involved going to eat beef tongue after this, but there was still a bit of time. This was the perfect chance to show Akane a bit of our world, but I couldn't very well take her around in her kunoichi outfit. And that was where the concierge service tied to the platinum card I'd gotten under Dungeon Busters, Inc.'s name came in handy. This same card was quite popular with many other sole proprietors who frequently needed to make business trips or eat with clients.

When I called the number, the other side picked up almost immediately.

* * *

I materialized Akane within a shopping mall with plenty of boutiques outside of Sendai Station and told her to pick something out for herself. When she came out in her new outfit, however, I thought I would faint. Either my fashion sense was off or Akane's preferences were off-kilter, and I strongly suspected it was the latter.

She giggled. “Now Kazuhiko-sama’s eyes and the eyes of every man on the street will be on me.”

What she had selected was, by all appearances, the kind of dress normally only worn by girls in cabaret clubs. And it was a very sexy one, at that—her entire back, as well as both of her arms from the shoulder down, was completely bare. As the material was quite elastic, it stuck to her very closely, clearly revealing her stunning body line and all ninety-nine centimeters of her voluptuous breasts. What’s more, there was a large leg slit that rose almost to her side flank that exposed everything from her porcelain-white thighs to her hip bone.

“Akane, your underwear...?”

“I’m not wearing any, of course.”

I brought a hand to my forehead and tilted my head upwards. Personally speaking, I loved it. This outfit did an incredible job drawing out and accentuating all of Akane’s charm. It was winter now, but a warm coat would allay any worries of being cold. However, I shuddered to imagine what everyone else on the streets would think of me if I were to bring her walking along Kokubuncho, Sendai’s entertainment district, in such an outfit. *What the hell was the concierge thinking introducing me to a shop like this?!*

I sighed. “This dress is extremely attractive. We’ll buy it. However, I can’t have you walking outside looking like this.”

Thankfully, the female employee—who had been staring at Akane with enraptured eyes—turned out to be someone with some common sense. When I asked, she quickly picked out something more reasonable for women in their twenties. Akane seemed a bit huffy about it, but I ignored her. *I’ll be having you wear it a lot when we get back to the hotel.*

* * *

When mentioning Sendai, many people would immediately think of beef tongue. This was not wrong, of course, but whenever I wanted to eat beef tongue in Sendai, I would never go to a restaurant that specialized in it. One reason was because the majority of them served beef tongue imported from the States or from Australis; another reason was because a lot of them had

become franchised and opened up branches back home in Tokyo. Therefore, I made sure to go to a place that would serve actual Sendai beef when eating beef tongue in Sendai.

“It’s all thanks to you that I can see and enjoy the peaceful aboveground world for myself, Kazuhiko-sama.”

A slight distance down Miyagino-dori Avenue from Sendai Station was a grilled meat restaurant called Dateichi that specialized in Sendai beef. As I had booked our seats beforehand, there was already a prepared portion of beef that had been allotted to us. We stepped in to find a few other tables already occupied by other customers. When Akane took off her coat, she gathered the eyes of every man in the room. Every step she took, her prominent breasts jiggled noticeably.

After settling down in our private room, we ordered, alongside sake, five servings of the premium assorted rare cuts platter that cost more than ten thousand yen and one kilogram of the famous melt-in-your-mouth Hanasaki Toro beef tongue. Never holding back on spending on food was part of the company culture at Dungeon Busters, Inc.

“This restaurant also has a very extensive stock of the various kinds of Japanese sake made within the Miyagi Prefecture. Eat and drink to your heart’s content, Akane. We have all night to enjoy ourselves, then I’ll be heading to Kanazawa first thing tomorrow,” I told Akane while filling her sake cup from a bottle of junmai daiginjo-shu priced higher than thirty thousand yen, the most expensive label on the menu.

Once I was done scouting out Kanazawa Dungeon, I would be returning to Tokyo and working towards reaching Rank B. As soon as Akira and I were both Rank B, and the four new members were Rank C, we would be clearing both Yokohama Dungeon and Funabashi Dungeon in quick succession.

“Don’t forget to pay attention to Mari-san as well,” Akane chided gently. “Emily is with her, but she might still be feeling quite lonely.”

“Thanks for the reminder. The initiative for licensing apprentice adventurers aged sixteen and above is still being debated at the Diet. I’ve been summoned as a speaker, but I’m not holding out hope of it passing before the re-election of

the House of Representatives. So instead, I'll find time to gather everyone in Dungeon Busters, including Mari, the back office staff, and the new members, for a company party. Ginou in Mizue should be perfect. Let's rent it out and eat blowfish."

Our company was a gathering of adventurers. After fighting with our lives on the line, we would celebrate being alive by throwing large, rowdy feasts. Eventually, we might have members who'd get wounded or, knock on wood, die. This was exactly why this kind of occasion was important.

We'll clear Yokohama Dungeon within the month, then have the party afterward.

I put a piece of beef tongue sushi into my mouth and washed it down with cold sake.

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[United Nations — International Dungeon Adventurer Organization Preparatory Committee]

The G7 summit held at Nagoya last year in August had ended with a joint declaration advocating for international cooperation in regards to dealing with the dungeons. In response, the International Dungeon Adventurer Organization Preparatory Committee had been set up in the United Nations in September, and was composed of the cumulative sixty-one member countries of the UN Security Council and the UN Economic and Social Council. Furthermore, other member-nations of the UN were also allowed to speak if they wished, as the issue of the dungeons was a worldwide concern.

"We will now vote on the establishment of the IDAO," announced the Dannish representative who was serving as president of the committee. No dungeons had appeared in Danmark as of yet, so the idea was that he could be trusted to conduct the proceedings in a neutral manner. All members of the preparatory committee were unanimous in their agreement for establishing the IDAO, but there was now a split between an overwhelming majority and a vocal minority in regards to the specific details that would be involved. Major points of contention included the compulsion to share dungeon locations, the setting up of a centralized database of adventurer information, the system that

enabled adventurers to apply for clearing another country's dungeons, and the protocol for how dungeons were to be handled after being cleared.

The Kingdom of Ko was fiercely opposed to the system for applying to clear other countries' dungeons. If this clause was passed, it would force Ko to accept foreign adventurers, and Ko feared that this would affect its domestic power structure.

The United States of Gamerica was fiercely opposed to sharing dungeon locations and to the issue of ownership of cleared dungeons. The only country that possessed a satellite network extensive enough to determine the locations of the dungeons was Gamerica, which meant that this clause would require it to basically give out valuable information with no return. At the same time, the military-industrial complex back home was lobbying extremely hard for private ownership of the dungeons, which was clearly not going to be possible if the right to buy and purchase dungeon resources was going to be in the hands of an external international authority.

The Republic of Woori originally had no reason to oppose anything, but strangely enough, they were still in opposition. For some reason, the inexplicable narrative of "because Japan is currently far ahead in dealing with its dungeons, Woori's national interest will be greatly harmed if this international accord gets passed" was spreading like wildfire back home. The Japanese government hadn't the faintest idea why this was happening.

"Without further ado, those who are in favor, please raise your hands."

The large majority of countries present raised their hands. Of course they did. Although there was no telling *when* the Monster Stampede would be taking place—as the Japanese government was keeping that information a secret—there seemed little doubt that it *would* happen sooner or later, and current international security policies were woefully inadequate for dealing with such a catastrophe. The only country with actual achievements to show in this matter, Japan, was proactively sharing information and providing support for other countries' efforts in establishing their own civilian adventurer initiatives. There was no reason to say no.

"This is absolutely unacceptable! Gamerica refuses to acknowledge this vote!

Count us out of the IDAO!”

“Same for our kingdom. We vehemently refuse entry to adventurers from other countries, especially countries with a history of war crimes! We will resolve the issue of the dungeons within our borders by ourselves.”

“Woori also refuses to accept this vote. The dungeons on the Korian Peninsula will be cleared by the Korians. This issue is nothing before the combined brilliance of our people.”

The representatives of the three countries stormed out of the hall. However, none of those who remained gave them more than a passing glance, as this had been expected beforehand. After the vote was over, many countries without dungeons flocked around Japan and Sina. Although the dungeons were currently highly dangerous existences, they promised to deliver incredible benefits and profit when cleared. It was only natural for countries without access to the new dungeon resources—such as magic stones—to pursue a connection with countries that seemed likely to have them in surplus.

“We have already succeeded in implementing a cyclical hydrogen energy power plant. It will take until the end of the year before we have a large-scale model up and running, but mass production of small-scale ones for powering isolated cities has already begun. The Republic of Belau agreed to be a test case in exchange for us providing the technology free of charge. If the results are promising, we will be more than willing to assist with installing the same in your country,” the Japanese representative said to the representative of Finlanti.

Despite its large size, the Scandinavian country of Finlanti was a minor power with a population of only 5.5 million. As it mainly relied on nuclear energy, it was struggling with the issue of processing nuclear waste. Small countries such as Belau and Finlanti were starting to truly pin their hopes on the technology for small-scale hydrogen energy plants.

After talking with quite a few representatives in turn, the representative of Sina approached the representative of Japan. This was something that the latter had also hoped for. It seemed like sheer inevitability for the country with the most advanced handling of the dungeons to join hands with the country with the most number of dungeons.

“The vote’s passage was all thanks to your country’s support. We thank you.”

“The dungeons are a huge problem for us as well. Much might have happened between our two countries in the past, but we believe that cooperating on the issue of the dungeons is something that will benefit us both greatly. Official notice will come through the appropriate channels at a later date, but President Zhou has expressed an intention to pay Japan a visit. It is our hope that we can join hands over this mutual challenge and develop our relationship in a positive direction.”

After saying this, the representatives of two powerhouses in the Far East nodded in concert and exchanged a firm handshake.

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[The Pentagon — Isaac Roland]

When I received the news in my office at the Pentagon, I sighed heavily. A team of Rank D commandos had reached the lowest floor of Las Vegas Dungeon, but then got wiped out while fighting the last boss. I had strongly opposed the operation, but idiots higher up who had felt pressured seeing Japan’s success had circumvented my authority and given the order anyway.

“So, what are our casualties?”

“Six men. Unfortunately, we still have no information regarding the Guardian that they faced.”

“It just might be the same as the one in Sapporo Dungeon, but I wouldn’t count on it. See to it that everyone gets the memo that reaching Rank D as an adventurer means jack shit. Trying to clear a dungeon being that weak is the same as committing suicide. The difference between Rank D and Rank C is as vast as the difference between little league and major league.”

Instead of setting up an initiative for civilian adventurers, Gamerica had decided to make adventurers out of selected volunteers from its military forces. The reason for this was the issue of ownership. Unlike Japan, this was a multiethnic country with a litigious society. If civilians were allowed to own the dungeons and someone was to become injured in one, the owner could be sued for it. Above all, there just might be lowlifes who would attempt to negotiate

with the federal government in exchange for turning the Stampede field off.

“I’m so jealous of Japan. They’ve got Dungeon Busters to do the clearing so the other adventurers can just be miners and earn money. On the off chance someone gets hurt, they can just wave the ‘personal responsibility’ flag, and that would be the end of the story. In that country, you don’t see morons getting fat from eating hamburgers suing restaurants for making the hamburgers too delicious. The general ethical integrity of their society is so much higher.”

