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DD DUNGEON BUSTERS Vol. 4



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Chapter 1: Ezoe Kazuhiko Has Changed

[A Certain Place in Tokyo — Ezoe Kazuhiko]

I opened my eyes and gazed at an unfamiliar ceiling, head foggy. It felt like my whole brain was bathing in a numbing fluid. My body was heavy, and I couldn't move my limbs.

What's going on?

I tried my hardest to remember what had happened. As I recalled, I had been in Hyakunincho, inside Shinjuku Dungeon. *We had a barbecue on Floor 1, didn't we?* Then Akira called me, and we chatted for a while. I couldn't remember what our conversation had been about, or anything else after that point.

Where am I? Am I still inside the dungeon?

I heard a strange voice, a woman's voice, that sounded as though it had been recorded and was being played back at a slower speed.

I couldn't move my neck. Someone must have given me eye drops too, as my eyes couldn't focus, and I closed them in spite of myself.

A hand caressed my head. Suddenly, I felt extremely sleepy.

I needed to stay awake and open my eyes though. If I was inside a dungeon, what was happening could very well be part of a monster's attack. I bit the corner of my mouth, the pain clearing my head somewhat. Finally, I tried getting up.

"Don't! Sleep some more!"

"Director General Ishihara?" I struggled to speak. "Urgh... What's going on?!"

My arms and legs were tied down to the bed with chains. I didn't really understand what was happening, but the situation was ridiculous. Did they really think mere chains could restrain a B-Ranker like me?



I mustered some strength in my right arm and tried to break free. The chain creaked but did not budge.

“It won’t work,” she said. “These chains are a dungeon item. Even a B-Ranker like you won’t be able to break them.”

“How about you tell me why the hell you did this,” I growled, glaring at Ishihara.

She looked sad as she shook her head. “Shishido Akira was right. You really have changed. You can’t keep a cool head and read the situation anymore. The violent look you just threw me is proof enough. You’re not the same person I met half a year ago.”

“What is wrong with you? Just get these chains off me!”

I banged the chains on the bed.

Ishihara crossed her arms. “As the head of the Dungeon Adventurer Administrative Bureau, I can’t let you go,” she continued, her expression stern. “You don’t seem to be aware of it, but your mental state is unstable. Having a B-Ranker in this state roaming free poses too much of a threat. For now, I want you to calm down, all right? I’ll explain everything, so...”

I tried to move my right leg, using all my strength—after all, my legs were at least three times stronger than my arms—and I still couldn’t break the chain. Finally, I took a deep breath and let myself slump on the bed.

I could more or less piece together what had happened. I was probably inside a hospital room. As for me blacking out, I assumed that something must have happened inside Shinjuku Dungeon. The only person who could have done anything to me inside the safety zone was Akira.

“It was Akira, right? Did he slip me a drug to make me lose consciousness?”

“He used a forbidden dungeon item, Sleeping Perfume. Inhaling even a fraction of it will make you fall into a deep slumber. He first contacted me around three weeks ago to tell me you were acting strangely and asked for permission to use it if he ever judged that the situation required it...”

“That guy...” I paused. “Couldn’t he have just talked to me?”

“If he had, would you have listened? You were becoming more and more unstable. Shishido Akira told me that you were even starting to doubt the Legend Rare characters, you know. I have no qualms about that in itself, but what were you thinking? Starting such an argument right as you were entering a dungeon...? In the past, you wouldn’t have brought that up in front of everyone. You would have checked with the Legend Rare characters in private afterward, wouldn’t you?”

I closed my eyes and thought back to the events of that day. I found myself half-agreeing with her. At the same time, I couldn’t help but think that it couldn’t have been helped, considering how little time we had left.

“There’s no time. The countdown to the Monster Stampede has started. If we don’t hurry up, then...”

I smelled something and immediately became unbearably drowsy.

“Don’t think about it for now. Tomorrow, you’ll be calmer. And, hopefully, you’ll go back to how you were...”

My consciousness slipped away once again.



[Dungeon Busters Headquarters — Shishido Akira]

Aniki always said that anything could happen inside the dungeons and that, if something were to happen to him, I was to take charge of Dungeon Busters... But there was no way I could ever replace him.

I heard that several adventurers in Gamera and Sina had developed mental health issues after becoming C-Rankers. This wasn’t all that strange. Fighting monsters in dark dungeons while fearing for your life was extremely stressful.

We had been lucky enough to avoid that, all thanks to Aniki. Ezo Kazuhiko had always been there in front of us, pushing forward. All we had to do was follow in his footsteps. We had been able to move forward without fear because he was there to show us the way.

On the other hand, I couldn’t begin to imagine how much weight rested on Aniki’s shoulders. He had spent the most time inside the dungeons, had fought

the most monsters, and was the most concerned about the threat of the Monster Stampede. The stress he must have been under was unimaginable.

The first time I thought Aniki was acting strangely had been at the beginning of April, right after the Full Activation of the Dungeon System. He had been growing more and more impatient. First, he'd suddenly threatened the peddler we'd met inside Funabashi Dungeon. Then, he had obsessively killed monsters to reach Rank A, and when even that had failed, he'd taken needless risks fighting Rank A monsters despite being Rank B.

What had finally convinced me that Aniki had changed was his attitude when we'd entered Shinjuku Dungeon. He'd doubted the Legend Rare characters because Anego knew of the monster that looked like a Dr*cky. In the past, he never would have done such a thing; he had changed. Aniki was an adult, always considering the situation as a whole and the people around him before saying anything. He would never have been that crude.

That was why I'd decided to act. Aniki needed some rest, and he would get it, even if I had to force him.

"Director General Ishihara contacted us. It seems that Ezo-san woke up but was put back to sleep once more. They're also done taking X-rays and blood samples. They haven't finished analyzing them, but there don't seem to be any issues so far."

I was sitting in the cafeteria and drinking a beer when Mukai, the General Manager, and Mucchii, the guy in charge of our IT department, came to find me. It was past 10 p.m. Apparently, the two of them planned to stay at the headquarters overnight tonight. *Well, so do I.*

"They won't find any physical issue. Ezo-shi can use recovery magic, and we have so many Potions—including Extra Potions—at Dungeon Busters that he couldn't use them all, even if he tried. I'm worried about his mind, not his body," Mucchii said.

I could see the worry on his face. If Aniki didn't come back, Dungeon Busters would lose its backbone, and it could very well collapse immediately.

"I was also too careless," Mukai-san added with a sigh. "In the end, Ezo-san is just another human. He's had to grapple with his guilt and impatience while

taking on monster after monster in dimly lit dungeons for over ten years in dungeon time... It's only natural that his mind would take a blow. It may do us good to consider hiring a psychiatrist in the future."

"Ezoe-shi tends to push himself too hard. Dungeon Busters is a pretty big organization now. All we need to do is finish putting our clan system in place. As long as we raise plenty of B-Rankers, some are bound to reach Rank A, or even Rank S, after that. When Ezoe-shi comes back, I'll make sure to tell him that," Mucchii added.

"I think you both have a point, but regardless, I doubt Aniki will stop dungeon diving. Even if he couldn't have done anything to prevent it, it's still true that dozens of people died because of the Dungeon System activating. Aniki wants to bring this to an end himself."

Dungeon Busters Inc. was a company. As Mucchii said, what Aniki would normally have done was exchange information with the Dungeon Adventurer Administrative Bureau in Japan and the respective adventurer organizations in the EU and Gameraica, recruit promising applicants, figure out how to best clear dungeons, compile this information, and work on bettering the adventurers' image in the media.

Currently, Mukai-san handled all of this. The only reason Aniki was able to keep dungeon diving was Mukai-san's employment. Of course, Aniki understood that better than anyone else. That's why he paid special attention to his words when addressing Mukai-san, always being as polite as possible.

"Mukai-san, I think Aniki will listen if you're the one to warn him. You're the only one who can give him advice on how to handle the company..." I said.

"I agree. Ezoe-shi is a smart man. If you give him logical arguments, you will definitely get through to him. I think that you're the only one who can bring this up as business advice too," Mucchii agreed.

As I thought, Mukai-san was the best person to discuss things with Aniki on equal footing from a logical standpoint, but I still had a feeling he wouldn't be enough. We needed something more to turn Aniki back into his old self. We needed another approach, something completely opposite from this one...



[The University of Tokyo General Hospital — Ezoe Kazuhiko]

“Could you tell me what this looks like to you?”

“Two dogs that are mating...”

I was currently undergoing the infamous Rorschach test. To be honest, I was a bit dubious about these psychological tests. I didn't believe you could understand anyone with these. They were nothing more than a pseudoscience that relied on the Barnum effect, just like that so-called personality assessment based on blood type. This was so stupid that I was starting to get a bit annoyed.

“Hey! Are we done here?” I asked. “Aren't you a bit embarrassed to be using something as stupid as the Rorschach test in this day and age? What's the next step? Are we going to go back to methods of the Japanese Army before the war and make groups based on blood type?”

As soon as I complained, they picked up their pen and wrote something down. They kept trying to get a rise out of me and observing my reactions. I didn't want to lose any more time on this bullshit. I should've been reaching the deepest levels of Shinjuku Dungeon instead.

I was moved to another room to listen to the final assessment results and suddenly felt a strong urge to punch the psychiatrist. They had most likely anticipated my reaction, since they had sent Director General Ishihara to break the news. Their craftiness pissed me off even more.

“I have OCD? Bring the idiot who decided that over here,” I said. “I'll bring them along on a little dungeon trip so they can check if I'm being obsessive or not themselves.”

“Calm down,” Ishihara told me. “The doctors are also having a hard time figuring out your issue. Serotonin levels usually play a big role in mental illnesses, but in your case, there seems to be no issue whatsoever with your brain. At the same time, you're clearly exhibiting behaviors found in patients with OCD and mood disorders.”

“So you're saying that there's no cause, right? When someone changes without a major cause, we usually just call that 'growth.'”

“Are you going to pretend you grew as a person?” she asked. “You're acting

more and more like a little kid.”

I could feel my left eye twitch. I decided to let it go since it was Ishihara, but if anyone else had said that, I would have punched them on the spot.

“I’m good with being a kid. If it means the dungeons can be cleared, I don’t mind becoming a little kid or even a girl. I’m done now. I’m going home,” I said.

“I can’t let you do that,” said a voice that came from the door.

Turning around, I saw General Manager Mukai as well as another person.

“General Manager Mukai and...Mari? Why are you here?” I asked.

As soon as those words left my lips, Mari rushed over to my side, in tears, and slapped me.

“Why?!” she screamed. “Why won’t you trust us more?!”

I didn’t get what she meant at all. I looked at General Manager Mukai, who watched us with a calm smile. He was older than I and held the key role of supporting Dungeon Busters by ensuring the company operated smoothly. Many of our HR and PR staff had joined the company because of his influence. I truly owed him a lot.

“Ezoe-san,” he started, “you worked as a management consultant for a long time, so you should understand. The president shouldn’t do the same job as his employees. He trusts his employees to get the job done. That’s what being a manager is all about, right?”

“Yes, I know. But that only applies to large-scale corporations that are able to establish strict divisions of labor. When it comes to small and medium-sized enterprises, the owner needs to act as the breadwinner. If you look into the history of the biggest companies in Japan, the owners also used to work and manufacture goods in their early days.”

“Your comparison is misguided,” General Manager Mukai said. “Is there any other company in the whole world that counts over forty adventurers in its ranks, owns a several-hundred-square-kilometer headquarters as well as lodging facilities, and is able to make hundreds of millions of yen in profit in a single day? In the adventurer business, our company is without a doubt the

biggest in the world. We also have five adventurers who have reached the same rank as you. Isn't it time for you to start doing your job as the company president?"

"There is still too much we don't understand about the dungeons. I cannot step down from being an adventurer now. I'm responsible for activating the Dungeon System. Many have lost their lives because of me. I need to finish this with my own two hands," I explained.

General Manager Mukai nodded a few times before whispering quietly, "As expected, *that's* the real issue..."

* * *

[Dungeon Busters's General Manager — Mukai Junpei]

I had seen more than my fair share of managers after having worked as a banker supervising operations at countless branches for more than twenty years. Thanks to my experience, I could easily see that, sadly, Ezo Kazuhiko was far from an outstanding manager. That being said, this assessment was mostly based on the usual criteria applied in business, such as cost-consciousness, profitability, and HR management.

On the other hand, he was unparalleled as an adventurer and leader who brought together other adventurers. Plenty of candidates stated that they hoped to join us because they admired Ezo Kazuhiko and wanted to fight alongside him, after all. His best quality wasn't his natural charisma but rather the fact that he always took charge and was a pillar of strength in front of his teammates at all times.

However, this quality of his was a double-edged sword. I had seen several former colleagues develop mental illnesses from the stress of being caught between their responsibilities to their clients and their obligations to the bank itself. In the case of Ezo Kazuhiko, what he struggled with weren't his responsibilities as the leader of Dungeon Busters, but rather his duty as an adventurer—clearing the dungeons with his own hands.

I had been worried about this for quite some time.

"Ezo-san, you're an adventurer. You know that you have to always stand on

the front line to lead other adventurers. That's why I don't intend to tell you that going inside the dungeons, fighting monsters, or clearing dungeons yourself is a mistake. However, that is something you should do because of your position as Dungeon Busters' leader, not because of the guilt you feel for activating the Dungeon System. I will take the occasion to say it clearly once and for all: at this point, it doesn't matter who activated the Dungeon System. No one is thinking about that anymore. You saying you need to 'finish this with your own two hands' is nothing more than your guilt speaking."

A good company owner had two main missions: bring everyone's work together and lead their employees. Many of the office workers that I had seen in managing positions were good at the former but could not act as leaders for their subordinates. As long as the company was prosperous enough, it was not an issue. However, any adversity could make the whole company topple in bad times. That's why, until now, I had been in charge of making sure everything was in order work-wise while Ezo Kazuhiko acted as a figure of leadership. I didn't mean to say that he should man up and do his work as a company president without complaining or showing any weakness, but instead that, as the president, he ought to act as a leader for everyone else. I was certain he would understand me.

"Mari... Tell me. Did I really seem that desperate?" he asked.

"Yes..." she answered. "It was hard seeing you like that."

"Ezo-san, let's go out to have some fun more often," I said.

It appeared I had gotten through to him.



[Dungeon Adventurer Administrative Bureau Director General — Ishihara Yukie]

For the time being, Ezo had been discharged to go check on the rest of the Dungeon Busters members. Considering his condition, he should have been kept under surveillance for a while longer, but hospitalizing a B-Ranker against their will was no easy feat. Only dungeon items could be used to achieve that, and we had no insurance that using them to keep him immobilized wouldn't eventually backfire.

What had happened had to be kept under wraps. If the public learned that a B-Ranker was mentally unstable, it would only lead to unrest. There was also another reason, which I hadn't discussed with him.

"I can only think of one reason for him to be suffering from mental health issues while showing absolutely no physical signs. Enhancement Element..." I paused. "I don't know how to deal with this. If the Monster Stampede didn't have a deadline, I would make a report immediately and have all the dungeons sealed off until we are able to check the condition of every single adventurer, but..."

This was nothing more than a makeshift solution, but, for now, we ought to dispatch mental health professionals to provide care for busters at every dungeon facility. A few hours above ground were equal to a month inside the dungeons. Having adventurers stay inside for prolonged periods of time was too dangerous. If possible, I wanted to limit dungeon diving to one above-ground hour at a time.

Unlike miners, however, busters needed to stay inside the dungeons for longer stretches of time in order to clear them. We were still lacking a large sample size, but, from the information we had been able to gather thus far in Japan and the EU, it appeared that dungeons grew increasingly deeper as their rank got higher. I couldn't even begin to imagine how deep Rank A or Rank S dungeons must be.

"We can't be sure of anything yet. So far, none of the other members of Dungeon Busters have shown similar symptoms. Even if Enhancement Element is the cause, it's also possible that it has a minimal effect, and the pressure and stress Ezoë was under amplified it. We need to observe him, as well as other adventurers, for a while longer to reach a conclusion."

Dungeon Busters's existence was crucial, not only for Japan but for the world as a whole. The one who supported the Busters was Ezoë Kazuhiko. He wasn't a genius like Shishido Akira; he was just an average, middle-aged man who had decided to stand up to the dungeons with nothing more than his courage and wits. Yet, many adventurers had found hope thanks to him. If Ezoë Kazuhiko went down, dozens of other adventurers would lose their will to fight, and humanity would get one step closer to ruin.

“What he needs the most right now is a change of pace. Thankfully, we received just the right request...”

I wondered how he would react when he heard about this particular request, letting out a little chuckle as I imagined the face he would make.



[Ezoe Kazuhiko]

“WHAT?!”

I was sitting in the cafeteria when I heard about it, and I was so shocked that I let out a weird sound. I was tired of the hospital’s bland food and had asked Shiori—Mari’s mother—to make me shabu-shabu, a type of hot pot that involves you cooking the meat and vegetables in the broth yourself. I loved pork, so I had asked for kilos of pork shoulder and pork ribs to be prepared and was currently enjoying them with Shiori’s homemade sesame sauce.

Akira, Mutsuo, Rinko, and the other B-Rankers, as well as the Legend Rare characters, were present. For some reason, Mari and Shingo were also with us. I needed to ask how far their relationship had progressed later.

“We got that request while you were in the hospital, Aniki. Maeshima Yuuko and Mineno Ayumi from TNG47—Tonegawa 47—are both huge fans of yours and are hoping you will agree to escort them when they come to Edogawa City to film a show,” Akira explained.

“Why would they even like an old guy like me?” I asked after a pause. “Cute young girls should go on dates with good-looking guys who are the same age as they are. Don’t you agree, Mari?”

“I...” she started. “I don’t think I care about age that much. I’m attracted to hardworking people I can respect, especially if they also are honest and open-minded.”

“You heard her, Shingo! You know what to work on now,” I joked.

Shingo seemed to take it at face value and nodded, face serious. *Good*. If he started laughing awkwardly and getting embarrassed at every little jab, Mari wouldn’t be able to count on him either. Now that he had confessed, he had to

keep working hard.

“Well, they probably dreamed up an ideal version of me. If I meet them, they’ll only end up disappointed, won’t they?” I asked.

“Oh my. I think Kazuhiko-sama is an incredible person, though. They will probably end up falling for you. As a woman myself, I can guarantee it,” Akane said as she sat down next to me and handed me a bowl.

I planned to take her back to my room tonight. I needed to apologize for what had happened inside Shinjuku Dungeon again too.

“So, Ezoe-shi, what are you going to do? If you end up accepting their request, bring me back a picture of them and their autographs, all right? Ah, and ask them if they’d be down to appear as guests at the Comic Live October Festival, please.”

“Mucchii! As always, you’re only interested in your hobbies!” Akira cut in, as he always did.

I ended up laughing out loud. As expected, having lively people around was a must. I couldn’t turn my back on the crisis at hand; I’d make sure all of the dungeons were cleared no matter what. However, resolve and determination alone wouldn’t cut it. My body wouldn’t follow suit. I needed to fight hard *and* play hard. I thought I had been doing that so far, but it wouldn’t hurt to have a little more fun.

“I guess it could be a good change of pace... Tell them I accept. And, Mutsuo, I don’t mind asking them, but I’m warning you in advance that Dungeon Busters won’t pay their appearance fee.”

Everyone laughed at the sight of Mutsuo’s shoulders slumping in defeat.



[Tokyo TV — Oosuga Fumika]

A few days ago, I had finally gotten the okay for a project I had been waiting on for quite some time. It had come as a surprise to the broadcasting station as well, and the programming schedule had needed some urgent adaptations to accommodate it. It was extremely rare for a channel like Tokyo TV to suddenly

re-arrange their programming. That's just how attractive this project was! After all, the last time we had been able to get him on our channel, at the end of last year, the ratings had reached a whopping forty percent...

"Good evening, everyone! Five months have gone by since the last edition of this program, which aired at the end of last year. It has been approximately ten months since July, when dungeons started appearing, and general agitation is still high. How will our country—no, how will the world face this crisis? Tonight, we have a very special guest. He hasn't been on TV in the last five months... Please welcome the representative of Dungeon Busters, Ezo Kazuhiko-san!"

It had been five months since I'd last seen him, and I felt as though he had changed a little. He wore a high-quality tailored suit just as he had the first time, and, at first glance, looked like some management consultant or CEO. Ezo had a peculiar atmosphere about him, somewhere between the intellectual look of a businessman and the wildness of a seasoned adventurer, although I had a feeling his wild side was a little more pronounced than it had been in the past.

"I think everyone would agree that the most fitting word to describe the past five months is 'agitated.' In Japan, four dungeons—including Sapporo Dungeon, Yokohama Dungeon, Kanazawa Dungeon, and Funabashi Dungeon—have been cleared. These feats have proved that dungeons can indeed be cleared and have given hope to the people. On the other hand, we now know that what is being referred to as the Monster Stampede—a phenomenon during which the monsters currently contained within the dungeons will rush out—is a real possibility."

Rumor had it that the Monster Stampede was to happen in ten years, but the government had neither confirmed nor denied this information. This meant that they knew the truth but refused to comment on it. Well, if they revealed this kind of information, it would only increase the risk of it turning into reality.

Aside from a few freelance journalists, most of the media had a tacit understanding that the timing of the Monster Stampede was not to be investigated. Japan, Gamera, the EU, the Oriental Republic of Sina, and other countries communicated about this issue in secret. Bringing the truth to people was the mission of us journalists, but most countries' leaders had brought forward the matter of "responsibility" when it came to disclosing such news. If

someone tried to break this scoop, they would undoubtedly be blamed for the unrest that would naturally follow. A puny TV station was sure to immediately crumble after something like that.

“Still, if the dungeons can be cleared, all we have to do is have our talented adventurers get rid of them one at a time. Dungeon Crusaders, another adventurer group, has been formed in the EU by the Vatican State with that exact mission. However, just as everyone felt hopeful that the dungeons would be steadily cleared, the Dungeon Outbreak Phenomenon, which previously resulted in the appearance of new dungeons every thirty-six days, suddenly sped up. In twenty-four hours, new dungeons appeared all over the world. Since then, no further outbreak has occurred, but this phenomenon brought the total number of dungeons across the globe to over six hundred. Experts surmise that several dungeons may not have been discovered yet. Right as humanity found a glimmer of hope, it was brutally taken away from us once again.”

I glanced at Ezoe. His face showed no expression at all. I wondered how he felt deep down. Was he also reminiscing on the events of the past five months?

“That’s when another incident took place. The man who later introduced himself as Joker instigated a coup d’état in Venisuela, and after claiming that the Monster Stampede was to happen in ten years, he said that he intended to make it happen. He demanded that advanced countries pay in order for him to stop his machinations. He took every single inhabitant of our planet hostage with his blackmail and has naturally faced heavy criticism from most countries.”

“Venisuela has expressed its intentions to withdraw from the UN,” I continued. “At the same time, the UN Security Council has pushed in favor of excluding Venisuela. The next General Assembly of the United Nations will likely see Venisuela officially forced out of the organization. Some countries, such as the Kingdom of Ko, have decided to support Joker and have even been hinting at their intention to leave the UN along with Venisuela.”

“How ought we react to the threat of the Monster Stampede? How should we respond to the divisions in the international community? Tonight, we will be asking Ezoe-san for his opinion both as a leading adventurer and as a key individual who has been involved in dungeon policy-making here in Japan.”