If I were the president, I would invite Dungeon Busters, Inc. to set up a branch office here in the States, have them consult on the setting up of our own adventurer initiative, and request that they clear all the dungeons in the country. The administrative rights of the dungeons might end up in their hands, but depending on how negotiations turned out, there would be a fair chance we could get them to, say, cede the rights to the magic stones. Their aim was to turn the Stampede field off in the dungeons, after all, and not to rake in profit. Just handing them US$10 billion ahead of time and going “Take care of it, thanks” would be so much easier *and* so much more efficient.

“Speaking of which, it’s pretty weird how none of our troops have reached Rank C despite all the Rank Ds we have now,” Rebecca commented. “I wonder why.”

I sighed again. “This is probably the difference between those who are merely accepting orders and those who are self-motivated. In all likelihood, reaching Rank C requires hardship that goes far beyond the realm of common sense. For all we know, it might mean killing hundreds of thousands of monsters nonstop down underground.”

“That’s a bit much for an order, isn’t it...?”

“Everything about the dungeons is far too fucking much. Trying to clear them while still concerned with human limits like working hours and hazard pay is just not going to work. It’s starting to seem like going mad is a basic requirement of becoming a Buster.”

I understood all these things as facts, but putting them into practice was proving nigh impossible. Honestly speaking, I was starting to get the feeling that

staying in the position of command chief wasn't going to help me make much more progress in my research. *I really want to go to Japan and study the Dungeon Core in Sapporo Dungeon.*

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[Ezoe Kazuhiko]

Upon clearing their first dungeon, all Busters would gain the ability to materialize cards above ground. This was an incredibly powerful ability, but it had a large flaw—although there was no limit on the *number* of cards that could be materialized, there was a limit on the *duration* of materialization. Items such as potions and weapons had no such time limits, but character cards and monster cards could only be maintained for one rotation of the planet—in other words, one day. After the materialization was dispelled, there would be a "cooldown time" equal in length to how long the materialization had been. However, for each successive dungeon cleared, the duration for maintaining materialization would be doubled—so, two days for clearing two dungeons, four days for clearing three dungeons, eight days for clearing four dungeons, and so forth—and the duration of the cooldown would be halved in direct inverse proportion. For example, someone who'd cleared ten dungeons could keep a card materialized for more than a whole year.

The morning after I'd finished scouting out Sendai Dungeon, Akane woke up cuddled next to me and then reluctantly returned to her card form. The amount of time that she had remained above ground had been roughly sixteen hours, which meant I would not be able to call her out again within the day. I put her card away while inwardly resolving to show her around Kanazawa some other day in the future.

I got out of bed myself around 7:30 a.m., took a shower, then went downstairs to devour pretty much everything on offer at the hotel's breakfast buffet. Around 9:30 a.m., I got onto the Shinkansen at Sendai Station. Of course, I could have flown, but considering how I would still have to take an hour-long journey to reach the city proper from Komatsu Airport, taking the rail just seemed so much easier. After changing to the Hokuriku Shinkansen Line at Omiya, it was a direct journey to Kanazawa Station. I arrived at around 1:00 p.m. without any mishaps.

The skies above the Hokuriku region in the winter could be summed up in one word: dark. This was something that was probably quite hard for someone who's only ever lived on the Pacific side to imagine, as the sky was drastically different. And it was exactly this cold winter sky that I stepped out into as I got off my train at Kanazawa. I had only a single business-use overnight carry-on bag in hand as the rest of my luggage was stored inside a Magic Pouch.

There were numerous hotels, villas, holiday houses, and other accommodations for travelers scattered throughout Kanazawa. The one that I personally preferred, however, was a certain airline-franchised hotel located close to the station. At ¥25,000 per night for a double room, the place was on the more economic end, and yet the overall quality of the rooms was high and the staff was well trained.

There was still a bit of time before my check-in, so I took a taxi to head somewhere else beforehand. It soon came into view as we proceeded down the national highway in the direction of the national university while keeping Omicho and Kenroku-en Garden on our right. Whenever it was the weekend, this giant building—it was literally as big as a traditional Japanese inn—would see entire flocks of visitors. Having to wait more than an hour to secure one of the private rooms on the second floor was pretty much a given.

There wasn't a single resident of Kanazawa who did not know the name "Number 8 Gyoza Restaurant." And I, for my part, absolutely refused to acknowledge someone who had never visited this restaurant to have "visited Kanazawa." This was the restaurant serving gyoza—Japanese dumplings—that had held the taste buds of the entire city captive for years on end.

The first floor was set up with only counter seats surrounding the frying area—sort of like a hibachi restaurant in the West, only expanded to the scale of the entire room. Back in the day, there had been no waiters or waitresses, and newly-arrived customers just grabbed whatever seat was open or lined up behind eating customers who seemed like they were finishing up soon. Now, however, the restaurant had seats for those waiting. During the lunch hour, the entire floor was so filled with commotion and activity that it was practically a battlefield. Thankfully, though, it was now around 1:30 p.m., and a lot of the rush had let up.

“Give me a serving of white gyoza, pork broth gyoza, and an assorted pickled vegetable platter please.”

Honestly, I really wanted to order a beer too, but as I would be going dungeon delving afterwards, I held myself back. I held off on the rice this first round to allow myself to fully enjoy the gyoza itself. I picked up the bottle of rayu chili oil closest to me and transferred a whole spoonful—making sure to really get to the chili powder at the bottom—to my sauce plate, then added the perfect amount of soy sauce and vinegar. The first piece of freshly fried gyoza—which was as big as a manju!—went into the sauce, then into my mouth. The unique texture of the dish and the fragrance of the five-spice powder assaulted my senses almost immediately. There was no stopping after that. I was familiar with quite a few other dishes famed for their addictiveness, such as Tokyo’s jiro ramen and Osaka’s Indiran curry, but this was still definitely at the top of that list.

After finishing off fifteen pieces in record time, I put in the order for more gyoza, properly pairing it with rice this time. After packing everything away in my stomach, I walked out of the restaurant a very happy man. Then I came to a realization.

Oh, I forgot to call for a taxi...

* * *

The Korinbo branch of Hokusei Bank was located alongside Hyakumangoku-dori Avenue, the artery running through the city of Kanazawa. After getting out of my taxi on the opposite side of the road, I looked up at the multi-story parking deck that had been closed off in its entirety. The entire first floor was covered with tarp, with even the pedestrian walkway out front being sealed off.

Without further ado, I presented my dungeon adventurer license card and walked inside. The entrance to the dungeon was located close to the exit gate on the first floor and was currently surrounded by fences. The Korinbo branch itself had been shut down, with the 2nd Battalion of the Japan Ground Self-Defense Force 14th Infantry Regiment having set up base in the space. After exchanging greetings with the commander of the battalion, Major Sudo, I was introduced to a man wearing a suit which seemed quite conspicuous against the

sea of camo uniforms.

“Ezoe-san, this is Director Yamagishi of the Kanazawa Transportation Policy Division.”

Once we were done with the customary business card exchange, Director Yamagishi immediately cut to the chase. “Ezoe-san, please erase this dungeon.”

“Getting right into it, I see. Of course, clearing dungeons is Dungeon Busters’s mission, so we will naturally do the same here. However, I am here today in a surveying capacity. Without knowing the details of what’s inside, I’m afraid I can’t really promise exactly when we will clear—”

Director Yamagishi shook his head. “I’m sorry to interrupt, but I want to make sure that you heard me clearly. Please actually *erase* this dungeon. Please make it disappear. Hyakumangoku-dori Avenue is the artery of Kanazawa. Just closing the sidewalk is already an incredible inconvenience to the residents. Not only that, but the JSDF setting up a base so close to this major thoroughfare is tarnishing our city’s value as a tourist destination.”

“The current policy of the Dungeon Adventurer Administrative Bureau is to leave dungeons as they are, however. And there are definite merits to doing so. For example, after this dungeon is cleared, researchers from Tokyo will be arriving in numbers. Furthermore, if this location is determined fit for hosting the Dungeon Bootcamp, it will become a draw for participants from all three prefectures of the Hokuriku area.”

“However, on the off chance that the monsters ever break out—”

“We will be clearing it to ensure that the monsters don’t ever break out. I fully understand where you’re coming from. This dungeon is located on Hyakumangoku-dori Avenue—in fact, it’s located within the Korinbo district. Naturally, this makes the residents of the city feel uneasy and affects traffic. However, I can at least say with some certainty that the sidewalk would be reopened once the dungeon is cleared. As for this building... I’m afraid there will be no choice but to have Hokusei Bank sell it.”

Seeing Director Yamagishi looking dejected, I tried my best to adopt a bright voice in an effort to console him. “I just finished evaluating Sendai Dungeon yesterday. That place seems like it will require quite a bit of time, which means

it's very possible that we might be focusing our efforts on Kanazawa first. And if Kanazawa Dungeon turns out to have appropriately powerful monsters, then it could be used as a location for the Bootcamp program quite soon. May I suggest that you attempt to think of this as an opportunity in disguise?"

After leaving those words behind, I descended into the dungeon.

* * *

"Akane, this is the dungeon in Kanazawa. We're here to determine its rank."

"Yes, Kazuhiko-sama."

As soon as I reached the Safety Zone on Floor 1 of Kanazawa Dungeon, I summoned Akane. Although there was still a cooldown before I could materialize her again above ground, there was no such restriction down here. We slowly pushed open the large double doors, listening carefully for the voice of the Dungeon System. The fact that it did not inform us of a nickname for the dungeon indicated that this place was Rank B at the highest.

"That is a naam python, which is a Rank F monster. Its bite will cause a short bout of paralysis, but otherwise, this monster does not pose that much of a threat."

The creature that was slithering towards us on the ground looked like a normal rock python, albeit a rather large one. Its length was around two meters and its girth wider than two human arms put side-by-side. When it got close enough, it raised its head and lunged with its mouth open wide.

Slap.

I slammed the flat of my shovel against the fist-sized head, completely crushing it. The monster then turned to smoke.

"So weak. It's Rank F all right."

"It does possess the strength to break some bones if it manages to wrap itself around you, but as you just saw, it's not particularly fast. You can also deal with it by severing its head."

Akane swung her ninja sword in demonstration and sent a head flying. *In terms of danger, these are equal to the rabbits in Yokohama Dungeon. So that*

would make this place a Rank C dungeon, maybe?

We proceeded to kill a hundred naam pythons and calculated the average weight of the magic stones they dropped. Final result: around three grams.

“Let’s move on to Floor 2. If the monsters down there turn out to be Rank E, then we can be almost sure that this dungeon is Rank C.”

As expected, we found ourselves facing the Rank E poison alligator. These one-meter-long monsters were, as their name suggested, alligators that were poisonous.

“Their thick skin protects them from blunt attacks dealt by Rank F fighters. The way to fight them will be to aim for their eyes or to stab their torsos, but...looks like you don’t have to worry about any of that, Kazuhiko-sama.”

My Super Rare weapon, Cosmic Zantetsuken, easily split the entire monster in half. The magic stone dropped weighed four grams. *Some women might have an aversion to the reptilian monsters in this dungeon, but it’s still a step up from the centipedes in Funabashi Dungeon, right?*

“Their strength is also just right. Kanazawa Dungeon is suitable for hosting the Bootcamp. The JSDF would be more than capable of dealing with the snakes on Floor 1, and Rank E adventurers who have obtained a weapon from the gacha should do quite well here on Floor 2. This actually makes it a blessing that this dungeon is located in Korinbo. All right, it’s time to see what Floor 3 has in store for us.”

After defeating three hundred alligators, we descended another floor. Almost right off the bat, we found a reptile with a shell and four legs blocking our way —it was, of course, a turtle. A gigantic one, at that. The diameter of its shell easily reached three meters.

“This is a poison turtle. It’s a slow-moving monster that’s normally quite docile, but its tough shell protects it from most attacks, and the power of its beak is more than enough to easily sever someone’s arm. What’s more, if you ignore it and simply try to pass by...”

When Akane approached one side of the turtle as if to walk past, it abruptly started spinning horizontally, splaying its short legs outwards in an effort at

mowing her down. She casually sliced off the creature's limbs before returning to my side.

"As you can see, they attack anyone who attempts to simply slip past. The way to defeat them is to purposely provoke them into spinning so as to attack their exposed limbs or to destroy their shells with overwhelming force."

"In other words, these are turtles that just crave attention? How hard *are* their shells? Let's see whether it can stand up to Cosmic Zantetsuken, the legendary sword said to be capable of cutting anything in this world!"

I leaped up into the air and brought my weapon straight down. As a result, the entire monster—shell and all—was bisected down the middle.

"Once again, I've cut a worthless object..."

"Are you doing an impression of something, Kazuhiko-sama?" Akane asked with a truly puzzled face.

Immediately growing embarrassed, I decided to ignore her and weigh the magic stone dropped by the monster. It came out to around five grams, indicating that the monster was Rank D.

"Isn't it a bit weak for being Rank D? Ah, never mind. I only thought dealing with them was easy because I was using Cosmic Zantetsuken."

"At the moment, your strength is on the verge of reaching Rank B. Mere poison turtles are far beneath giving you any trouble. However, any normal person would find themselves entirely helpless before one."

There was no way to bring modern weapons into the dungeons. Once this monster decided to hide inside its shell, there would be almost no way for an adventurer specializing in striking attacks to deal damage to it. Even if said adventurer possessed a Common sword, taking advantage of that whirling attack would require a very discerning eye. *With all that in mind, I suppose it does make sense that this monster is considered Rank D.*

"Do you wish to take a look at Floor 4 as well, Kazuhiko-sama?"

"Hmm, we might as well. I am somewhat curious what the Rank C monster here is like. Back in Abyss, we get goblin soldiers attacking in a group. What

does this place have in store?”

And so we descended to Floor 4. After pushing forward for a while, we heard heavy footsteps approaching. It was a lone enemy. Soon enough, it turned the corner ten meters ahead of us and revealed itself.

“It’s an elder orc! It is Rank C. It moves around by itself, but otherwise is a monster specializing in close-quarters combat who doesn’t have any noteworthy weaknesses!”

The elder orc held a wooden shield in its left hand, a broad saber in its right hand, and wore a chestplate that, judging by the dull glint, was of metallic make. Most importantly, its behavior seemed markedly different from that of all other monsters that we had encountered so far. Instead of rushing towards us, it remained standing in place several meters away, not even lifting its weapon. The impression I received was that it was inviting me to a duel.

Even while thinking myself stupid for doing so, I decided to rise to its provocation and ordered Akane to stand down. The fact that the monster and I were both alone meant that we would be doing this mano a mano. So I put Zantetsuken away in exchange for my shovel. In all likelihood, my opponent’s weapon wasn’t SR; it would be unfair, therefore, for me to hold onto that advantage.

With a slightly alarmed expression, Akane said, “Kazuhiko-sama, please don’t joke aro—”

“Sorry,” I interrupted. “I am a man. And as a man, I have to accept this challenge head-on.”

The fact that this monster was Rank C meant that it definitely possessed a skill or two and therefore was not an opponent that I could overwhelm with sheer difference in rank. I would need to really think and use all the techniques at my disposal.

When I stepped forward, the orc before me also slowly lumbered forward. We stopped roughly two meters apart from each other. Although I was facing a monster, I felt more like I was walking into a fighting ring. It was a very bizarre experience.

“Give us the starting signal please, Akane.”

After a heavy sigh, my companion conceded. “All right. Ready... Fight!”

The moment Akane clapped her hands, the orc rushed forward with Shield Bash, aiming to slam me up into the air. I sidestepped to the left, but found the point of the orc’s saber staring directly at me from up high, already in the middle of plunging down. Of course, I had also seen this coming. I thrust the edge of my shovel upwards before my opponent’s right arm could accelerate anymore in its descent.

“Hah!”

As intended, I managed to land my shovel onto the orc’s elbow joint. It cut in deep, all the way to bone. The descending saber nicked a bit of skin off the left side of my head, but in exchange, the monster had lost the use of an arm. It dropped its weapon and roared.

“MUBOOAAAAHHHH!”

“An opening!”

“No, Kazuhiko-sama!”

I leaped up to smash my shovel into the orc’s face. However, Akane screamed at that moment. At the same time, the monster’s eyes glinted.

“BUFOOOOHHHHH!”

The orc, which had been down on one knee and clutching its right arm, suddenly delivered another Shield Bash. Its wooden shield shot up and dug deep into my chest armor. I slammed heavily against the ceiling, then fell to the ground.

“KAZUHIKO-SAMA!”

“Oof!”

The wound I’d just suffered had been deep enough to damage even my internal organs. The crouching and the arm-clutching had been a lure. There was no way that a Rank C warrior would lose his will to fight after losing a measly arm. This was apparently the same with monsters. I managed to stand up somehow, knees quivering. My opponent took the time to throw away the

shield in its left hand to free it for picking up the saber instead.

“Akane, don’t interfere.”

“But... Understood.”

Akane seemed about to step in, so I shot her a look. Then I approached the orc. The next exchange was surely going to be our last. I was at a disadvantage for having the shorter reach, but I still chose to stick with the shovel. I knew full well that it was the foolish choice, but this was my first time fighting one-on-one with a Rank C monster in close quarters. I had a feeling that winning here would lead to significant personal growth.

The orc raised the saber in its left hand up high, indicating its intention to unleash a terrible downward strike. I gripped my shovel with both hands. Everything was going to hinge on whether I could dodge the incoming attack.

“BUUUOOOOHHHHH!”

“RRRRAAAAHHHHH!”

The instant I charged forward, the saber came rushing down, accompanied by the orc’s deafening roar. I instantly braked and leaped backwards. The ridiculously powerful and extraordinarily fast strike cut through my Steel Body Armor and slashed me from my right shoulder to my left flank. However, the saber only got skin and a bit of muscle thanks to my earlier backstep. The instant my feet made contact with the ground, I pushed off with my left leg to resume trying to get in close. My opponent, having read this, utilized the rebound of its weapon hitting the floor to quickly bring it back up. To its surprise, it found me stepping on the back of the blade with my right foot. The momentum from the lift brought me all the way up to the orc’s face. When I brought my shovel down, I thought I saw a smile of acknowledgment from a worthy opponent for a fraction of a second.



“Phew, it’s over.”

“You took it too far, Kazuhiko-sama! One wrong step and you would have been dead!”

I chugged one High Potion to heal the organ damage I had suffered and poured another on my wounds. Because I hadn’t lost any limbs this time, there was no need to use an Extra Potion. Unlike my practice matches with Liu Fengguang and Akira, this was an actual kill-or-be-killed battle. Even I was impressed at how I’d managed to stay alive.

“Everything involving Rank C is beyond human limits. Experiencing similarly life-threatening battles in the five or six digits is probably the only way to reach Rank A, right? In that light, this dungeon is great. It’s perfect for training. You know what? I think I *will* stay here to work towards Rank B.”

“Kazuhiko-sama, isn’t the purpose of this visit to scout out the dungeon?”

“The scouting is over. Kanazawa Dungeon is Rank C, has solitary monsters, and is perfect for both magic stone gathering and hosting the Bootcamp. At the same time, it is also perfect for training towards Rank B. I’ve got my weights with me, and now I know that I’m capable of killing elder orcs by myself. Stay with me, Akane. This dungeon is where I will become a Rank B adventurer.”

This is also in line with our short-term goal of clearing Yokohama Dungeon. Oh, right. Should I invite Akira? I’m sure that we’ll both rank up if we each fight ten thousand elder orcs down here.

* * *

“And that’s why I’ll be staying here for several days.”

“Now *hold on* a moment! That sounds like so much fun! You can’t hog it all to yourself, Aniki!”

After reporting the results of what I learned about Kanazawa Dungeon to Ishihara, I told Akira about my plans to stay here for the time being. As expected, he latched onto the story immediately and insisted on coming with me.

“Amane-chan and Hisato-kun reached Rank D just today. I really want to do

some fighting of my own again!”

“Then do you want to come over? I can pick you up right now with Teleport. Where are you?”

“In the changing room at Yokohama Dungeon. I was just about to head home.”

“Perfect. Let’s grab dinner at Kanazawa.”

“Whoa!”

I appeared abruptly in Yokohama Dungeon with my phone still pressed to my ear. Akira was right in front of me, sitting on a bench.

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[Kanazawa Dungeon — Shishido Akira]

Generally speaking, Aniki was an intellectual and logical person. He hated waste and very rarely forced matters. If I said I wanted to do something, in most cases, he would understand. However, when it came to the dungeons, all that logicality would fly right out the window. His ideas and ability to take action would take on an almost crazed tinge, and he would ask the most far-out things of me.

“Ho ho ho! This *is* a good place. The monsters on this floor are perfect opponents for polishing each of your individual fighting styles!”

After picking me up at Yokohama Dungeon, Aniki had immediately Teleported to Abyss and met back up with Maririn. He’d sent her home, asked her for Emily, Myu, and Purin’s cards, *then* headed for Kanazawa. Without resting, he’d dove right into the dungeon. I had originally intended on taking a breather first, but that idea left my mind the moment I’d seen an armed orc appear before me. Shifu Liu was practically bursting with delight.

“The three-meter-tall orc gets a saber and a shield while I’m completely unarmed? Any normal person would consider it an insane matchup!”

In spite of what I was saying, however, there was a certain emotion bubbling up inside of me. *This is it. This feeling is why I became an adventurer.*

I gritted my teeth as the corners of my mouth rose in a grin. I took a step

towards the orc approaching me. After reading the area of control of its falling saber, I chose to unleash a low kick that made the monster's knee give way. This threw its guard wide open, making it very easy for me to grab the hand wielding the sword, lock it, and snap it all at once. In the same motion, I drove an elbow strike into the creature's face and, as it opened its mouth to roar, I circled around to grab its head and snap its neck.

"Hmm, a combination of techniques from karate, jujutsu, and muay thai. Akira, your talent really does shine. You will eventually reach Rank B if you keep it up. On the other hand, Ezoe, you will have to just keep fighting with one foot away from death while burdening your body to its limits."

"I don't need to be the strongest in the world. However, I do need to keep standing on the front line. And in order to do so, I need to rank up."

As Aniki said, I had already surpassed him in fighting strength. The foundation we'd each started from was simply too far apart—there was me, whose entire life had been involved with martial arts since birth, and there was him, who had spent the previous forty years of his life having zero contact with any kind of fighting. Even so, I could never consider myself to be beyond him. I was great at fighting, but I had no idea how to set a vision, get everyone else on board, and steer an entire group. This was the difference between a warrior, who could only command his own fighting, and a general, who could command the fighting of a multitude.