[Tokyo TV — Ezoe Kazuhiko]

I hadn't been appearing on TV all that much, but General Manager Mukai had convinced me to go get us some exposure. Next week, the members of TNG47 would be coming to our headquarters. We couldn't have them enter Abyss, but it would be a good occasion to show them around Shishibone, Edogawa City. It was a remote place that required you to walk for over thirty minutes regardless of which station you got off at, but surprisingly, it was packed with great shops and restaurants.

"Finally, I would like to ask you about your thoughts on the future of Japan. In June, the double election of both houses will take place. Anti-dungeon measures are one of the most debated issues. Conservatives, who currently rule the country, have spoken in favor of a revision of the constitution, the reinforcement of our armed forces, and the establishment of a Ministry of Dungeons and have made a point of clearing every single dungeon. The Komeito, which has allied with the Conservative Party, had shown some reservations about the idea of revising the constitution before finally agreeing to it as long as the revisions only last until the dungeons are cleared."

Considering my position, I did not want to comment on politics too much, but I was aware that the upcoming elections were being carefully observed by the rest of the world. If the current ruling party lost, it would call the anti-dungeon policies of many countries into question.

"On the other hand, the main opposition party, the Constitutional Democratic Party, agrees on the necessity of clearing dungeons but has shown a clear opposition to the Urabe Administration's plans to revise the constitution. Its leaders are calling for other parties to join them in a united opposition front. Their plea hasn't reached the Democratic People's Party, as they have spoken in favor of the revision plans. The Civic Democratic Party and Communist Party, however, have both joined the Constitutional Democratic Party and refuse any constitutional changes."

A chart appeared. The parties in favor of revising the constitution were the Conservative Party, the Komeito (albeit with reservations), the Japanese

Reformist Party (though they seemed like they could change their mind at any point), and the Democratic People's Party. On the opposing side stood the Constitutional Democratic Party, the Civic Democratic Party, and the Communist Party. Their stance would make the dungeon response much more complicated.

"I have been actively working with the Dungeon Adventurer Administrative Bureau under the Ministry of Defense, so I am aware of the stance of the ruling coalition regarding dungeons," I started. "The idea is to join forces with the EU, the Oriental Republic of Sina, the ASEAN, and, if possible, Gamera to get rid of every dungeon. In order to achieve this goal, they are concentrating their efforts on exchanging information and raising adventurers while bolstering the JSDF in preparation for the worst-case scenario. The constitutional reform plan is part of this goal."

"If the Monster Stampede actually occurs," I continued, "we will not be able to fight a typical war. The main reason is that monsters know no such thing as borders. For the monsters, the enemy is humanity as a whole. Fighting alongside the armies of other countries will naturally become paramount. This is why the current government has deemed constitutional reform necessary, and I fully understand their view. What I don't get is the opposition parties' view."

The graphic changed. The next one was a table with each party's opinion on four topics: dungeon clearing, adventurer regulation, Monster Stampede prevention plans, and response to Joker. The fact that the main opposition party had left these fields blank stood out to me, but I was even more puzzled by the Communist Party's comment on Joker.

"In regards to the Joker situation, the Communist Party has stated that they intend to 'peacefully resolve the situation with talks.' How do they actually plan to go about this?"

"It seems that they plan to handle the situation in the same way the Kingdom of Ko's abduction victim problem is being dealt with. They intend to negotiate with Venisuela until they can reach a satisfactory resolution."

I was unable to hold back my laughter. It was rude, so I covered it up with a

cough and schooled my expression.

“How long do they think it will take? Joker wants to destroy humanity. Isn’t it obvious that he’ll just try to delay negotiations until the Monster Stampede, just like the Kingdom of Ko kept stalling until they had a nuclear weapon ready?” I asked.

“Ezoe-san, do you think peaceful talks with Joker are impossible?”

“They are. The only thing we could hope to discuss with him is the means he’s employing, but there’s no room for discussion when it comes to the future he envisions. After all, this is his idea of justice. Joker’s concept of justice is fundamentally different from everyone else’s. No, I should say *my* idea of justice. Everyone has their own ideals, their own idea of what justice is, and naturally, their own idea of what evil is. It is possible to compromise when these differ slightly, but in Joker’s case, compromise is out of the question.”

“Then, how do you think the Joker situation should be handled?”

“An embargo in accordance with a UN resolution would be a start. However, that would not be enough to fully solve this issue. We are not fighting a country but a single individual, the terrorist Joker. On top of this, this terrorist has transcended human limits. Only a stronger adventurer could hope to stop him.”

“By stopping him, you mean...?”

I did not answer Oosuga’s last question. It wasn’t something that ought to be said on TV.



[TV Fuji — TNG47’s on location with YOU, Roke Roke]

“We have just arrived! Today, we are in Shishibone, Edogawa City! Some of you may be wondering where Shishibone is... Google it, all right? It’s been dubbed the ‘Landbound Solitary Island’ because it’s so far from any train station. Many will never step foot in this area during their entire lifetime. It’s almost another country! Here we are, Shishibone!”

“Ayumi-chan, you can’t talk badly about Shishibone. We’re here today to visit the headquarters of the great adventurer clan... Dungeon Busters! Let’s go~~~!”

Are you girls picking a fight with the people of Shishibone?

I looked at the two girls facing the camera, acting all cute and energetic, and I suddenly felt the urge to slap my face. I held it in, though, and smiled instead.

“Welcome to Dungeon Busters.”

“Aaaaaah!!! It’s the real Ezoe-san! He’s so refined!!!”

Come on. I’ve been standing here from the start. Oh well...

I knew that TNG47 was an idol group, but I didn’t know the names of any of their members. Both Maeshima Yuuko and Mineno Ayumi looked like high schoolers to me, despite apparently being nineteen.

They have cute faces, but Mari is at least three times cuter, nicer, and smarter. It’s a good thing I told her not to come. If she stood next to these two, she would look so much better in comparison that she might have ended up with haters...

“I’ll show you the building. It’s the first time we’ve had a TV crew film here.”

This was the very first time we were allowing cameras inside. We had thoroughly checked the identity of every staff member, including the cameraperson.

“We built four walls to fully surround this building and installed surveillance cameras around the property without leaving a single blind spot,” I explained as we passed through the entrance. “We keep hundreds of rare dungeon cards here, so we needed to make sure that the building was burglarproof. I’m sorry to inconvenience you, but we will need to perform a body check on everyone here.”

We needed to check whether they were transporting listening devices or other such items. The housewives we had hired to work part-time had all signed our contracts, so there were no worries there, but this was my first time meeting these people. I wasn’t stupid enough to blindly trust them.

“I’ll be the one to check you girls,” Amane started. “Don’t worry. This is just a metal detector. I’m sorry we have to bother you so much. This is part of our anti-terrorism protocol, so please try to understand, okay?”

Amane approached the two young idols who appeared to be a bit puzzled and

started checking them with the metal detector. She carefully checked their backs and the soles of their shoes. She was being as thorough as possible to make sure no one would get the idea to do coverage on this building ever again.

“You’re being quite strict, aren’t you?”

“Naturally. What we keep inside this building is even more dangerous than regular weapons and ammunition. We are being rather careful with the dungeon cards, keeping them locked behind multiple doors. Still, terrorists will go to any lengths to get what they want, right? We also ask you to pixelate the faces of every member of our staff.”

The two idols exchanged a look before nodding with serious expressions. As they should. Their frivolous TV star demeanor was best kept in the TV studios. If people thought that we weren’t taking security seriously, they’d lose their trust in us.

I showed them the counter we used to collect adventurer’s loot when they came out of the dungeon. Just to be safe, I had asked the counter staff to stay home today.

After leaving the counter, which was located on the left side of the building’s first floor, and passing through the shower rooms, we arrived at the cafeteria, where Rinko’s team was having a meal.

Mineno Ayumi said she wanted to talk to her, so I went to ask for Rinko’s approval.

“Kusakabe-san, why did you decide to become an adventurer?”

“Well, I think I wanted to prove that my martial arts were good enough. I have been learning Ancient Martial Arts since I was a child. Self-defense is meant to protect not only oneself but also the people one holds dear. That’s why I wanted to use what I learned to protect humanity. The Monster Stampede is like the sword of Damocles, hanging above our heads, and I want to stop it. That’s why I became an adventurer.”

Rinko spoke as she always did, giving a serious answer. However, her graceful looks paired with the elegant words of a true Yamato Nadeshiko was a blow right to the cheerful girls’ hearts.

“Way... Way too cool! I want to call you Onee-sama!” one of them yelled, eyes full of stars as she tried to cling to Rinko.

True to her name—the first kanji of Rinko meant “cold” and “dignified”—the female martial artist was at a loss and could only laugh drily.

Good grief... I didn’t get what it was that got them so riled up about Rinko’s story. People who lived peaceful lives truly turned into idiots. *Well, I suppose that this society full of peaceful idiots is exactly what we are meant to protect.*



[Rank A Dungeon Abyss — Ezoe Kazuhiko]

I sent the orc flying. Rank D orcs were no match for a B-Ranker like me. I was only fighting them to get my touch back. For ten days, I had abstained from dungeon diving and rested above ground. I felt much better now. Stopping the Monster Stampede on my own was impossible to begin with, but I had plenty of reliable allies. We received encouraging messages from all over the world, many of which said that they wanted to fight alongside us.

“You seem in much better condition after your break,” observed Akane. “I can see that you’re much more relaxed, even from behind. You look very reliable right now. I’m sure that you would have no trouble clearing a B-Rank dungeon as you are now, Kazuhiko-sama.”

“I can’t do it on my own. I need your help, Akane,” I admitted.

Akane giggled. “Of course, I shall always be your faithful servant, Kazuhiko-sama. Please take good care of me tonight as well, my lord.”

She threw her arms around my neck and nuzzled against me. Sadly, I couldn’t afford to summon her on the surface tonight. Tomorrow was a big day, as we’d finally start preparing to clear Shinjuku Dungeon.

I smiled and peeled Akane off me. “We’ll continue this after the dungeon has been cleared. I’m done with my warm-up, so I’ll go back to the surface. Turn back into a card, please.”

With a little poof, the beauty turned back into a card, which I tucked into my breast pocket before heading back up.

* * *

On May 29, 2020, the Urabe Administration dissolved the House of Representatives. An election was declared on June 15 with polls set to open on June 28. As he declared the dissolution of the Diet, Prime Minister Urabe Seiichirou took the occasion to address the citizens of Japan.

“Dear citizens, the biggest decision you will have to make during this election is whether you approve of constitutional reform or not. Although the US-Japan Security Treaty has become nothing more than an empty shell, our self-defense forces aren’t allowed to engage freely as things currently stand, not even if monsters were to break out of the dungeons. As the world rises against the dungeons and every country is cooperating to the best of their ability, will we have to say that we can only protect our own territory? Some insist that, even if our country has to be isolated from the rest of the world, even if humanity has to meet its ruin, the constitution must not be revised. Others, however, believe that modifying the constitution isn’t an issue if it is necessary to ensure Japan’s survival and peace. It has been 2,700 years since our country was founded, and this election will be crucial to deciding its future. I hope that every constituent will give this issue serious thought and make a choice they will not regret.”

Several newspaper companies published opinion polls, but their results differed greatly. According to Mai-Asa Journal, public opinion was evenly divided on constitutional reform, whereas according to Keisan Journal, more than eighty percent were in favor of the reform. The poll from Benihata Journal, a heavily left-leaning newspaper, announced that sixty percent were opposed to the reform. It was the first time since the end of World War II that a prospective constitutional reform was at the center of the elections. Every television station was airing daily talk shows on the question and liberally broadcast man-on-the-street interviews. Considering the general anxiety due to the prospect of the Monster Stampede, many assumed this election would have the highest voter turnout in history.

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[Shinjuku Dungeon — Ezoe Kazuhiko]

After resting for about ten days, we went back inside Shinjuku Dungeon in a

second attempt to clear it. We had no trouble getting rid of Floor 1's drockies and Floor 2's poison slimes and quickly made our way to Floor 3.