"Akira, my turn next. Shifu Liu, please give me your guidance. And I'm sure Akira is already tired from the full day he's had before coming over, so we'll be calling it a day after we kill a hundred more elder orcs."

"Very well, then I shall call more over! The first one's just turned the corner. Make sure to not over-rely on your weapon. Fight normally with your sword and shield."

I calmed my breathing while watching Aniki dive into his fight. *A hundred, huh? It's true that I'd spent quite a long while at Yokohama Dungeon, so I guess that sounds about right. Wait a minute... Did he mean a hundred* each*?!*

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[Shishibone Dungeon — Kinouchi Mari]

Half a year had passed since I began working part-time at Kazu-san's company. Although I had been a bit bewildered at the start, I was now quite used to fighting against monsters. Emily-chan, Myu-chan, and Purin-chan were all with me, so I wasn't lonely. As always, today was a day of facing the skeleton knights while casting the Cleaning spell on myself.

"Kyuu, kyuu!"

Purin-chan was circling around close to the ceiling while keeping thirty balls of fire suspended in the air. When a group of skeleton knights clanked their way close, Purin-chan unleashed all its fireballs at once, reducing all the enemies to smoke.

"Myuu!"

At the same time, Myu-chan was fighting the ones who had approached from behind. It zipped around at incredible speeds, leaping off of the walls and ceiling as much as the ground, dealing a barrage of blows that reduced the skeletons on this side to smoke just as quickly. I wasn't really doing anything myself, aside from walking around wearing weights.

"Say, isn't it kind of boring just doing the same thing? Myu and Purin have both reached Rank C, so, wanna try Floor 4?" Emily-chan asked out of the blue.

"But Kazu-san said not to," I replied in surprise. "He said to stay within the first three floors while I'm still in high school."

"Pssh, it'll be fine! You have *three* Rank Cs with you—me, Myu, and Purin! Floor 4 is occupied by goblin soldiers; as long as we're careful not to get surrounded, we can fight them just as easily!"

"Really? But..."

"You're starting to get bored yourself too, aren't you? Don't you want to make things a little bit more exciting?"

The thing was, just as Emily-chan pointed out, the repetitiveness *was* starting to get to me a little. The scenery never changed, and we were just fighting the same opponents over and over. *Maybe we can just check it out?*

"Well... Let's take a small peek."

Since we were in agreement, we descended to Floor 4. As for how that turned out...

“Myu-chan!”

“Myuu!”

We found the goblin soldiers entirely different from any opponents we had faced so far. When Purin-chan shot fireballs from above, the six goblins put their shields together and blocked them all. Myu-chan managed to get behind their shields by kicking off of the walls, but then was sliced by a sword and got a bit hurt.

“How dare you?!” Emily-chan cried as a crackling noise emanated from her hands and what looked like lightning struck the goblin soldiers. As a result, all of them fell to the ground, unable to move beyond just twitching. Only then could Purin-chan and Myu-chan move in and finish them off.

“Emily-chan, on second thought, let’s go back. The goblins are so strong, and Myu-chan’s already gotten hurt. We can’t do this by ourselves.”

“Mmm... Was it really too early? But I feel like if we only...”

Just as Emily-chan took one step forward, many goblin soldiers suddenly appeared from the T-intersection up ahead. There were more than ten of them!

“Uh-oh! Mari, close your eyes! Flash!”

My friend set off a blinding flash of light that stopped the goblins in their tracks. In the meantime, our group hurried back up the stairs to Floor 3.

“Did anything out of the ordinary happen today?” Kazu-san asked when I was clocking out for the day.

I shook my head as I handed him the Lazybone’s Bag that I had been wearing, sans the Goblin Soldier Card and ¥5,000 bill that had appeared inside after our brief excursion.

I’ll break the bill down into ¥500 coins and add it to the total amount I turn in at the end of my next shift. Then, when I’m officially allowed to enter Floor 4, I’ll properly apologize and return the card.

“All right. Good work today, Mari. Just a heads up, but Akira and I will be

cooping up in Kanazawa Dungeon for a while. You also have end-of-term exams coming up next month, right? Take the time off to study. In the meanwhile, I'll be bringing Emily, Myu, and Purin with me."

"Ah, okay. Please stay safe."

"Don't worry, Mari! I'll come back super strong, and then we'll wipe the floor with those goblin soldiers together!"

Kazu-san's hand froze for a moment at those words, but Emily-chan did not seem to notice it. He then carried on as normal, filling out the part-time shift schedule and sending me home. He was apparently going to head straight to Kanazawa Dungeon right afterwards. But before he did, he dropped an off-hand comment that pricked my heart.

"Staying on Floor 3 all this time's pretty boring, right? I'll show you around Kanazawa next time."

Ugh, he caught on.

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[Shishibone Dungeon — Ezoe Kazuhiko]

"Well then, Emily. If you aren't honest with me, then it's straight to another round of spanking. Did you or did you not, take Mari to Floor 4 against my instructions?"

"Ugh... B-But it was getting really boring just fighting the same enemy! And Myu and Purin and I had all reached Rank C! We *can* make it on Floor 4!"

"Well, how did it turn out?"

"M-Myu got hurt a little."

I merely nodded in response to Emily dejectedly hanging her head. *Emily herself must have also been getting bored. Making sure to keep things engaging for employees is part of the duties of someone in a managerial position as well.*

"Floor 4 of Abyss is different from other dungeons. It is occupied by goblins with the intelligence to fight together with teamwork. This is a whole other level compared to other Rank C monsters. I'm sure you've noticed this already, but Purin's fire attacks don't really work for keeping enemies at bay. That's the

job of a tank with high physical defense. I do hope to have Mari lead her own team in the future, so I suppose I should start thinking about assigning her a proper tank."

"Are...you not angry with me?" Emily asked timidly.



It was true that Emily was at fault for disobeying my orders. However, I was also at fault for having created an environment that had made her want to disobey my orders.

“I’ll forgive you this time. It is also partly my responsibility for having let things get boring for you two. I’ll be having you two alternate between Abyss and Kanazawa Dungeon going forward. As for Yokohama Dungeon... That’s probably the one place I should never take Mari, I feel.”

With that out of the way, we resumed fighting on Floor 4 of Kanazawa Dungeon. We started off taking, on average, 4 minutes finishing off an orc. That worked out to 15 orcs in an hour, or 100 orcs in 7 hours.

“Let’s aim to get the time of each encounter down under 3 minutes. Then we will be racking up 20 kills in an hour; if we keep that up for 12 hours, it’ll be 240 kills total. With Akira and I taking turns fighting, we’ll both reach a total of 10,000 fights in 80 dungeon days. Factoring in time for showering and everything else, that will come to a total of around 3 aboveground days. If needed, we can increase the weights we’re wearing and might even take on multiple opponents at once.”

“Ho ho ho! That’s...absolutely insane,” murmured Shifu Liu as he stroked his white beard.

I looked around to see Akira, Akane, Emily, Myu, and Purin—literally everyone other than me—nodding in seeming agreement. *Is it really? We need to do this to clear the dungeons though. The easygoing salarymen who take days off just because they wake up thinking “Ugh, I don’t want to go to work today” would never be able to meet their sales quotas. They’d get a D on their regular evaluation for having a poor working attitude. This is the same thing.*

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“The card drop rate for elder orcs is around 3%, it seems. So we can expect around three hundred cards for each ten thousand we fight. That should be enough to test the gacha as well. All right, let’s fight ten times each in a row to pick up on whatever we can regarding the fighting. Shifu Liu, please watch us and instruct us on how to improve along the way.”

So without further ado, we began the process of “experimenting, analysis, and improvement” against the elder orcs. As could be expected, I had a lot more to work on when compared to Akira. Although I did my best to keep the various pointers in mind, I still wasn’t improving much. *Guess this is where the difference in talent is showing.*

By the end of the first day, Akane had reached Rank B.

Name: Akane

Title: Glamorous Kunoichi

Rank: B

Rarity: Legend Rare

Skills: Ninjutsu (Lvl. 1), Enemy Detection (Lvl. 8), Sex Technique (Lvl. 8)

“Your Kunai Mastery’s changed to Ninjutsu. What does that do?”

“It enables me to use all skills considered ninjutsu, such as making clones and breathing flames. Please think of it as an upgrade from Kunai Mastery.”

“I see. So each skill only goes to Lvl. 9, at which point it converts into an advanced alternative. Is this the same for humans, Shifu Liu?”

“Depends on many factors. Take Shield Bash, for example. It’s true that just repeating it would be enough to raise its level. However, the job of a tank also involves many other things, such as picking up on danger while pushing forward and discerning opportunities to get in attacks of his or her own. How much the user has worked on other unspoken things surrounding a skill would also affect what happens.”

“Understood. That sounds like something we should be mindful about while developing Dungeon Busters’s training policy. In short, the more varied the experiences, the better. Right? It’s the same for training up businessmen. All right, let’s call it a wrap for today. I’ve already booked a hotel, so we’ll be spending the night above ground. Starting tomorrow, we will be spending all three days in a row down here aiming to reach Rank B.”

This was how our very first day of this push to Rank B ended.

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Katamachi of Kanazawa was considered the largest entertainment district within the three prefectures that composed the Hokuriku area—Ishikawa Prefecture, Toyama Prefecture, and Fukui Prefecture. Anyone who heads towards Sai River from Korinbo would eventually find themselves at the pedestrian scramble that served as the heart of the Katamachi area. Located close to that scramble was a restaurant that I personally rated extremely highly, Oden Izakaya Miyuki. It used to be a place filled with local regulars, but after the new Shinkansen station opened and word of this place spread online, it was now so popular among tourists that one would have to make a reservation to eat here. *The previous local regulars are probably none too happy about it, I imagine.*

“This is delicious. I never imagined that oden could taste this good!” Akira exclaimed.

Sashimi and teriyaki made of yellowtail from Himi and Kaga vegetables both went extremely well with Japanese sake made in Ishikawa Prefecture. This restaurant had counter seats, table seats, and seats on a raised tatami-floored seating area. As we’d booked in advance, our party was ushered to a table at the back of the raised seating area when we walked in. Several customers who were already there seemed to have recognized us, but none of them bothered us. The store owner also treated us like any other guests, which we were quite grateful for.

“The monsters on Floor 3 of Yokohama have the appearance of fennec foxes. They’re Rank D and shoot small stone pellets from far away. I thought them the perfect opponent for the four new members.”

Akira reported how things had gone at Yokohama Dungeon as we enjoyed our food. In turn, I told him about what I’d learned about the dungeons at Sapporo, Sendai, and Kanazawa. He became really interested when hearing that Sendai was even tougher than Yokohama.

“After we clear Yokohama, we’ll do Kanazawa, then Funabashi. But I suspect that doing all that still won’t be enough to push us to Rank A. The hope is that Sendai will do the honors for us in that regard.”

However, as there were other customers around within earshot, we couldn't go into much detail. Therefore, our conversation naturally shifted to talking about the situation in other countries.

"I was contacted by someone I know from Woori the other day. He's a taekwondo practitioner who decided to become a dungeon adventurer. And he invited me to go over to serve as an instructor on their side."

"And how're you supposed to do that? Gamerica, Woori, and Ko all refused to be part of the IDAO. As such, foreign adventurers won't be able to enter dungeons in Woori, and even their licenses as adventurers won't be acknowledged. In light of the current Japan-Woori diplomatic relationship, I can't imagine the Bureau allowing you to travel over in the first place."

"I know, right? I told the guy to go through the proper channels and make the request through the Bureau. I just thought I'd give you a heads up anyways."

"Good call. Thank you. I'll also bring this up with the director general. There's a lot going on within that country right now. I heard that their third dungeon appeared in Busan during the wave on January 30. They seem to have completely copied our dungeon adventurer initiative as-is, but honestly, I'm not sure how well it will go for them."

Due to a difference in historical understanding and territorial disputes, the diplomatic relationship between Japan and Woori was quite complicated. This relationship was currently at an all-time low, not helped much by President Jae-in's extremely pro-Korian stance. My policy was to leave politics to politicians, but as an adventurer, I also considered Woori quite low on my list of priorities. If I had the time and resources to spend on a non-IDAO country, then it made more sense to do so for Formosa instead.

"By the way, Aniki, what are we doing after this?"

"Katamachi pretty much has everything you would want by way of entertainment. Do you have anything particular in mind?"

"Hmm... It's my first time in Kanazawa, so I'll leave it up to you."

I nodded, then called up the beer garden at the top of the nearby ollo building.

Chapter 4: The World Stirs

[Vatican State]

The emergence of the dungeons—and the monsters within—shook the religious world as much as it did the political. The president of Gamerica issued an executive order prohibiting the establishment of any new religious groups within the States, the city in the Middle East that held the status of being a holy city for the world's three largest monotheistic religions saw record numbers of pilgrims, confessions at churches spiked, and people flocked to Sunday worship.

However, regardless of how many prayers were lifted up, no god descended to bestow salvation. Why were the heavens silent in the face of an event that seemed so convincingly like the end times? Day after day, adherents lifted their faces to the skies as unease roiled in their hearts.

The world's largest religion, Christianity, had around 2.4 billion believers, roughly 1.3 billion of whom professed adherence to the Catholic Church. The seat of authority of the Church, Vatican State, was purported to have been established here in the year 326 AD when Constantine the Great built the first St. Peter's Basilica. Ever since then, this location has greatly influenced the history of not only Europe but that of the rest of the world. Even today, it continues to hold enormous sway on a global scale despite having a population of only around eight hundred people and no armed force.

Of course, the Holy See did indeed command remarkable military influence many centuries past. Part of it was in the form of three specific orders of knighthood that played pivotal roles in the Crusades of the 11th to 13th centuries. And today, these orders were still in existence in the form of chivalric orders.

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Back on a certain day when the news of Ezoe Kazuhiko and his Dungeon Busters achieving the world's first-ever dungeon clear was still sweeping through the world, the Papal Palace saw the grand masters of three major chivalric orders kneeling before a man who appeared to be in his seventies.

“August Kramer, grand master of the Knights Hospitaller, here in response to Your Holiness’s summons.”

“Jeanne Bonaparte, grand master of the Teutonic Order, here in response to Your Holiness’s summons.”

“Philippe de Périgord, grand master of the Knights Templar, here in response to Your Holiness’s summons.”

The person they were kneeling before was, of course, none other than the supreme pontiff and chief pastor of the Catholic Church, Pope Francesco himself. The pope nodded in acknowledgment of the greetings and sent his head secretary a look. The man bowed once, then stepped out of the room.

“It warms my heart to see three great orders that have supported the Church throughout history gathered again here at the Papal Palace. Thank you for responding to my summons.”

“You honor us with your words, Your Holiness,” the three kneeling figures said in unison as they bowed their heads in response to the pope’s words of gratitude.

The old man nodded once more, then continued, “A great and terrible tribulation has befallen not only the Church but the world at large. The Lord does not give us more than what we can handle. However, the hearts of men are weak. The faith of many is being shaken by the looming threat of the dungeons. They seek guidance. This is why I have gathered all of you here today in the capacity of the grand masters of the three largest chivalric orders. Just as you once took up arms to recover the Holy Land, I now call on you to raise your flags and clear the dungeons.”

“Permission to speak, Your Holiness?” asked Grand Master August Kramer of the Knights Hospitaller, his head still bowed.

The pope expressed his permission, prompting the three leaders to lift their heads.

Grand Master August continued, “Our orders still bear their historic names, but we no longer possess the military might we did during the Crusades. Although our faith is just as strong, many of our members are in positions of

responsibility within their respective communities. If the aim is to confront the dungeons that are currently shaking up the entire world, it is my humble opinion that we would be better served choosing young blood possessing equally fervent piety."

These three great orders had once been inexorable forces that took Europe and the Middle East by storm during the Crusades and the Reconquista. Now, however, they were little more than social clubs for those who had been awarded for some merit or another. Naturally, the large majority of their members were rather advanced in age and unsuitable for doing actual fighting as dungeon adventurers. The pope was fully aware of this.

"Select two candidates around twenty years of age from each of your orders. I understand that many of the younger believers may not be as diligent in attending mass regularly. However, neither these dungeons nor the creatures within are mentioned in the scriptures. What is truly needed here are flexible and adaptable minds."

"Your Holiness, I am in full agreement with the idea of selecting the younger generation for this task," Grand Master Philippe de Périgord of the Knights Templar opined. "However, the Eurocorps is already handling the guarding and investigating of the dungeons. Do you mean for the candidates we select to become a part of the EU dungeon adventurer initiative that will be established soon?"

It was not much longer until the IDAO would be ratified, after which the initiative for developing and managing dungeon adventurers from the European sphere would begin in earnest. This initiative, which was based off of the experimental model currently being tested in Japan, was expected to see very large numbers of applicants. What Philippe de Périgord was hinting at through his question was the fear that the orders' candidates would simply become buried within the sheer numbers. The other two grand masters nodded, indicating that they shared the same worry.

The pope's answer, however, took a turn that none of them had expected. "It is true that the European initiative will be beginning soon. However, many countries have made almost no progress in the clearing of their own dungeons during the six months that this phenomenon has been taking place. What we

are seeking to form here is a group that will serve as the Lord's vanguard, a group that will brandish the flags of the orders while standing on the front lines. The best way to enable them to do so would be, of course, to study under the most powerful adventurer there is, the man who knows the most about the dungeons."

"You mean... To Japan...?!"

The pope smiled and nodded at the surprised expressions on all three grand masters' faces, then adopted an authoritative air. "Francesco, Episcopus Servus Servorum Dei, command the grand masters of the three great chivalric orders: Select one male and one female from each of your orders. They will form a team named Crusaders and be the vanguard that will clear dungeons in the name of our Lord."

"As you command, Your Holiness."

This was the historic moment when the Dungeon Crusaders, a team that would command fame on par with the Dungeon Busters, was born.

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[The Republic of Woori — The Blue House]

The government of the Republic of Woori had an executive branch headed by a president, under whom was a prime minister who took care of most of the administrative duties. The counterpart to Japan's Ministry of Finance was their Ministry of Economy and Finance, Japan's Ministry of Defense was Woori's Ministry of National Defense, and so on and so forth.

At the end of 2019, a brand new ministry was established—the Ministry of Dungeons. This was when Japan, the country that had rolled out the world's first civilian dungeon adventurer initiative, had still treated its dungeon-related decision-making body as a mere bureau under their Ministry of Defense. Similarly, Gamerica had also placed its counterpart organization under the authority of their Department of Defense. Consequently, President Park Jae-in had been very vocal in declaring that "Our country is the first in the world to establish a top-level administrative body specialized to deal with the dungeons. Before long, our governmental policies on the dungeons will become the global standard!"

With the help of the Ministry of National Defense, the areas surrounding the dungeon entrances were cordoned off and a program for civilians to register as adventurers—called Dungeon Training—was implemented. The general rule was that the Ministry of Dungeons would purchase all resources obtained from the dungeon, including magic stones and monster cards, and then adventurers could buy back the cards they needed. Online, this was bashed as a direct copy of what Japan was doing with the exception of being led by a minister and buying all cards equally. Of course, the Woorian government strongly insisted that they were employing unique policies that were not influenced in any way by those of any other countries.

"Mr. President, the first round of the Dungeon Training has been scheduled for the end of March. The Ministry of National Defense will also be involved. However, we are having trouble convincing Milae Motor Company to cede us the land where Seoul Dungeon is located. As a result, the program's launch will be held at the dungeon that appeared within Jagalchi Market in Busan."

"They were planning on building their new headquarters on that land, right? The emergence of the dungeon should have rendered the plot entirely useless in that regard. And it's not as if we are asking them to give us the land for free. Why is Milae still refusing to sell?"

Back in 2015, Milae Motor Company, Woori's biggest car manufacturer, had purchased the land of Koria Electric Power Corporation's previous headquarters in Gangnam, Seoul for the astronomical price of ₩10.5 trillion. Milae's plan had been to use the land to construct at 105-floor "global business center." However, Seoul Dungeon had appeared right before they were about to begin construction. When it had gotten out that this plot Milae had invested so much money into practically lost all book value overnight, the company's stock had plunged. This was what had prompted them to approach the Woorian government in hopes of selling it.

"Milae is asking for ₩15 trillion, but according to market price in the Gangnam area, the land is worth only ₩400 billion. Our negotiations with them are at a standstill because of the steep difference in valuation. What's more, the labor union appears to be against the sale, and their management is also afraid of being held responsible for losing the company massive sums of

money.”

“It’s Milae’s own fault for buying the land at three times the appraisal price back during the bidding in 2015. It only makes sense for whoever arranged that purchase to be held responsible. I give you permission to use the power of the state if you have to. Worst case, we can take advantage of this as an opportunity to dissolve the Milae conglomerate altogether.”

President Park Jae-in ended his words with a “they had it coming” expression on his face. As an advocate of a progressive civil society, he considered every last massive conglomerate an evil giant contributing to the oppression of the common man.

“Make sure to finish the negotiations surrounding Seoul Dungeon by June. Japan might have gotten the jump on us in regards to dungeon clearing, but don’t worry too much about it. The whole thing about the Monster Stampede is probably fake in the first place. Chances are that Japan’s just made it up as a pretext for bolstering their military. The Kingdom of Ko has also expressed similar worries.”

President Park looked at his aide to make sure that he was listening closely, then continued. “I am aware that Ko has yet to respond to our attempts to reach out to them in regards to reunification and on cooperating on the issue of the dungeons. However, once our policies are working smoothly and producing results, they will surely come to the negotiating table. Once we rack up more dungeon clears than Japan, the UN will be the one to approach us and ask us to join the IDAO. There is a very real possibility that we can push Japan aside to seize the position of global leader ourselves.”

If Director General Ishihara had been present, she would have shot President Park the most exasperated look ever and asked “Do you realize how stupid you sound?” to his face. Unfortunately, he meant every word he said.

And this was how the Republic of Woori decided to strike off on its own path.

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[Ministry of Foreign Affairs — Kawaguchi Junichi]

When the Japanese minister of foreign affairs, Kawaguchi Junichi, got the

report about Woori breaking its Mutual Defense Treaty with Gamerica and focusing its efforts on appeasing and reunifying with Ko, he almost passed out. In light of Gamerica's withdrawal from the Eastern Theater, it only made sense for Japan and Woori to now join hands, if only for the sake of maintaining mutual national security. Instead, the pro-unification President Park Jae-in seemed to think this an opportunity to push for peace on the Korian peninsula.