"These are red slimes, Rank D monsters. They have strong resistance to physical attacks and use fire magic to attack, but we shouldn't have any issues defeating them," Akane explained.

"All right. Akira, I'm asking just to be sure, but do these guys also appear in that game?" I asked.

"They do appear in a game, but not the same one. The other ones came from DQ, but these are from a game called EF—Eternal Fantasy. The world-building here is a bit of a mess, to be honest."

Emily used a freezing spell, turning the red slime into frozen slimes on the spot before they disappeared in a puff of smoke. They seemed to be rather weak to magical attacks, so we decided to let Akane, Emily, and Hisato take care of this floor.

After they had slaughtered a few hundred slimes, we entered the Safety Zone of Floor 3 to take a little break. We set the gas stove up on the floor, added some oil to a pan, and heated up some crab fried rice that we had brought with us in a container. It had already been prepared, but adding a few touches here and there made it even tastier.

"Since the monsters here are modeled after monsters from not just one but several different video games, it must mean that the Dungeon System has a way to obtain information about our world and use it to give life to new monsters," I theorized. "On top of this, Akane and the others also knew about the new monsters, meaning the Legend Rare character cards must have been given this information upon materialization in this world. Still, a question remains..."

"What do you mean, Kazuhiko-sama?" asked Akane.

"The gacha function," I answered while enjoying today's menu—crab fried rice, shrimp gyoza, and a bowl of vegetable soup. "Neither you nor Emily had ever heard about the Gacha skill when I first met you. At first, I assumed this was because 'gacha' was a word coined in our world. But if the Dungeon System is able to gather information about video games, make monsters based on

them, and even input this information into your memories, why wouldn't it teach you about the Gacha System? How does it decide what to tell you and what to withhold from you?"

"Isn't it just a coincidence? You'll go bald if you think too hard about every little detail, you know?"

I ignored Amane's jab and stuffed my mouth full of snow crab fried rice, pondering the Dungeon System in silence.

There is no such thing as a coincidence when it comes to the Dungeon System. There must be a reason it didn't let them know about the Gacha System. I haven't put enough thought into the Gacha skill... Now that I think about it, isn't it weird that every single person shares this skill? Akane said that there had been no such system in previous worlds, so adventurers had to trade cards with the peddler. Why did we get a Gacha skill, then? And why do the 108 Pillars not know about it? I need to find out more about the Gacha skill...

"Aniki...?"

Akira's voice roused me from my thoughts. I'd have time to think later. For now, I had to focus on clearing the dungeon.

"Ah, sorry. I was lost in thought."

"That's not it... I mean..." he said, pointing at something behind me.

I turned around. What greeted me was...

"Mwa ha! I have to say, this is really tasty!"

A young woman was sitting on the floor, eating crab fried rice. Before I knew it, all the leftover rice had disappeared, the pan left sparkling clean.

* * *

"You're Rita the Peddler, right?"

"Sure am! Thank you very much for your patronage last time. And thanks for the food!"

Rita waved at us as she put down her empty plate. No one had noticed her sneaking up on us. *An S-Ranker is really something else.*

We could never hope to beat her in a fight. However, negotiations were another story altogether. I never fought losing battles, and when it came to wits, I had the advantage.

“I don’t remember offering you any food,” I said. “You’re a merchant, right? You should know that things need to be bought.”

“Huh?”

Rita’s face scrunched up for a second. I smiled and sat in front of her.

“Let me guess. You were attracted by the smell and couldn’t help but have a bite,” I said. “Our food is pretty good, after all. But I’m sure you know that, for us adventurers stuck inside a dungeon for days, food is our only enjoyment. You stole that from us. How do you intend to make up for it?”

The peddler narrowed her eyes.

“Hmm... I see... You’re trying to extort me now.”

I laughed, trying to calm her down. “Of course not, of course not. I’d never have the audacity to try that with an S-Ranker such as yourself. It’s just that... Since you said you’re a peddler, I assumed you knew how to properly pay for what you eat. Someone who takes things by force shouldn’t be called a peddler but rather a robber. Wouldn’t you agree?”

Rita rested her chin on her hand, seeming to think about the situation hard.

Heh heh heh... Don’t underestimate a man with over twenty years of business experience. How many times do you think I’ve negotiated with people?

“To be honest, there’s only one thing I’d like to know,” I admitted. “I won’t ask about your other clients. It’s about the Dungeon System. If you answer me, I’ll consider us even. What do you say?”

“It depends on your question. I can’t tell you what I don’t know.”

“That’s okay. If you don’t know the answer, you can just tell me as much. I want to know more about the Gacha skill. Up until now, I just thought of it as a skill that allowed us to trade the cards we got from killing monsters, but this brings up some questions. Why don’t the 108 Pillars know about this skill? Why is it a shared skill? I can’t help but think the Gacha skill must have value beyond

simply trading for cards. So tell me. What exactly is the Gacha skill?”

“Hmm? Why do you think I’d know anything about it?” asked Rita.

“Since you’re a peddler, the Gacha is sort of a business rival to you. If I were in your shoes, I’d have looked into it as soon as possible and researched what it could and couldn’t do... I’d have wondered why a skill that hadn’t existed in any of the previous worlds I’d been in had suddenly appeared in this world. If you don’t know anything about your rival, you can’t make your own business stand out in comparison, can you?”

As soon as I finished speaking, Rita diverted her eyes and the corners of her mouth turned upwards. This was a natural human behavior. People tended to adopt this mannerism when they thought about something and suddenly reached a conclusion. I kept silent and waited for her reaction.

“I’m afraid this piece of information is worth a little more than one meal. I’m a peddler. I don’t want to undersell...”

“That’s only natural, just as it’s natural for the buyer to try to get the lowest possible price. If you won’t sell, then I hope you can return what you took from us.”

There was no way Rita could give back the food she had already eaten. She seemed at a loss for words, so I offered her a way out.

“Well, I can at least offer you a meal whenever I’m around. I do want to keep doing business with you, after all. What do you think?”

“Hmm... I guess I don’t really have a choice. Let’s go with that,” she said, wearing a sour expression that didn’t quite reflect her approval.

Rita took out a piece of paper—a Contract, a dungeon item. The fact that she took one out as if it were natural reminded me once again that she was indeed a true merchant. As soon as I signed it, it automatically duplicated itself.

“Ni hi hi hi! The deal is done, so let’s get to chatting. You wanted to hear about the Gacha skill, right?” she asked, rubbing her hands together.

In the end, she seemed quite happy with our contract.

* * *

“I have to say, I had never heard about this Gacha skill either until I came to this world. It’s a very interesting skill, but it is indeed my rival of sorts, so I did look into it as much as possible.”

She took a bundle of parchments out of her Magic Pouch, and after licking her finger, went through them. I was very curious about the contents of each parchment, assuming all kinds of precious information was recorded on these pages. *Once I become Rank S, will I have a shot at stealing them from her?*

“Don’t get any weird ideas, okay? Next time you try something, I may actually kill you.”

I immediately averted my eyes. What I needed right now was information on the Gacha.

Rita didn’t say anything more and focused her attention back on the papers in her hand.

“All right, so...” she started. “The first thing I can tell you about the Gacha skill is that it appears to be shared by every single person in this world. The most common way to refer to it isn’t actually ‘Gacha’ but rather ‘Slot.’ It can also be displayed as ‘dd’ or even left blank.”

“I already know the Status window uses different languages based on the country. What else?”

“The gacha’s pull rate depends on the quality of the cards used. If you use Rank F cards, you’ll almost always receive Common cards, but if you roll the gacha with Rank E or Rank D cards, better cards are increasingly likely to appear.”

All of this was already common knowledge. We even had pretty detailed statistical data. Considering the number of different Rank F monsters, we had checked the pull rates separately for every monster, one by one. This wasn’t what I wanted to know, but I kept my mouth shut and continued to listen to Rita’s explanation.

“There are four different types of gacha: Weapon Gacha, Equipment Gacha, Item Gacha, and Character Gacha. Only one of them works differently than the others.”

“That would be the Character Gacha,” I said. “I’ve barely used it.”

I had tried it to see if the Character Gacha would give me one of the 108 Pillars, but I had only gotten monster cards. After concluding it wasn’t very useful, I hadn’t touched it in the past few months.

“Nothing in the Dungeon System is useless. There is a good reason for the Character Gacha to exist, but it seems to go right over most people’s heads.”

“So tell me. What is this reason?”

I wanted to know what she meant by “most people,” but understanding the Character Gacha came first.

Rita laughed and answered my question with a question. “Have you ever summoned a monster after picking up its card in a dungeon and tried training it?”

“Well... We have trained Rank F and Rank E monsters to Rank B,” I admitted. “What about it?”

“Have you? Well, that makes my explanation easier. These monsters won’t ever go above Rank B.”

“What?”

I lost my composure as I listened to Rita’s words. Suddenly, I understood the point of the Character Gacha.

“The monsters from the dungeons cannot go over Rank B. As for monsters that already are Rank A or Rank S, you will not be able to materialize them unless you have obtained them from the Gacha.”

“Hang on! Does that mean that monsters obtained by rolling the Gacha can grow all the way from Rank F to Rank S?”

“They can. The way to train them is the same. If they keep fighting and absorbing Enhancement Element, they will get stronger. On top of that, monsters obtained through the Character Gacha are not subject to any invocation time limit. You may materialize them whenever and for however long you wish.”

Shocked, I covered my mouth with my hand. How had I not noticed? Joker

had launched his coup d'état with a few hundred Rank F monsters. Would a modern army lose against a mere few hundred Rank F monsters, though? The Rank F monsters of Yokohama Dungeon could be killed with a single bullet, and yet, Joker had succeeded.

"Joker already knows about this, doesn't he? He somehow managed to learn information regarding the Dungeon System that we had yet to uncover and used it to make his coup succeed," I mused.

"I'm afraid the answer to that question isn't covered by the terms of our contract, so I won't comment. Either way, there is no such thing as a useless gacha. An SR monster card is already quite the powerful ally. After all, it would be a Rank A monster."

That was true. I could roll the Character Gacha eleven times if I used a hundred Rank C cards. Statistically, an SR monster card should come out. In other words, I could get a Rank A underling. I was pissed at myself for having decided that the Character Gacha wasn't worth it after only trying it a few times.

"Thank you," I said. "I didn't expect to receive such valuable information."

"No need to thank me. As long as my client is pleased, so am I! Anyway, I'm done paying back my debt, so I'll take my leave. It was nice doing business with you. Bye."

Rita disappeared just as suddenly as she had appeared, and the Safety Zone was quiet once again.

"What should we do, Aniki?"

Everyone present understood how crucial the information Rita had given us was. *Perhaps we should go back and discuss what to do from now on...* We could do that after we finished clearing Shinjuku Dungeon, though. It wouldn't make that big of a difference in above-ground time.

"There's no need to go back right now. Let's handle this dungeon first. What the peddler told us is incredibly important, but it doesn't have anything to do with our goal here," I said.

We finished eating and headed out of the Safety Zone.



[Venisuela — Caracas — Rank C Dungeon]

The monsters inside the dungeon that had appeared in the slums of Caracas dropped food. However, it was very likely that fights over the food would break out if people were allowed to dive inside the dungeon whenever they pleased. That was why someone had to manage this dungeon. Simón Claudio had been chosen to fulfill this task.

“Goblins and orcs that reach Rank C are to be added to the Legion. Our job is to control monsters Rank D and under and gather as much food as we possibly can. There is no need to fight or kill others to secure food. As long as you’re here, you won’t starve. So don’t go stealing from others anymore, all right?”

He lectured the children as they fought monsters alongside the goblins. Their opponents weren’t very strong. As long as they stayed focused, even children could easily defeat them. In a few years, these kids would join the Legion, the army of the Demon King, in leadership positions and manage dungeons in different areas.

As Claudio watched the children happily stuff their cheeks full of grilled meat, he remembered Joker’s words. *“Our enemy is the world itself. Sooner or later, this world filled with those who can only steal, violate, and kill will reach an impasse. To break this cycle, we need more than power. We need justice. First, we’ll get rid of hunger. We’ll make sure to turn this world into one where no one goes hungry. Still, that won’t be good enough. We also need to educate the masses.”*

“Do you know what the boss is thinking, Mr. Claudio? He says he wants to destroy the world, but at the same time, he feeds children and even tries to educate them. Doesn’t that mean he thinks there will still be people in ten years?”

As soon as the underling standing next to him spoke, Claudio punched him right in the face.

“Listen here. We do not question the boss’s orders. He’s giving us food to eat and even enough money to buy women. He freed us from the pain of living. Do you wanna get all friendly with the rapacious bastards who dress nicely, live in

humongous houses, eat French cuisine, and take pictures of themselves draped in jewelry to show how nice their lives are? We're fighting to get rid of a shitty world that's controlled by those bastards who can never get enough. Don't forget that."

A group of goblins carrying bags full of harvested goods came along. In this dungeon, different products, such as flour, fruit, beef, and butter were dropped, depending on the floor. All of these were gathered and freely distributed to the inhabitants of the slums. The goblins and orcs did not need any nourishment other than Enhancement Element.

This dungeon also acted as a training ground of sorts for monsters of Rank D or lower. Whenever a monster hit Rank C, it was turned back into a card and given to Joker.

"The boss will be coming back from Maracaibo soon. Get the cards ready. And don't ever say something like that ever again. Boss is kind, but don't push your luck."

The underling paled, nodding once. After acknowledging him, Claudio headed back to the surface.

* * *

[Venisuela — Caracas — Rank C Dungeon]

"As expected of a Rank S dungeon," Joker said after letting out a heavy sigh. "It's not that easy to clear, huh?"

The dungeon that had appeared in Maracaibo was a Rank S dungeon. It did not have Safety Zones, and the monsters that roamed its floors were extremely strong. Joker and his men had tried to clear it, but they'd had no choice but to turn back halfway through.

Still, Joker showed no signs of being dispirited. He was slouched on the couch with a cigarette in hand, feet resting on the coffee table in front of him.

"We didn't manage to clear it, but we got plenty of Rank C and Rank B cards out of it. Let's use them to gacha and increase our number of Rank A cards. It's probably time to try rolling the Weapon Gacha a bit too."

“Will you go back after you rest?” Claudio asked, lighting Joker’s cigarette for him.

Joker let out a puff of white smoke and shook his head. “No. It’s better to clear another dungeon to increase our food supply and have others become busters. Perhaps we’ll head to Brezil or Colombian next...”

“The closest dungeon is in Colombian. The ones in Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo are too far.”

“Riiiiight. Crossing the Amazon is a pain too. All right! Let’s ask nicely for Colombian’s cooperation. If they don’t want us to slaughter all of their citizens, they’ll hand their dungeons over to us. Sending a dozen wyverns their way should be more than enough to get them to fold.”

“Won’t their air force get involved?”

“Their aircraft are at least fifty years old, aren’t they? Well, I *am* interested in seeing how wyverns fare against fighter aircraft. It’ll be a good way to estimate the strength of the Legion. Now that that’s decided, I’m off to see the president.”

“Boss, what about food...?” Claudio asked, trying to stop Joker, who was already standing.

The man in front of him had become so emaciated that he looked terribly sick. All of his men ate meat and bread, but Joker himself didn’t touch food very often.

“I’m good with this,” he answered.

Joker picked an apple out of a basket, munching on it as he exited the room.



[Shinjuku Dungeon — Ezoe Kazuhiko]

After entering Floor 4 of Shinjuku Dungeon, we encountered another “game monster.” This one was a strange bull over two meters tall with two huge, sharp horns coming out of either side of its forehead. As soon as it spotted us, it started kicking the floor, getting ready to charge.

“This one is also from EF. It’s called Evil Horn, if I remember correctly,” Akira

offered.

“You sure have a good memory. Akane, do you know its name as well?” I asked.

“Yes. It is indeed an evil horn. This monster doesn’t have a weak point, but it tends to rush in recklessly.”

The bull stomped the ground angrily and rushed us. As Akane had said, it was quite reckless.

Akane threw a kunai. It masterfully hit the Evil Horn’s forehead but instantly broke with a shrill sound.

“It’s a Rank C monster, but since it only charges in a straight line, it is rather easy to counter,” Akane continued. “However, you shouldn’t underestimate its strength. You may get hurt unexpectedly if you try to stop it in its tracks.”

“Got it. Let’s kill a few of them. If we don’t run into any issues in particular, we’ll head to the next floor straight away.”

We tried different attacks on the evil horn, such as piercing it with a lance and using magic, to determine how strong it was and what worked on it. Becoming stronger wasn’t only about absorbing Enhancement Element and bodybuilding. It was also important to gain experience by fighting all kinds of monsters and to be able to use a wide array of tactics. Experience was a strength all its own, one that couldn’t be noticed at first glance.

Once each of us had finished killing around ten evil horns, we moved on to Floor 4.

“This is a Rank C monster as well,” Akane started. “It’s called—”

“You don’t even need to say it,” I cut her off. “It’s a golem, right?”

Even though I didn’t play video games, I had seen these many times in fantasy movies. These huge monsters made of several stone blocks were quite famous.

“Golems appear in quite a few games. They’re so famous that even Aniki knows about them.”

“I’ve seen them in movies. I’ve always wondered how they manage to move their joints despite being made of solid stone. How do all these stones stick

together? Actually, how would a bunch of stones even manage to move at all in the first place? Do they have muscles? Nerves? It's quite interesting once you start thinking about it from a medical or biological point of view, isn't it?"

"Aniki, you're probably the only person on this earth who watches fantasy movies and asks themselves these questions..." Akira said, exasperated, as he ran toward the golem.

Although it was made of stone, the giant was unexpectedly swift. *FWOOSH!* It brought down its fist, cutting through the air. Akira deflected the attack with his left arm. The golem's upper body twisted with a crack as the stones around its waist broke from the force of Akira deflecting its punch alone.

"I see. In the end, these things really are made of stone. Its body doesn't have the elasticity of human skin. When game characters like these are materialized in our world, these defects become all the more obvious."

"Kazu-san... You don't need to analyze them so deeply..." Hisato complained. "I used to be really into DQ in the past, you know..."

I had no idea what DQ was, but if you stopped to think for five minutes, it should have been obvious that beings made of stones or knights made of steel had no viability in the physical world.

"Even the Dungeon System and its nonscientific fantasy madness can't materialize elastic stones in our world. If some sort of metallic creature appears, it'll probably be made out of liquid metal, won't it?" I asked. "To be honest, a killer machine traveling back in time would be way more realistic than these."

"Hang on. I have a feeling there was a monster like that as well..."

Akira's premonition came true on Floor 5. A robot with four limbs came into view along with tumultuous mechanical noises. It was rather far from us, but it suddenly activated a jet and approached us at high speed, as if it were gliding.

"It's a killing machine! A B-Rank monster!" Akane warned us.

"Urgh!"

The killing machine glided so quickly that it managed to get around the shield

Masayoshi had put up.

CLING! It swung down the saber it held. Hisato retaliated, blocking the blade with his own. Rinko leaped, kicked off the wall, and got behind the monster in an instant. She shoved her staff in the gap between the machine's head and the rest of its body. We heard a strange noise, almost as though an electrical circuit had overloaded, and the machine came to halt before turning into smoke.

"That's...a robot, right?" I asked Akira, face blank.

"It's a monster that shows up in DQ. I don't think it was called a killing machine, though..."

"No matter how you look at it, it *is* a robot! Why is the Term*nator showing up in a fantasy setting?! Who even programmed an AI capable of autonomous decision-making? Is there a semiconductor factory hidden under the Demon King's castle?!"

It had been a while since the ridiculousness of the dungeon had caused me to lose it like this.

"Kazuhiko-sama, this is a dungeon, after all..." Akane chimed in, just as she always did.

I know that. But still, what's weird is weird. Is the Dungeon System truly capable of such precise engineering? When the machine stopped moving, I thought it would say something like, "Alternative power supply ON," and suddenly start moving again.

"Either way, this robot is really interesting," I noted. "The technology used to power it is far more advanced than what currently exists in our world. Let's get some cards of it. If we bring some of these above ground to be taken apart, scientists may discover new technology and materials."

"Kazu-san... Won't it just turn into smoke upon being taken apart?" Rinko did not hesitate to calmly shoot me down.

Thank you.

* * *

[Shinjuku Dungeon — Kusakabe Rinko]

I too had noticed how strangely Kazu-san had been acting in the past few weeks. Between the sudden Full Activation of the Dungeon System, the Monster Stampede countdown kicking off, the unrest and coup d'état in South Gamera, and the vocal minority who did not understand or support dungeon adventurers here in Japan, Kazu-san had a lot on his plate. He must have been incredibly stressed out.

“For now, let’s stay on Floor 5 and take down as many term*nators as we can. After all, who knows? We might run into a T-*000 model eventually. We need to get used to fighting robots while we can.”

We weren’t in a movie, so I highly doubted we would ever run into those. Of course, Kazu-san was joking. He had completely stopped making jokes like this during these past few weeks. I didn’t know what had happened while he’d been recuperating, but he seemed much more laid back now.

“Just checking, but there aren’t any monsters made of liquid metal, are there, Akane?”

“There are: silver metal slimes. They are superior Rank A slimes. Both physical and magical attacks are virtually useless against them. Even if you try to freeze them or grind them into powder, they can go back to their initial form, since they’re liquid.”

“Seriously...?! How do we fight them, then?”

“I believe poison to be the most effective method, in this case...” Akane paused, then said, “Look ahead! Two killing machines are approaching.”

While listening to Kazu-san and Akane-san’s conversation, I started to picture these slimes. I wouldn’t be surprised if they showed up any moment now.

For now, though, I had to focus on the enemies in front of me. Two of them were coming at us. I took out my katana card. As long as the opponent wielded a blade, I had to respond with my own.

“Ah!”

I cut through the killing machine’s curved blade—a talwar. Since my weapon was an SR card, it should’ve been effective against Rank B monsters as well. Considering the monster’s body was mostly made out of metal, though, I

couldn't just blindly swing my katana. If I wasn't careful, my katana might end up breaking instead.

"It moves on four legs! If we cut one off, it won't be able to move anymore!"

I went in and cut right through the—*thigh, maybe?*—part of its left front leg. The killing machine pitched forward. Amane took the chance to swing down her whip, using an SR weapon called Thorny Iron Whip. It looked almost like barbed wire, and she twined its thorns around the monster's neck mercilessly before squeezing the whip tight. A painful screeching filled the area as countless thorns shredded the killing machine's neck into pieces.

"Hmph! As expected, machines don't scream. How am I supposed to know if it works?"

I wonder why whips suit Amane-san so well. She was usually so nice and gentle, and everyone—besides the members of her party—loved her. Yet, when she was on the battlefield, she wore a cruel smile as she swung her whip around. One of the members of her party—an ex-member of the Kanazawa Prefectural Police Force—had said that this gap in her personality was the most attractive thing about her. I didn't quite get it, to be honest.

Amane-san seemed to notice I was staring at her, lost in thought.

"Oh my. Would you like to try as well, Rinko?" she asked with a cheerful smile, holding out her whip. "It feels really good to beat someone into submission with a whip, you know?"

"I... I'm good."

I did feel satisfied after fighting a strong opponent, but I didn't particularly want anyone to submit to me. I had never been with anyone who had, but I knew some men had such inclinations. At the very least, I was fairly certain that I would never be attracted to such a man.