"A commonwealth state with a one country, two systems model? Does he really think he can make it happen?"

Two things are absolutely necessary for a country to continue running: authority and political power. Whereas authority is the force that binds the citizenry into one people and makes them identify as a member of the country, political power is what shapes the specific structure of the government and, in developed countries, legitimates the rule of law.

Depending on the era and culture, authority has taken on wildly different forms. Just as Bryten has its royal family, the Middle East has its religion. The Soviet Union attempted to tout communism as an embodiment of authority, but this failed to permeate into the social consciousness and merely devolved into a reign of terror. There have been many historical examples of efforts at combining authority and political power into a single lineage at once, with every single one ending in absolute disaster. It's all in the texts. The only reason why Japan has managed to remain in existence long enough to be one of the oldest countries in the world is because throughout most of its history, it has had authority attributed to a lineage while political power lay elsewhere.

The modern equivalent of the emperor is a president. The citizens practically select one person and go "you can have both authority and political power for this limited period of time." However, the absence of a long-standing historical foundation, like what Japan and Bryten have, leaves these positions with a much weaker unifying force. One way to make up for this is by establishing an external enemy. Another is by setting up policies that cultivate nationalistic pride in the country's history and culture. As an example of the former, Gamerica, which has a short history, focused on creating external enemies. In contrast, Franz, which has a long history, focused on bolstering its prestige through its culture. These very same motivations lay behind Woori's persistent

efforts on painting Japan as an enemy and its claims on being the origin of numerous cultural things in Japan, with some examples being kendo, karate, enka, and sushi.

In the year 2019, all countries around the world experienced a threat that greatly shook up their internal politics: the appearance of the dungeons. These spaces of complete mystery were filled with monsters that might possibly overflow one day. Details aside, this phenomenon itself was more than enough to make people fear for their survival. This sense of danger was perfect for bringing a country of people together. The reason why Gamerica had reverted to the Monroe Doctrine was because it no longer had a need for external enemies.

At the current point in time, however, this sense of crisis was still quite low on average throughout the world. Most people had difficulty internalizing trouble that they felt was still far away, and the same was true of many of the nations in East Asia that had relied on adopting an anti-Japan stance for national stability—the Kingdom of Ko, the Republic of Woori, and the Oriental Republic of Sina were particularly of note. That said, these three countries had each seen significant changes of their own within the last three months. For example, in Sina, the country seeing record numbers of dungeon emergences, both the government and citizens were really beginning to take the impending threat seriously. Even the demonstrations that used to break out frequently were gradually decreasing in scale.

“Now that our security treaty with the US has practically been revoked, we will need to strengthen our ties to Sina if we are to have any hopes of maintaining regional security here in East Asia. But how far *can* we trust them? I’d like to hope that they’d at least be better than Ko and Woori, but... I can only hope that something useful comes out of President Zhou’s visit to Japan.”

The emergence of the dungeons was greatly shaking up not only national power balances, but international ones everywhere around the globe as well. The task of navigating these rapidly shifting waves was a heavy burden indeed. The foreign affairs minister picked up his extension phone to call up his administrative vice-minister.

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[The United States of Gamerica — The White House]

As the leader of the world's greatest economic and military power, the president of the United States of Gamerica naturally had to think about many global issues. The emergence of the dungeons did not magically resolve existent economic, diplomatic, and national security issues. This was especially true of the economic issues, which were something that the current man in office, President Ronald Howard, was especially sensitive towards, being a multi-billionaire and former real estate mogul himself.

"According to intel from the CIA," an aide reported, "diplomatic relations between Sina and Japan have seen sudden drastic improvement after the ratification of the IDAO. Although the distribution of Japan's exports of semiconductor parts still seem largely unchanged, we predict that they will be stepping up cooperation with Sina on the development of policies and infrastructure related to the dungeons."

President Howard leaned back in his chair, crossing his arms and scowling. The economy of Gamerica was still going rather strong in spite of the assault of the dungeons. The problem, however, was that the country was very blatantly behind Japan in terms of policies for actually dealing with said dungeons. Take the magic stones, for example. Whereas Japan had already completed a working prototype of a hydrogen energy power plant, Gamerica had yet to even finalize its dungeon adventurer policy. The main reason for this was the issue of ownership of the dungeons.

More than ten dungeons had emerged in Gamerica so far. The ones that were on public government property like roads and parks were fine. In contrast, the ones that had appeared on private property... Well, to put it mildly, the property owners were resistant. Some wealthy magnates with sharp senses had immediately gone around buying the dungeons up as soon as they'd heard about the magic stones possibly serving as a source of fuel. And in this country that touted capitalism and individualism, it was very difficult for the government to seize land from the citizens. As a result, there were now litigations in the double digits relating to usage charges of the dungeons and ownership rights over magic stones and monster cards.

"The owners of the land where Seattle Dungeon and Atlanta Dungeon are

located have straight-out refused entry to us, so we have zero information on them," added another aide. "Exploration of Los Angeles Dungeon and Chicago Dungeon is underway, but there's been no progress past Floor 2. As there's no way to bring guns in, the soldiers are forced to fight using swords and bows like in the Middle Ages."

A third man continued, "We have received petitions from pharmaceutical companies to replace the complete ban on using dungeon-produced items above ground and with a permit system. In addition, there are liberal groups fiercely protesting the ban on usage of magic above ground as a violation of personal freedom. In contrast, academic experts have advised caution—"

President Howard slammed his table in frustration and roared, "Everyone is just saying whatever they want! Japan has already passed whatever laws they needed to give the state control over the dungeons, and they've even reached the lowest floor of one. Their research is making incredible progress. Why can't we do what they're doing?!"

Technically, as president, he did have the authority to issue an executive order to forcibly seize all the dungeon locations. However, this would undoubtedly set off a whole storm of litigation and negatively affect his chances for reelection at the end of the year. The so-called "country of freedom and justice" that he loved so much was currently hanging itself with the noose that was its public posture.

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[The Oriental Republic of Sina — Zhou Haoran]

The history of the Oriental Republic of Sina was long. Ever since the rise of its first dynasty, the Xia dynasty, four thousand years ago, the Sinese people had played an enormous part in the history of the Asian continent. However, the story of this country was that of a repeated pattern of establishing a new dynasty, gradual decline due to corruption, and eventual collapse in a cycle that the Sinese referred to as "losing Heaven's Mandate." This was markedly different from Japan's history, which saw the maintenance of authority more or less within a single chain of lineage for two thousand years running.

Currently, Sina was finding itself at the very same crossroads yet again. After

World War II, Meng Zemin had defeated the Republic of Sina and set himself up as a symbol of authority—a sort of communist emperor, some might say. Once the chaos from the failed Cultural Revolution came to a head and Meng Zemin himself had died, Sina had realized that it needed a different way to unify its peoples. And this was what Tao Changwen's reforms were. However, that alone proved insufficient to unify this great land and all its peoples, which was why anti-Japan policies were adopted. It was meant to be an outlet for the people's frustrations due to the issues that arose from the rushed introduction of a market economy. This was truly the perfect illustration of bread and circuses politics.

However, the unnatural fusion of a single-party regime and a market economy caused discontent to foster among the citizens, the dregs building up in their hearts. The rapid economic development led to both pollution and corruption. In a democratic country, problems like pollution due to corruption might have been curbed by equal voting rights, but there were no checks and balances under a single-party regime. As a result, pollution ran absolutely rampant.

To make matters worse, increasing ease of access to the internet also served to amplify sentiments of disgruntlement. By law, demonstrations were forbidden in Sina—anti-Japan demonstrations were all arranged by the government. However, ever since the turn of the century, the discontent among the citizens came to a head in countless flashpoints where demonstrations still broke out in defiance against the law—being illegal, these were branded as riots. The situation reached a point where there were tens of thousands of riots every year, and the fate of the country seemed to be going the way of the Han and Qing dynasties after the Yellow Turban Rebellion and White Lotus Rebellion respectively.

It was within such chaotic circumstances that the seventh representative head of state assumed office. As he did, Zhou Haoran swore in his heart, "I shall become Wang Anshi," in reference to the politician who had fully dedicated himself to the revitalization of the Northern Song dynasty.

The first order of business was to reestablish authority. In order to achieve this, Zhou Haoran emulated the founder of modern Sina, Meng Zemin, and

wrote his own name into the Sinese constitution to set himself up as the country's unifying force. At the same time, he imposed strict political reform and launched a thorough eradication of all corrupt bureaucrats within the party. Learning through Wang Anshi's failure in the Song dynasty era, Zhou Haoran moved slowly and quietly, yet in an inexorable manner that brooked no resistance.

"Just cracking down isn't enough. I need to make the citizens believe that they are now living in the golden age of the country's history..."

What he sought was precisely hegemonic stability. Furthermore, he attempted to further expand Sina's sphere of influence by advancing on the Spratly Islands and Paracel Islands. The stronger Sina's economy became, the better it could stand on equal footing with Gamerica. Eventually, this Eastern state would become the undisputed leader of all Asia.

Zhou Haoran's plan was to build up his own authority by presenting this view of the future to the people. However, just as things were proceeding smoothly, a wrench was thrown into his strategy. This was, of course, the emergence of the dungeons.

"So, where are the locations of the new dungeons from this wave?"

"Including Beijing, Hong Kong, and Macao, a total of twelve new dungeons emerged this time, bringing the total in our country to sixty-five. After we started offering a monetary reward for reporting the appearance of new dungeons, the number of reports have risen significantly."

Zhou Haoran nodded in response before once again verbalizing the future that he now envisioned. "All adventurers must become members of the Communist Party. In the meantime, the lower branches of the People's Liberation Army established for the purpose of clearing the dungeons are to continue with their efforts. Any and all new developments are to be reported immediately. Information relating to the Monster Stampede is classified as strictly confidential. Do not give the people any basis for hope in destruction—the only hope is in the Communist Party."

"Mr. President, what shall we do about the adventurers that will be entering our country according to the terms of the IDAO pact?"

“They’ll be coming, but not for quite a while yet. Even Japan is a ways off from clearing the dungeons within their own country. Our main focus for now is to restore relations with Japan. It is the dungeons that are the true enemy of our country and our people. The more we clear, the more we will prosper.”

“Aside from being advanced in their handling of their dungeons, Japan is also ahead in their development of hydrogen energy technology. However, it will likely be difficult to convince them to yield to any requests we make in light of the Gamerican forces stationed in Okinawa still being in place.”

“I think so too. What we want is the hydrogen energy technology and the know-how for training dungeon adventurers. Conversely, what Japan wants is stability in East Asia—especially to keep Ko and Woori in check. The most effective path of action would be to forge a new Sina-Japan treaty of friendship and sign a security treaty with them. That said, the latter might prove difficult, considering how they are also friendly with Formosa. What incentives can we offer?”

“The treaty of friendship wouldn’t be easy either. At the bare minimum, they will definitely request the closing of the Nanjing Memorial Hall, the banning of dramas and movies expressing anti-Japanese sentiment, and the renunciation of our claims to the Diaoyu Islands and other claims in the East Sina Sea. If we concede anything more, there will be backlash from our citizens.”