I turned to look at Shishido Akira. *I have no qualms about his strength, but he's kind of shallow. If someone asked me to describe my brother, I would say he is rather aloof and detached. As for Shishido Akira, it would be more accurate to describe him as frivolous and superficial. I have a feeling things wouldn't work out very well between us...*

A loud noise brought me back to reality. Masayoshi had just used Shield Bash to send a killing machine flying. Kazu-san finished it without a moment's delay. *All right. I should go fight too.*

* * *

[Shinjuku Dungeon — Kirihara Amane]

Men only ever think about sex... Or at least, that's what I used to believe until I joined Dungeon Busters. Even if they're straightforward when it comes to their desires, I think men shine when they have a goal to pursue.

"Aah!"

Hisato barely dodged the killing machine's blade before swinging his own magic-infused sword and separating its body into two. I had thought his sword might not be sharp enough to cut through the monster's metal skin, but he seemed to have made it vibrate at high speed with a magic spell to increase its power.

Akira came along, whistling happily, and gave Hisato a pat on the head. These two were very different from regular salarymen. Both were ready to risk their lives in the dungeons for the sake of their goals. I hadn't come across anyone like that during my years in the police force. *Well... Perhaps I just hadn't noticed them. There may be more men worth my while than I think.*

When we entered Floor 6, we encountered a bipedal monster with two black horns and a pair of black wings on its back. It didn't look like an oni, but rather a demon...

"A lesser demon! It's going to launch a magic attack!" Akane-san shouted.

The next second, several large, roughly fifty-centimeter fireballs flew at us. Masayoshi protected us with his shield, but I could still feel the burning heat.

"Aniki, there's something I wanna try," said Akira.

They seemed to discuss something. At first, Kazuhiko-san seemed surprised, but he eventually nodded. Akira immediately jumped over Masayoshi's shield. *What is he thinking?* If he stayed there, he'd be a perfect target for the monster's next magic attack.

“Yaaaaaah!”

Akira assumed a stance with both arms in front of him. The lesser demon launched a fire attack once again. Akira moved his arms in a circular motion and repelled each of the monster’s fireballs. I couldn’t believe my eyes! Why didn’t he get burned or explode?

“I already knew that mawashi uke was effective against magical attacks, and...”

Once he had taken care of every fireball, Akira leaped at the lesser demon. He used his killer move, the Centerline Meridian Six Consecutive Punch, to hit all of the monster’s vital points at once. When a B-Ranker punched with all his might, even a monster couldn’t take it.

“Once they’re done with their magic attack, most monsters go through a short cooldown period. I’m not sure everyone’s noticed, but Emily and Hisato also pause. It might be a weakness inherent to magic.”

Right. The reason we were able to triumph over monsters of the same rank as ours was that we could make use of something they lacked. Monsters did not have strategies. Trying to fight by comparing pure stats, like in games, did not make any sense in the dungeons. We gained experience in every battle, and we made use of it by designing strategies to use in future fights. All the knowledge that we had accumulated this way was extremely valuable and couldn’t be measured in numbers or letters.

The next monster is approaching. It’s my turn to have a go. Heh heh. Time to discipline some monsters!

* * *

[Shinjuku Dungeon — Ezoe Kazuhiko]

We kept fighting monsters that seemed to come right out of video games. After the lesser demons, we ran into a monster with two sharp fangs coming out of its upper jaw that looked exactly like the long-extinct saber-toothed tiger. It was around two meters tall and rather nimble and agile.

“It’s a killer tiger,” Akane started, “a fairly strong B-Rank monster. Its specialty is—”

“Kazu-san!” Rinko’s voice came from behind.

I had noticed it before she’d even said anything. Before we knew it, we had been encircled by tigers. It seemed like their hunting skills were just as good as ours.

“I see. As expected of Rank B monsters. N’gie, you take the front. Masayoshi, I’ll leave the back to you. Do your job as guardians. Hisato, you launch fire magic at the ones in the back. You don’t need to defeat them. We’ll handle the ones in front of us first.”

When facing enemies on two different fronts, dividing your forces was usually a terrible move. Holding one side in check while focusing on defeating the other as fast as possible was better. This was easily doable with our current fighting power. Hisato would conjure a firewall and Masayoshi would send those that managed to get through back with his Shield Bash skill. In the meantime, we’d get rid of the ones that attacked from the front one by one.

“They are indeed fast and strong, but they’re far from being too tough for us to handle.”

Akira sent the killer tiger that had charged him flying with the heel of his palm before using an overarm stroke to pierce right through its exposed abdomen. He seemed to have grabbed its heart precisely, that single hit turning the killer tiger to smoke.

Amane wore her signature cruel smile as she swung her whip, disciplining the beasts. I didn’t know if it was because their instincts had kicked in or because of the noise produced by Amane’s whip, but the tigers seemed frightened.

“All right. We can now take on top-tier, Rank B monsters with ease. The next floor should be the last one. Let’s keep fighting these for a while longer to get some more experience before finishing things up in one go.”

We kept fighting killer tigers for almost one full day.

* * *

“Aniki, this picture...”

“It looks like a dungeon is being created.”

After making our way down to the last floor, we checked the ceiling and saw another relief. In it, an old man was making a sphere glow. On the sphere were hundreds of little scattered dots and marks. I had already thought that the dungeons had been created by some sort of supernatural entity, and it seemed as if this old man was the one in question. The sphere must've represented a planet. Then... Did that mean that dungeons had only appeared on Earth out of all the planets in our universe?

"We could spend a long time going through all of our theories, but let's prioritize clearing this place for now," I said.

We took footage of the ceiling's relief and advanced down the straight path in front of us. Behind the door was the Dungeon Core and its guardian, which was likely a top-tier B-Rank monster or an A-Rank monster.

I pushed the door open with both hands. Inside the room was a puddle-like being, its silver surface shining brightly.

"Akane... Your words ended up setting a flag, huh? Even I know what this is, and I don't play video games. That's the infamous silver metal slime, isn't it?"

The slime was around one meter wide and fifty centimeters tall and looked like a puddle. For some reason, Akira and the others were snickering behind me.

"I mean... That thing looks exactly like the I*quid met*I slime from DQ. In the game, it gives a tremendous number of experience points, but it immediately tries to run away if you spot it."

"It runs away? Where does it go?" I asked. "Whatever. Akane, you said poison was effective against it, right?"

"It is, but I'm afraid it will not be so easy to apply poison to it. After all..."

N'gie ran past us and put up his shield. The puddle slime had made use of its liquid-like body to turn into countless needle-like pins and fired them at us. Most crashed into N'gie's shield, but some made it past him.

"Aargh!"

My eyes sought the source of the cry, and I saw Amare holding her foot. One

of the thin, silvery pins had stabbed her leg. Suddenly, it turned back into a dripping liquid and entered her body through the wound. Amane's face paled in a matter of seconds, her body violently convulsing as she started foaming at the mouth.

"That's not good! Give her an Extra Potion immediately!" Akane shouted.

Masayoshi and N'gie protected us with their shields while we helped Amane lie on her side and had her drink the potion. The slime's body appeared to be a deadly poison. A few silver drops fell out from Amane's left eye and started slowly crawling across the floor, trying to return to the main body. Stepping on them without a good plan came with the risk of becoming contaminated by the poison ourselves. There was nothing else to do but let them go.

"Physical attacks are useless. Magic won't work either. On top of that, it can attack us by turning into countless tiny parts, each of which is highly poisonous. So this is the level a Rank A monster is on..."

The liquid slime had gone back to its former state and trembled as it crept across the floor. It was waiting for a good chance to attack us again.

"What do we do, Aniki?"

"Taking it down in one blow seems impossible, so let's deal with it one step at a time," I said. "Step one: stop its movements. Emily! Use freezing magic to lock it in place."

"Understood! Here I go! Get your shields out of the way when I give the signal!"

Emily's eyes shone, and the temperature in the room suddenly dropped by several degrees. Her right hand started glowing with a silvery light.

"Now, eat this! Niflheim!"

A freezing attack flew toward the silver metal slime as soon as a gap formed between the shields. However, the Rank A monster wasn't so easy to take down. Sensing the cold magic, it divided itself just as it had when attacking us with the needles and scattered across the room. Only half of it ended up being effectively frozen.

“Continue firing your attacks. You need to freeze it.”

“I know!”

Emily continued to fire ice magic. The opposite side of the room had probably reached minus two hundred degrees Celsius at this point. It was so cold I felt we might end up frozen as well. Hisato continuously used his fire magic to warm up N’gie and Masayoshi, who stood in front of us. Without Hisato, they, along with their shields, would have long turned into ice cubes.

After a while, every little piece of the slime had been frozen solid. I moved on to step two while breathing out white puffs of air.

“Let’s bring all of the slime parts together in one place. We’ll use this.”

When I took out the broom we always used after breaks in the Safety Zone, everyone looked puzzled.

“Aniki, you...” Akira suddenly seemed to understand something. “You’re not going to throw it away, are you?”

For step three, I took out the R card “Other-dimensional Disposal Bin.” We usually used it as a trashcan to throw away plastic or iron scraps that the dungeons couldn’t naturally absorb. Once materialized, it pretty much looked like a normal trash can. Anything thrown in this bin could never be retrieved.

“All right. Now, we throw every single bit of slime away, and we’re good. Dungeon cleared,” I said.

“What?! We haven’t managed to beat it at all!” Akira complained.

My face grew serious again.

“As we are now, it is extremely difficult for us to fight this Rank A monster. That’s why getting rid of it is a much better option than killing it. Don’t misread the situation. Our goal is to clear the dungeon. We need to check if our titles will change after clearing a Rank B dungeon. We shouldn’t take needless risks to fight a Rank A monster if we can help it.”

They all looked exasperated but followed my directions and threw the slime parts they had gathered in dustpans into the bin. We needed to be extremely careful not to leave even one shard behind. Just to be safe, I had Emily use her

freezing magic once again so we could “clean” the room extensively.

Even though this method was effective, I wasn’t a fan of it either, to be honest. Had our opponent not been the guardian, this method wouldn’t even have worked in the first place. We’d have no choice but to run away if many of these monsters came at us on a regular floor.

“We can’t get any cards or magic stones like this. No Enhancement Element either. This was a onetime thing. Next time, we’ll have a proper fight...”

Once we had finished getting rid of every single slime bit, the Dungeon Core appeared.

Dungeon No.:	527
Rank:	B
Master:	None
Qty. of Floors:	008
Supplied DE:	2309
Resource:	Black Magic Crystal
Stampede:	On
<Do you wish to claim administrative rights? Y / N>	
<Do you wish to erase this dungeon? Y / N>	

“All right. I’ll turn off the Monster Stampede and take the administrative rights.”

As expected, the Dungeon System’s voice sounded right as I touched the screen.

<The clearing of a Rank B Dungeon has been verified. You will be granted the title Rank B Dungeon Buster. Your enhancement limit will be upped to Rank A. Furthermore, you are hereby granted the LR character card “Senyath the Courteous Cat-Sìth” as a reward for clearing the first Rank B dungeon.>

The fifth Legend Rare character card appeared before my eyes.



[Shinjuku Dungeon — Ezoe Kazuhiko]

As a soon-to-be-forty-one-year-old man, I had had plenty of pets throughout my life. I had kept dogs, cats, and even a hamster once. My schedule had become quite irregular since starting work as a freelancer, so I had stopped keeping pets, but I did not dislike animals.

“Is something the matter, myaster? Something on my face, perhaps?”

However, in my forty years of existence, I had never come across anything like...this. I didn’t know if I should say something or accept it as being part of this fantasy setting.

Why is this cat standing on its back legs and talking? Or rather, why is this cat wearing a white tuxedo, complete with a bow tie, and even using a cane?! This doesn’t make any sense!

“Hmm...” I said. “Your name is, hmm, Sebas...”

“I am called Senyath, myaster.”