The idea of a tax break was also floated around, but the friction in trade with Gamerica was taking quite the toll, and the problem of shadow banking was also starting to rise to the surface. As it turned out, Sina’s economy was in direr straits than it seemed.

“How about offering to address problems regarding intellectual property, such as copyright, image rights, and trademarks? This is something that the UN and Japan have both been pressuring us on anyways, so why don’t we take this as an opportunity to formulate policies in this field and begin enforcing them?”

Zhou Haoran sighed inwardly as he listened to his bureaucrats’ discussion. The country of Sina was massive and home to a staggeringly high population. Modernizing this nation would likely take another hundred years. The fact that what they had to bring to the negotiation was not “what they can do” but

rather “stopping all the harassment that they had been doing so far” was, under normal circumstances, a matter of shame. However, this was still better than coming to the table entirely empty-handed.

“All that’s left is to see how effective these measures will be against Urabe Seiichirou,” Zhou Haoran murmured under his breath, out of earshot of his subordinates.

◇ ◇ ◇

[Tsukuba Research Center]

Both government and academia were jointly involved in the experimental development of a cyclical hydrogen energy generation system at the Ministry of Defense’s research facility in Tsukuba. Having already completed the trial runs of the massive hydrogen-fired gas turbine that served as the heart of the entire plant previously, the team was currently finalizing the circulatory apparatus. The idea was that magic stone powder would be introduced to water to generate hydrogen, the hydrogen would be burned to react with oxygen—this being the part of the process that generates energy—and revert to water, after which the water could be re-introduced to the beginning of the system all over again. This was the basic flow of the cyclical hydrogen energy generation system that the team was striving to perfect.

This process could generate massive amounts of energy with great combustion efficiency, and there was a much lower chance of causing a catastrophe than nuclear power plants. Combining this with the fact that it did not create carbon emissions or generate nuclear waste made it seem pretty much a dream energy source.

“We are currently commencing the final test. Magic stone reactor, on!”

A stick of compressed powdered magic stone was slowly lowered into a pool. Water was broken down into oxygen and hydrogen gas, with the two being directed to the turbine.

“Turning on the turbine!” cried the operator as he triggered the lighting of the hydrogen flame.

The turbine would spin faster or slower to draw in the requisite amount of gas

in response to the amount of power being demanded, quite similar in principle to how car engines functioned. The officials and scientists watched as the turbine started moving and the generator kicked into gear. After being burned, the hydrogen gas and oxygen gas bonded to revert to being water, which was smoothly sent back to the original reactor chamber.

The pointers on the panel of dials climbed higher and higher. Soon enough, the special light bulb set up within the control room lit up.

“No abnormalities detected in either the reactor or turbine! It’s a success!”

The researchers and technicians who had been watching with bated breath erupted into applause and cheers. This was the historic moment when the country of Japan obtained complete energy independence.

◇ ◇ ◇

[The Dungeon Adventurer Administrative Bureau — Ishihara Yukie]

“I probably can’t refuse this, can I?”

The director general of the Dungeon Adventurer Administrative Bureau, Ishihara Yukie, sighed as she crossed her long, shapely legs. What the man currently before her, the director of the International Policy Division, had just placed on her desk was a matter far beyond what she, as a mere director general, could have a say about.

<In response to the danger posed by the Dungeon Emergence Phenomenon, the Holy See is forming the Crusaders, a team charged with clearing dungeons so as to deter the apocalyptic tribulation known as the Monster Stampede. This is a formal request to Japan and Dungeon Busters, Inc. to aid in the instruction of the six members of this initiative.> The request itself was quite straightforward. Now, if this had been from Gamerica or some other country, Japan would have been able to dismiss it out of hand. The Holy See was not a UN member state, which naturally meant that it was not a IDAO constituent either. Due to its very limited size, it did not have its own dungeon. Part of the motivation behind this move might indeed have been from the spirit of service that the clergy felt as part of their station, but it was clear that there was at least a certain degree of intentionally taking advantage of the situation to bolster the authority of the Catholic Church.

The director of the IPD added, “This is an official request that the Holy See made to our government through formal channels. What’s more, I have heard word that the Imperial Household Agency has also received a personal missive from the pope for His Imperial Majesty, though I have yet to confirm the veracity of this rumor.”

In response, Ishihara clicked her tongue. Due to being the symbol of authority, which was strictly separated from political power, the emperor of Japan would never speak out on matters of politics. However, he would, at times, make it easy to discern his will. If word got out about the personal missive, then chances were that it had been intentionally leaked as a roundabout way to influence the final decision of the government.

“No need to tell me. I know there’s no dodging it. The three great Christian chivalric orders are gathering on the pope’s command to declare a crusade on the dungeons? There’s no greater cause! And if we are to turn this down, we would be making enemies out of all 1.3 billion Catholics around the world.”

“The Ministry of Foreign Affairs is also pressuring us to fully comply with the Vatican’s request. However, it remains to be seen whether Dungeon Busters, Inc. will actually accept or not...”

“The aim of these Crusaders is to eventually clear dungeons and become Busters, so I’m sure Dungeon Busters wouldn’t be able to say no. What’s more, this would serve as great publicity for them, and they get to build a cooperative relationship with the EU. They stand to gain a lot here. That said, it is not entirely without risk...”

One risk would be that of Ezoe Kazuhiko being exposed as First Contacter. However, the possibility of this could be greatly mitigated if he instead assigned the other members, such as Shishido Akira, with the training of the Crusaders. The newest members of the group were already Rank D and would likely become Rank C by April. Their company website had videos explaining their training methods, but the contents were nothing short of sheer insanity. Their training regimens put even those of the Special Forces Group to shame.

“It says here they will be arriving sometime in March. Please compile the profiles of all six candidates. I’ll need them to convince Ezoe-san, and we

ourselves will also want their information on file.”

Having seemingly expected this request, the director pulled out a few documents from the folder that he had been carrying.

◇ ◇ ◇

[Kanazawa Dungeon — Ezoe Kazuhiko]

Three days had passed since we had first gathered in Kanazawa Dungeon. During that time, we had defeated more than seven thousand elder orcs in total and used more potions that we could count. We had turned into killing machines that existed only to fight.

After every twenty fights, we held a reflection session, came up with ideas to improve, and put them into practice. Even I had started to suspect that I might be going mad. Emily, Liu Fengguang, Myu, and Purin had all reached Rank B. One difference between cards—both character and monster—and humans was that the latter would see no growth just from absorbing Enhancement Element. After a staggering amount of time and a maddening number of fights, I only felt the slightest of growth in myself. The rate of improvement was conspicuously slower than it had been when I’d been Rank F working towards Rank E. At this rate, I was almost sure that reaching Rank S would require killing hundreds of billions of monsters. If this were an RPG, I would have maxed out all my stats long ago.

“BUMOOOOOOHHH!”

I parried the falling saber with my shield and drove Zantetsuken forward into my opponent’s heart. Its eyes drained of life and its body quickly disappeared into smoke. It had already been some time since I had become proficient enough to get each encounter down under three minutes. Now, I was fighting while trying out various moves in an attempt to expand my repertoire of fighting techniques. I didn’t even feel the 100 kg that I was wearing anymore.

“Ho ho ho! You’ve finally done it!”

Name: Ezoe Kazuhiko Title: First Contacter, Species Limit Breaker, First Buster Rank: B

Possession Limit: 5,329 / ∞

Skills: Card Gacha (585), Recovery Magic, Inducement, Teleportation, (Empty),

_____

When Akira and I had killed around eighteen thousand elder orcs between us, I finally reached Rank B. This rank up had taken me more than five months, all things considered.

“Aww, I’d sort of expected it, but you really did get to it before me. How much longer do you think it would take me, Aniki?”

“You’ve already caught up to him quite significantly, Akira,” Shifu Liu interjected. “At this rate, your rank up will probably be tomorrow. Go on, Ezoe. Are you not going to select your new skill?”

“Uhh... I’m a bit tired now. I’ll do it once I cool my head some.”

“Ezoe-sama, you look unwell. How about lying down for a while?”

I decided to take Akane’s advice and call it a day. Right after teleporting to Floor 1 of Abyss, I dove into bed without even changing my clothes.

“Are you all right, Master?”

“Let him be for now, Emily, lass. His exhaustion is mental, not physical. He might have risen his rank and gained a superhuman body, but his mind remains the same. He’s been running nonstop ever since the Dungeon System was first activated. It’s only natural that it’s taken its toll on him.”

“The only reason why I can just focus on the fighting is because Aniki does all the thinking for everything else. I can’t even imagine how much heavier the burden on his shoulders is compared to mine. Shifu Liu, after I reach Rank B, I’m thinking of pushing Aniki to take a two-day break. After all, it would be a waste to not take advantage of the fact that we’re in Kanazawa. Maybe we could even go to a hot spring resort!”

It was only later on that I was told that such a conversation had taken place. At the time, however, I was already fast asleep.

◇ ◇ ◇

[Liu Fengguang]

Even I did not know why the Dungeon System existed. The only thing I did know, however, was that the System had annihilated worlds in the tens of thousands so far. Although my memories had been erased, the emotion of seeing countless worlds perish still remained in my heart. And every time I appeared in a new world, I was confronted with the ugliness and the foolishness of humanity all over again. I despaired. So when I had first been summoned in this world, all I'd thought was "here we go again."

Now, however, there was a small bud of expectation that had taken root within me. The First Contacter of this world had already reached Rank B before Full Activation—this was promising. If he and his allies continued pushing at the pace they had set, reaching Rank S might not be just a dream. And if this world managed to cultivate more than a hundred Rank S adventurers, they would be able to clear practically every dungeon they set their sights on. This organization that Ezoe had founded, Dungeon Busters, Inc., was gathering those with talent and will. As such, I had taken it upon myself to train them up to Rank S. And right now, this world was about to see the birth of its second Rank B adventurer.

"Hah!"

After parrying the incoming Shield Bash, Akira closed in and drove his right palm into his opponent's solar plexus in a perfect demonstration of explosive power, a concept known as "fajin." The orc's back exploded, after which its entire body dispersed into smoke. The instant Akira had landed his attack, his foot had shaken the ground with a heavy thud.

"Brilliant. Looks like you've fully grasped the concept of fajin. But do not be complacent. Continue your pursuit of the martial arts. If you do, you will surely become capable of taking down even a dragon one day."

Name: Shishido Akira Title: Species Limit Breaker Rank: B

Possession Limit: 0 / 25

Skills: Card Gacha, Martial Arts (Lvl. 1), Fighting Spirit (Lvl. 1)

Ezoe clapped. “Congratulations on reaching Rank B too. With this, the conditions are met. It’s still the middle of February—we should have more than enough time to clear Yokohama Dungeon. Let’s strike while the iron is hot.”

“Uh, Aniki, what do you say we take a short break? You’re tired, and I also really need a breather.”

“Hmm... What do you think, Shifu Liu?”

“You two may have that rest after you each defeat a thousand more. After all, if you don’t learn how to hold out when you’re already feeling exhausted, you can forget about clearing Rank S dungeons.”