It corrected me in a low yet light voice. I thought it sounded very much like some renowned detective who tended to mention his wife an awful lot. Its ears quivered as it gracefully shook its long tail. No matter how I looked at it, it was a cat. *Will it purr if I started rubbing its belly?*



Name: Senyath

Title: Courteous Cat-Sith Rank: F

Rarity: Legend Rare

Skills: Butler (Lvl. 1), Escape (Lvl. 1), Poisonous Tongue (Lvl. 1)

“Look at it! What an adorable Abyssinian! My cat is the same breed!” Amane said happily.

She reached to pet it, but the cat swiftly stepped back before bowing politely.

“Please excuse my rudeness, but I smell a dangerous air coming from you, Your Ladyship. If I may, it is rather similar to the smell of dried fish made with rotten shark flesh. Would you be so kind as to refrain from approaching me in the future? Please stay more than two meters away.”

SWISH. Before anyone noticed, Amane had pulled out her whip while flashing a dangerous smile.

“I see you have trouble keeping your tongue in check, little cat. Don’t worry. I’ll make sure to educate you.”

“Oh my... I must apologize profusely. If I may provide an explanation...” Senyath trailed off. “I happen to possess a skill called Poisonous Tongue that makes me unable to refrain from speaking my honest feelings at all times.”

“Not helping your case!” she snapped.

Everyone tried to stop Amane from swinging her whip. As for the cat, it turned back into a card, fluttering midair for a while before falling to the ground. I picked it up and shook my head.

Senyath did seem like they were pretty good at escaping.

“What should we do with it...?”

We couldn’t afford to seal it away, but at the same time, there was so much that we didn’t yet understand about the Legend Rare character cards. I wondered who could make the best use of Senyath.

“Shouldn’t we give it to Maririn?” Akira asked as soon as I’d voiced my

question.

I had thought about that, but I had already given Emily to Mari. Giving her a second card might make me appear a bit too biased. Still, I checked with the other three, and no one seemed to want it.

“Give it to me. I’ll discipline it long and hard and make sure it doesn’t run its mouth like that ever again!”

Yeah, giving it to Amane is completely out of the question.



[Rank A Dungeon Abyss — Kinouchi Mari]

There’s a cat in front of me. For some reason, it’s wearing a tuxedo and a bow tie. It’s even holding a cane in its right paw. Wait, how can it hold a cane with its paw?

“Oh, what a beautiful young lady... And her servant, I suppose? My name is Senyath.”

“I’m not a servant!” Shingo-kun cut in.

Senyath wagged its tail happily. It was around 140 centimeters tall, so much shorter than I. *Ah!* Both Myu-chan and Purin-chan started rubbing themselves on its tuxedo.

“Myuu!”

“Kyu!”

“Why, the two of you are called Sir Myu and Sir Purin, is that right? Pleased to make your acquaintance. My name is Senyath. I shall take care of both of you and guard you against the dangers of the dungeons. In the meantime, I task you with keeping an eye on the incarnation of lust over there so that he will not bring harm to the lady.”

“Myuu!”

“Kyu!”

“Stop fucking with me!” yelled Shingo-kun.

I was starting to feel a little bad for Shingo-kun. Even Emily was doubled over

in laughter. *Myu-chan, Purin-chan, you shouldn't just agree with the cat! Let's trust Shingo-kun, all right? I wish Kazu-san would just say something!*

I looked his way, but Kazu-san was busy mulling over unimportant details. “Why? Why are the bunny and the squirrel able to communicate with that cat? On top of that, one of them can speak Japanese but the other two are just letting out weird noises like ‘Myuu’ and ‘Kyu!’”

Chapter 2: The Legion is on the Move

[Republic of Woori — Blue House]

<This is an announcement from the Japanese Government. Shinjuku Dungeon, which was a concern in regards to the upcoming Tokyo Olympics, has successfully been cleared. The Rank B dungeon has been cleared by Dungeon Busters. The government had expressed worries regarding potential radioactivity issues in the area as well as the dungeon. Now, that one of these issues has been cleared, the DOC—Domestic Olympic Committee—has expressed relief...>

President Park Jae-An turned off the TV, his expression gloomy. He sat in his office with Park Jae-In, the Special Advisor on Foreign Affairs, Diplomacy, and National Security. The men shared a surname, and their first names were extremely similar as well—only one syllable was different—so they were frequently confused for one another outside of the country.

“And? What was the Kingdom of Ko’s response?”

“We have yet to hear a word from them. King Kim has expressed his support for Venisuela but has not commented on our country, nor has he paid any mind to our attempts to open communication.”

The Special Advisor stayed quiet as the President clicked his tongue. The President was facing heavy criticism both inside and outside the country as people called him two-faced or even tone-deaf when it came to economic matters. However, he remained consistent on one front: he wished to achieve peace and prosperity for the whole Woorian peninsula. For the sake of that goal, he had no choice but to form an alliance with the absolute monarch of the northern part of the peninsula and slowly lead both countries down the path to creating a federation. He continuously reached out to the Kingdom of Ko with reconciliation plans, such as joint participation in the Tokyo Olympics and collaborative dungeon clearing efforts, but he had not made much progress.

“We are reaching out to the Kingdom of Ko behind the scenes, but they seem

to want us to publicly express our intentions. However, we cannot afford to vocally support Venisuela. The Kingdom of Ko appears to be dissatisfied with our stance on this.”

“Are they saying that breaking the US Woorian Mutual Defense Treaty and getting out of the GSOMIA weren’t enough to signify our intentions?”

“The North considers both of these decisions as the results of ongoing circumstances, not because we took the initiative. I believe vocal support for Venisuela is the only thing that can effectively prove our stance.”

President Park contemplated the situation for a while. If Woori supported Venisuela—a country currently threatening G20 members—getting kicked out of the G20 was a very real possibility. At the same time, the reunification of the North and the South was the people’s dearest wish. If the Woorian peninsula became one again, it would easily become a superpower, miles ahead of Japan, the Oriental Republic of Sina, and even Gamerica. President Park, at the very least, was convinced of this.

“I understand. Please draft a statement immediately. Make it sound as sympathetic toward Venisuela as possible without it irritating Gamerica and the rest of the G20 members too much.”

President Park knew such a feat was virtually impossible. Still, he believed that, as an independent nation, Woori was free to express support for foreign countries as it pleased. President Park’s sight was not on Japan, The Oriental Republic of Sina, or Gamerica. It was on the Kingdom of Ko alone.



[Kagurazaka — Traditional Restaurant Menosou — Ezoe Kazuhiko]

The heat and humidity could still be felt well after sunset once June started. On a night that said summer was right around the corner, I went to Kagurazaka at the invitation of a certain someone.

I turned right and entered Honda Yokochō, a narrow path off of Kagurazaka Street. I had reached my destination.

“Thank you for joining me. I apologize for having you come all the way here when you are so busy.”

“Are you not a much busier man than I, Mr. Prime Minister...?” I asked.

The person who had called me here was none other than Prime Minister Urabe Seiichirou, who must have currently been drowning in work due to the double election. It was right before the elections kicked off, so he must have had meetings left and right to adjust his party strategy and debate with other party leaders.

Dungeon Busters made a point of accepting as few political-oriented questions as we could. I had ended up answering a few when I had appeared on Tokyo TV, but I never intended to support one party or another. Due to my position, it was better for me to stay away from all of this.

“I hoped to have a leisurely talk with you at least once. It seems you managed to clear Shinjuku Dungeon a few days ago. That’s the fifth one... Thanks to you, we have been able to prove how safe Japan is to the whole world. Foreign investments are steadily coming in.”

The Prime Minister held a sake bottle out toward me, so I picked up my cup with both hands as I nodded to acknowledge his words.

Japan’s economy was slowly moving on from mere recovery to growth. The appearance of the dungeons had had a huge impact on the world economy. Stock prices had fallen in every country, but Japan’s were the first to recover. Considering the Japanese dungeons were being cleared one after another, and the island was protected by the sea on every side, it was believed that if the Monster Stampede was to truly occur, Japan might be the last country standing in the end. This belief had prompted many investors to start moving their funds to Japan.

“The production of crude oil from red magic crystals and liquefied petroleum gas from white magic stones has advanced to the practical application stage. Next year, after the Olympics, our country should become one of the leading producers of energy.”

“I assume the transition won’t be so easy to handle. How will the companies that have been benefiting off of crude oil and petroleum imports endure? We will need to consider the electric power companies as well. On top of that, we need to continue research on nuclear energy, even if we are able to stop using

nuclear power plants for a while. There is no guarantee that the dungeons won't disappear once the Monster Stampede is prevented, after all."

The Prime Minister had to keep the country's best interests in mind at all times. For instance, I often saw people online saying, "The government should get rid of the pachinko parlors!" If pachinko parlors were prohibited, however, a twenty-trillion-yen market would suddenly disappear. What would happen to all the people who worked there? What about the plots of land close to train stations that would become vacant? Few tried to offer solutions to this "cycle of loss" government regulations tended to bring about.

"Consider the effects of every policy while trying to gradually reach an ideal" was how conservative politicians thought.

We poured one another's drinks formally for our first round before switching to pouring our own drinks. I had only been told he wanted to meet. I had no idea why the ever-busy Prime Minister had decided to go out of his way to see me.

"Ezoe-san, it might be a bit early to discuss this, but I would like to have your opinion on the direction our world should take after the Monster Stampede has been dealt with," the Prime Minister admitted.

He was finally ready to talk.

* * *

"Let's assume that the dungeons will not disappear after the Monster Stampede has been prevented, and we will be able to keep mining magic stones. If that were to happen, the number of dungeons within a country's borders would have a tremendous impact on national power. The dungeons don't only produce magic stones. They also drop food, water, and even Japanese yen or Gamerican dollars. If a Japanese dungeon was able to produce dollars, I doubt Gamerica would stay silent for long," I explained.

"Naturally. This is why dungeon control should be left to the UN. Even if each country were allowed to manage and mine dungeons independently, the UN should still be able to conduct inspections the same way nuclear power is controlled by the international community nowadays," he answered.

I thought it might be a bit early to start thinking about all this, but it seemed Prime Minister Urabe wanted to discuss the state of the world in ten years.

I agreed that if the dungeons remained ten years from now after the Monster Stampede had been dealt with, the international community ought to have the right to inspect dungeons in every country. The materials produced by the dungeons were dangerous enough to warrant that.

“I must say I have another worry. You, that is,” he told me.

“I assume you are wondering how to deal with those who are Rank C and above who have transcended human limits. Am I right?” I asked.

“Sadly, Joker has proven how much of a threat you all pose. Adventurers wield tremendous power and have the ability to topple whole nations. If Dungeon Busters suddenly decided to start a rebellion, neither the police nor the JSDF could stop you. You have the capacity to bring ruin to our country. Even inside our ruling party, some worry about this.”

As a person, Prime Minister Urabe might have faith in me. As a statesman, however, he could not afford that faith. Our existence was too dangerous. If a civilian came to be in possession of a nuclear or chemical weapon, the government would do everything in its power to apprehend them, even if this person promised never to use it. From the point of view of the state, anything that threatened it was inherently evil.

“For now, it is not an issue,” he continued. “The threat of the dungeons is still upon us. But once the threat of the Monster Stampede has passed, your existence will be a source of fear for everyone else.”

“What you mean to say is that, once the enemy is dead, the soldiers should be killed off... Right?”

“That sure is a blunt way to put it. However, you are correct,” he admitted.

I had seen this trope in fantasy novels as well. Once the Demon King had been defeated, the Kingdom started to consider the hero as a threat. The hero, having lost their usefulness, would only be rewarded with death, and the nation that had passed down the order would consider themselves righteous.

I downed my sake in one gulp and stared at the powerful individual sitting

next to me. I had known from the very start that this sort of issue would eventually come up, and I had already thought of a way out.

“There is an SR gacha item called Elixir,” I started. “The user is able to change their body as they wish after taking it. I intend on using this medicine. Once the threat of the Monster Stampede has been dealt with, we should bring down the difficulty level of every dungeon to Rank D and have every adventurer Rank C or above use an Elixir to revert back to Rank D as well. Once all of this is handled, I’ll go live out my days on some southern island and never involve myself with the dungeons ever again.”