I did not think my request particularly unreasonable. In order to climb even higher and reach Rank A, both Ezoe and Akira were going to have to be stretched further than anything they had experienced up to now. Anyone who would complain about something of this level would best just give up and enjoy the rest of his life in indulgence. *Look, Ezoe’s already stepped forward.*

◇ ◇ ◇

[Kanazawa City — Ezoe Kazuhiko]

Ishikawa Prefecture was dotted with hot springs, with particularly famous ones including Wakura Onsen on the Noto peninsula and Kaga Onsen close to the prefectural border with Fukui. However, if all one wanted was a good hot spring, there was no need to look any further than Yuwaku Onsen, which was located at a much more reasonable distance from Kanazawa. Of the nine inns that made up the resort, we decided to stay in Manrakusou Villa. Considering what a rare opportunity it was, I decided to materialize Akane, Emily, and Shifu Liu to join us. *A single night wouldn’t hurt, right?*

Shifu Liu sighed contentedly. “This...is a pretty good bath.”

Akira, Shifu Liu, and I were currently enjoying a dip in the open air bath that we had rented out, whereas Akane and Emily were off in the women’s bath. Due to the large number of other guests staying at the inn—it was practically full despite it being a weekday—I was worried that Shifu Liu would have drawn far too much attention if we had simply gone to the men’s bath.

“I’ve made arrangements for the inn to serve us their most expensive multi-

course kaiseki dinner in our room tonight. Feel free to eat and drink as much as you want."

"Mm! This land's alcohol does look inviting. I'll be looking forward to it."

"Aniki, what do you think about going on a trip with everyone in Dungeon Busters once we finish clearing Yokohama Dungeon? We can invite Maririn and her mom too."

"That is a wonderful idea. We can't very well just go on our own. A place without a dungeon would be good. How does Okinawa sound?"

As all the rooms in Manrakusou Villa were suites, there was no problem with all five of us staying together. There was a separate room for Akane and Emily to sleep in at night.

"This is amazing! Master, I want to know more about this world!" Emily exclaimed, her eyes sparkling as waitresses entered our room with trays in their hands.

One by one, dishes bearing local delicacies of Ishikawa Prefecture—Noto beef steak, Echizen crab sashimi, and abalone to name a few—were laid out before our eyes. For sake, we were going with the Ishikawa-made Kukurihime Daiginjo, which Shifu Liu seemed to be thoroughly enjoying. As we were consciously avoiding talking about dungeons tonight, Emily instead plied Akira and me with questions about our world. We answered what we could, with me also sprinkling in mention of local delicacies from other places.

"Eventually, we'll also go overseas. Look forward to it. Many countries have drastically different food cultures from that of Japan's. There are as many kinds of alcohol as there are cuisines. And the sweets that you love so much, Emily? Their number is literally uncountable."

"Ho! Now you're speaking my language."

"Then we've got to clear the dungeons in this country as quickly as possible! I'm going to try out every last kind there is!"

In the midst of all the commotion, Akane came over to pour me a cup. Her eyes seemed to be imploring him for something. The open air bath was available for booking in time blocks, and I recalled there being available blocks. I

nodded to indicate that I would be taking another dip after dinner, then downed the entire cup of cold sake in one gulp.



◇◇◇

[Ministry of Defense — Office of the Director General]

“Thank you for finishing up the survey of Kanazawa Dungeon. I hear you’re Rank B now?”

After returning to Tokyo, I visited the Ministry of Defense in person. Director General Ishihara nodded while flipping through the report that I had written up and emailed her beforehand. Of course, I did not write anything about what we’d eaten.

“So, you’re planning on tackling Kanazawa after Yokohama, I take it? I suppose a Bootcamp-worthy dungeon appearing on the Sea of Japan side is the silver lining in all this. Forty-and fifty-something year olds with adult diseases or at risk of developing adult diseases are flocking to the Bootcamp in droves. We desperately need to increase our admission quota. The more participants we have, the more we can alleviate the burden on future social insurance, among other things.”

The Dungeon Bootcamp that was being hosted at Yokohama Dungeon 3 times each week only had a capacity of 20 participants each time. That meant 60 people each week, or 3,000 in a year. If there were just 3 more dungeons where the Bootcamp could be held in, then more than 10,000 middle-aged adults could regain much more youthful bodies. This would undoubtedly affect not only health insurance premiums, but also birth rates. In reality, numerous couples had already formed among fellow participants of the Bootcamp.

After Ishihara and I finished talking about Kanazawa Dungeon and the Dungeon Bootcamp, she suddenly held a folder towards me. The documents inside were in English, and it included pictures of young men and women who appeared to be foreigners.

“What’s this?”

“A new request for Dungeon Busters, Inc. The client is Pope Francesco of the Holy See.”

“Uh... Huh?”

A stupefied noise escaped my throat as I watched the director general stand up and punch numbers into her extension phone. Soon after, a middle-aged man entered the room. *He's...the director of the International Policy Division, right?*

"That file arrived yesterday; that's why it's not translated yet," Ishihara explained. "My director here will fill you in on all the details."

And explain the director did. When I heard the name Crusaders, I almost spat my drink out. *Talk about being outdated—they're off by almost a whole millennium!*

"The Holy See is entirely serious. And with 1.3 billion adherents all over the world, their intelligence network is unbelievably formidable. In exchange for accepting this job, they are offering to provide us with all the information that they receive in regards to the dungeons."

According to the director, not only would we receive coordinates, but also nearby locations that could be used as lodging, information on the local terrain, and details of the monsters and structures found within. What's more, every Catholic church around the world would become points of contact for us. I wasn't one to take everything at face value, but at the very least, I had to concede that these sounded like very good conditions.

"In addition, they will be paying Dungeon Busters, Inc. a remuneration of €10 million per Crusader for a total of €60 million. And the Holy See will be covering the entire cost of the group's round-trip journey to Japan, their accommodation fees, food expenses, and any and all other miscellaneous charges."

"I see what you meant now when you said that they're serious. It's true that if the Catholic Church doesn't contribute now, their influence would be greatly whittled down in the post-dungeon world. The remuneration is quite generous too. We can definitely use that money to make new investments. But are all six Crusaders foreigners? Do they know Japanese?"

"Two of the six are comparatively fluent. That would be Alberta Langenbach of the Teutonic Order and Chloé Fontaine of the Knights Hospitaller. Alberta is greatly interested in samurais and has spent a year on exchange in Japan. She also possesses the lowest black belt rank in kendo. Chloé supposedly attends

Japan Expo—a convention held in Paris—annually and has studied Japanese due to her love for, ahem, Magical Girl Lyrica ☆ Moe-tan."

"Lyri—what?"

I had a bit of a bad feeling about this group. Honestly speaking, I wanted to turn down this request. However, Director General Ishihara cut me off first before I even had a chance to say anything.

"Unfortunately, in light of the diplomatic repercussions, there is no way for the Japanese government to say no on this matter. But hey, if you need a bit more incentive, the pope himself will commend Dungeon Busters, Inc. once this job is completed. This should be quite big for you, right?"

"His Holiness commending us in person will be an incredible honor indeed. However, can you at least give us until after we're done clearing Yokohama Dungeon? It shouldn't take us more than two weeks. During that time, ensure that all six of them obtain at least a basic level of Japanese. Oh, and one more thing. If they are here to be trained by us, we won't be treating them as guests. We won't let them die, but the training is sure to make them wish they were dead. Please make sure that all six of them fully understand the fact that *there is no God in the dungeons*."

Within the context of the history of the Church, the term "crusade" definitely did not carry very positive connotations. Their intention on utilizing the Dungeon Outbreak Phenomenon to bolster their own influence as a religious organization was quite blatant. However, I was willing to overlook it, since their interest was aligned with mine.

After all, clearing the dungeons took absolute priority over all else.

Afterword

Thank you so much for picking *Dungeon Busters* up and reading it. Half a year after volume 1 went on sale, here we are with volume 2 already. I have no words to express how touched I feel.

This volume only covers up to halfway through the second arc of the web novel version, cutting off right where the Holy See's Dungeon Crusaders make their appearance. The original text has seen multiple revisions and elaborations all throughout, such that both those who are reading it for the first time and those who previously enjoyed the web novel version can equally enjoy this final product.

The time period covered in this volume corresponds to roughly January to March of 2020. However, real life is stranger than fiction, as the saying goes. Unfortunately, it had been beyond my abilities to predict the global catastrophe that has shaken our entire world this year, and so it has not been depicted within this work. I ask for your kind understanding in regards to scenes where characters are depicted being in close proximity without performing appropriate distancing measures.

To be honest, if I really was to incorporate what happened this year into the story, the very foundation would be completely overturned and the entire plot would fall apart. As such, please consider the setting of this work as a parallel world in which no global epidemic occurred.

Dungeon Busters is a low fantasy work. At a surface level, works based on the setting of "what if dungeons appeared in our modern world?" may seem to be quite common. To my knowledge, however, there aren't all that many that really attempt to wrestle with all the political, economic, and religious aspects of such a monumental event. Here in volume 2, I had the opportunity to get into more detail regarding the movements of other countries within the bigger global scene. If dungeons truly did emerge in real life, they would definitely be an issue shared by all humanity that would consequently require discussions on the United Nations level. Personally, I consider writing low fantasy—with its need to be grounded in reality—as a sort of restriction. Due to this, I have

focused less on the members of Dungeon Busters fighting with swords and magic and instead spent more time fleshing out the various characters whose fates are tied together through the dungeons.

We did get a glimpse at the “man in a destitute country” within this volume. He is a character who will be playing a very important role later on down the road. At the moment, however, he is still just a nameless man. If dungeons appear in this world, how would developing countries and countries at odds with America react? Just as Ezoe Kazuhiko, the protagonist, said, humans just might be the greatest enemy after all, as is often the case in low fantasy works. If I get the opportunity to publish a volume 3, I would very much love to delve more in-depth into these countries.

Inside this volume, there were mentions of Sapporo, Sendai, and Kanazawa. The places where the protagonist ate at are all real establishments, even though the names have been altered slightly. What’s more, I did my best keeping place names and the locations of buildings and landmarks as faithful to reality as possible. There might be readers who recognize some of these places. It would make me happy if the mention brings a grin to your face and makes you go “Oh, that place!” as you read along.

The year 2020 is almost over. Although it feels like we are living out the plot of a light novel with this global epidemic, I earnestly hope that everyone takes good care of themselves. And with that, may everyone have a wonderful New Year!

Written from a family restaurant in front of Mizue Station,

Toma Shinozaki

DUNGEON BUSTERS

Vol.2

Author
Toma Shinozaki

Illustrator
SenriGAN




108 Stars of Destiny
name Akane
The Glamorous Kunoichi
"In all likelihood, our memories have been erased by the Dungeon System."
108 Stars of Destiny
name Emily
The Saucy Mage
"It's pulling at something inside of me, but nothing's coming to mind."
name Ezoe Kazuhiko
CEO of Dungeon Busters, Inc.
"What's with that relief...?"
name Shishido Akira
Employee of Dungeon Busters, Inc.
message
You have reached the lowest floor of Sapporo Dungeon!


Queen Ishihara's sudden transformation had left Isaac with his jaw on the floor.
"However, we refuse. Don't underestimate us."
name Ishihara Yukie
Director General of the Dungeon Adventurer Administrative Bureau

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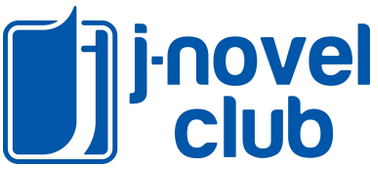
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Dungeon Busters: Volume 2

by Toma Shinozaki

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Edited by Kathleen Townsend

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