“I see you are prepared... But will the other adventurers agree so readily?”

“They will. Dungeon Busters will make sure of it...” I paused. “If they try to resist, we’ll catch them and make sure to turn them back to Rank D, even if we have to use force. This world doesn’t need any superhumans.”

Just as some were wary of adventurers, some had also started revering us as if we were some kind of gods. We could cure any wound in a matter of seconds and save people suffering from otherwise-incurable illnesses, thanks to Extra Potions. It was pretty much a miracle. However, that only made the existence of us adventurers that much more dangerous. Gods were only gods because they could not appear in front of believers’ eyes. Tangible gods who could perform miracles couldn’t be allowed to exist.

“I see. I understand your position and will make sure to keep my party in check,” the Prime Minister said. “Our government doesn’t wish to restrict adventurers. However, there are currently ongoing discussions on the need to assemble a police force tasked with handling adventurer crimes so that we’re prepared to deal with any eventualities. I expect it will be established before the end of the year.”

“I have just the right person for the job. She’s a former police bureaucrat and the most formidable woman in the world.”

Prime Minister Urabe expressed his interest. He might have understood “formidable” as “capable” when I’d meant to say she was scary, but oh well... Both were true, anyway.



[Ministry of Defense — Ministry of Dungeons Preparation Bureau — Ishihara Yukie]

Right as the simultaneous elections for the House of Representatives and House of Councillors were officially declared and the campaign period started, one of our neighboring countries, located on the southern part of a certain peninsula, made an absurd announcement. They claimed their support for Joker, the Venisuelan terrorist, of all things. It was also plain to see that they had tried to keep their statement as ambiguous as possible.

<I believe Venisuela's strong message has made all of humanity reflect. To mend the tremendous issue that is wealth disparity, there is no other choice than to listen to each other and compromise. We shouldn't be too quick to call them terrorists or to reject their ideas. Rather, we should seek open dialogue. We, the Republic of Woori, have decided to lend an ear to what Venisuela and Joker have to say and show our support. Of course, we do not intend to antagonize Gamera or the Oriental Republic of Sina. Our country has gone from being one of the poorest countries in the world to an advanced nation. We know the hardships of destitution as well as the comfort of riches. I believe we can become the bridge that helps link both sides. Balance can be found in the way wealth and resources are shared. The tremendous wealth gap between the northern and southern hemispheres is an issue the entire world faces. In turn, our country faces a similar division between the north and the south. We hope to join hands with our northern brothers in the Kingdom of Ko and push toward the resolution of wealth disparity worldwide together.>

Did they choose to announce this now because the Japanese elections are coming up, or is that merely a coincidence?

Either way, their position was now clear. Japan, Gamera, the EU, and the Oriental Republic of Sina had chosen to stand up to Joker. As for our neighbors, the north and the south had both chosen to side with him. It was hard to know how this situation would influence the elections, but if the Conservative Party won, a breakdown of diplomatic relations was a serious possibility.

“We need to strengthen our forces on Tsushima Island and the northern part of Kyushu. I assume the people in charge have already made a move...”

I quickly went through the report my subordinate had brought me and slumped back in my chair. Even in the face of Joker, that country was planning to stick to its two-faced diplomatic antics. A hundred or so years ago, these exact political tactics had prompted a major power to cast it away, which had resulted in Japan taking over the country entirely. Did they have no memory of this?

“Either way, this issue is outside of our jurisdiction. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs will handle this. We need to prioritize the inception of our Ministry of Dungeons. Are we finished laying the groundwork with relevant businesses?”

“We are still in negotiations with the help of the Ministry of Economy. We are still leaving the establishment and management of the heavy oil production infrastructures, liquefied petroleum gas production infrastructures, radioactive waste disposal infrastructures, and plants to independent contractors. The energy sector has agreed that the price for this oil and gas will be set as low as possible.”

“We are not a company. As long as we aren’t too far in the red, it’s good enough. Eventually, Japan should be one hundred percent self-sufficient when it comes to energy, though there’s still some time before that happens.”

I continued.

“In addition, we need to create a force to deal with adventurer-related crimes. Please go ahead and choose some members from the ranks of the National Police Agency.”

In July, the Ministry of Dungeons would be established. Its job would be to handle all dungeon-related issues. I expected it would soon become just as important as the Ministry of Finance, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, or the Ministry of Defense.

Once my subordinate stepped out, I stood up and went to the window. I glanced at the sky through the blinds and was greeted with a blue sky and the strong rays of sun that characterized the beginning of summer. The elections were this month. Next month was the Olympics.

“Looks like this summer will be especially hot...”

I suddenly felt like smoking a cigarette. I checked the time of my next appointment and headed to the smoking area.



[Republic of Colombian — Air Force Headquarters]

Colombian was the second-largest country in South Gamera after Brazil, but it could hardly be praised for its economy. Its GDP per capita was around six thousand dollars, which meant it was still a developing country. For this reason, its military force was also far behind those of countries such as Gamera and the Oriental Republic of Sina. In fact, Colombian still used over-fifty-year-old fighter aircraft as its main defense force. Equilibrium had been maintained over the years since most South Gamerican armies were in a similar state. However, the appearance of the dungeons had greatly disturbed that equilibrium.

“Ten unidentified flying objects are approaching from the direction of Venisuela. Altitude, 1500 meters. Speed, 300 kilometers per hour!”

“What is going on?! It can’t be an aircraft with a speed of 300 kilometers per hour! What the hell is it?”

The entirety of Colombian Air Force headquarters was puzzled by the unidentified flying objects their radar had detected but the Air Force had to make preparations regardless. All the more so considering the flying objects were coming from Venisuela.

The 311 battle squadron—the Dragones—that was stationed in Barranquilla was ordered to dispatch every aircraft at once. The aircraft that took off were all A-37 light attack aircraft. Nicknamed the dragonfly, this model was over fifty years old. Still it continued to be widely used in South Gamera due to its simple airframe, ease of maintenance, top speed of over 770 kilometers per hour, flying range of over 1500 kilometers, and overall performance.

“DF-01 speaking. I will soon make contact with the UFO... Wait! What the heck is...? AAAH!”

The pilot saw a gigantic monster leisurely flapping its wings in the vast sky.

“A... A dragon...”

“DF-01 speaking. The UFO is a winged monster. It’s a dragon! Awaiting orders to engage!”

“Headquarters speaking. We have confirmed the situation. Fire a warning shot, then take them all down!”

Thus started the very first clash between fighter aircraft and dragons, although these monsters would later be identified as wyverns.

“FOX 3, fire!”

The built-in machine gun fired a few rounds. It was only meant to be a warning shot. If it was enough to scare off the monsters, this would be the end of it. Unexpectedly, the wyverns did not run away. In fact, they only quickened their pace. Those first rounds had been meant to miss. Due to the wyvern’s sudden acceleration, however, they ended up hitting the mark. Bright sparks shone on the wyvern’s scales as the bullets were repelled.

“FOX 2!”

All six A-37 aircraft simultaneously fired IR guided missiles. Even though the enemies were monsters, they were not all that fast, and if the guided missiles managed to hit them, the wyverns would not make it out unscathed. That was what the six pilots believed, at least. Right as one wyvern was about to be hit, however, it responded in an unthinkable manner. It quickly gained some altitude before catching the missile heading its way with its claws and smashing it. The other wyverns also employed incredible maneuvers that a pilot in an aircraft could never hope to replicate. Every single missile that had been fired was dodged or crushed.

“GWOOOOOH!” one of the wyverns roared.



A blast of fire escaped its wide-open mouth. The A-37 narrowly escaped the attack, but more fireballs kept coming, one after the other.

“Bullets and missiles don’t work on them! SAVE US!”

“M-MONSTERS!!!”

“MAYDAY! MAYDAY!”

The radio filled Air Force headquarters with the horrible cries of the pilots.



[A Certain Place in Venisuela]

The clown stared at the computer screen for a while, then shrugged and averted his gaze. He felt rather dejected at the unexpected outcome.

“I’m beat...” he said. “I didn’t think things would end up like this. Did you predict it, Mifa?”

“Well... That’s why I told you not to do it...” Mifa said.

Joker let out a dramatic sigh and lit his cigarette. His subordinates operating the computers also looked worried and kept stealing glances at their boss.

“I really didn’t think the footage would end up being like this. Attaching cameras to the wyverns’ heads wasn’t that great of an idea, huh? What do we do now? Should we just use still images?”

Joker had ordered his underlings to attach cameras to the wyverns’ heads in order to retrieve footage of the fight. However, after checking the data, it was found to be completely unusable. With every flap of their wings, the wyverns moved up and down a few meters, meaning the video was extremely shaky. It was impossible to tell what was happening during their fight with the Colombian aircraft.

“In movies and anime, people ride dragons, don’t they? And here I thought Japanese animation was supposed to be accurate! Did they lie to me? Isn’t ‘Made in Japan’ the best?!”

“Even small birds move up and down slightly as they fly. Isn’t it obvious this movement would become that much more noticeable when it comes to

wyverns and their huge wings...?” the young girl asked, casting a cold look at Joker.

Joker scratched his head. “Nothing we can do about it now. Take screenshots and send them to the Colombian government,” he ordered his men. “They shouldn’t have any trouble seeing that their troops got crushed. They probably went crying to Gamera anyway. Maybe I should send a little message of my own as well.”

Taking in the sight of Joker, who didn’t seem to be all that irritated anymore, his underlings all relaxed.



[Dungeon Busters Headquarters — Ezoe Kazuhiko]

The Dungeon Busters’s headquarters had a large cafeteria where adventurers could gather and have meals together. Recently, a large, eighty-inch screen had been put up on one of the walls and was used to share information on monsters that hadn’t yet been added to the database or studies on how to fight with different weapons. Today, however, many of the members had gathered to watch the news.

<Buenas Tardes! How are my beloved humans doing? I’m Joker, the Demon King. Today, I am recording this video to inform you that my very own army, the Legion, has finally started being put to use. TADAAAAH!!!>

Joker, the Demon King, gestured to the right side of the screen with both hands as the picture of a monster appeared.

“A dragon?” I asked.

“No. This is a wyvern,” Akane, who I had materialized so she could watch the broadcast with us, corrected. “It’s a Rank A monster... Dragons have four limbs as well as a pair of wings on their back. Wyverns are more similar to birds, and their upper limbs are, in fact, wings.”

I nodded and turned my attention back to the video.

<This little guy is a wyvern! A Rank A monster. Yesterday, I had ten of these fellows fly to our neighboring country, Colombian. An exciting fight between

monsters and aircraft took place, but sadly, I only have still images to show you. Sorry!>

A new picture replaced the previous one. A wyvern clutched an aircraft in its claws. This picture was replaced once more, the next one showing a missile being crushed by a wyvern. I started wondering how Joker had even managed to get these pictures, but the Demon King soon gave the answer.

<I did attach cameras to the wyverns heads, but... Let's just say the footage wasn't usable. It was shaking so much that it was beyond salvaging, even with image stabilization. I think you guys would get motion sickness if I showed you the video, so I won't release it. Anyway! We were able to confirm that Colombian's army could easily be crushed by Rank A monsters. I'd like to give special thanks to the Colombian Air Force for helping out with our little test. Hya ha ha ha ha!!!>

"Damn. This guy freaking pisses me off..." said Akira. "Aniki, if I run into him, can I smash his head in?"

"Go at it until you feel better."

Even the ever-frivolous Akira was getting seriously pissed off. All of our comrades had strong personalities, but deep down, every one of them was a good person. We couldn't help but think about the pilots who had lost their lives. They must have had friends and families as well, and yet Joker kept laughing without a care in the world. It was only natural to feel nothing but disgust for such a man.

<What we're asking of Colombian is pretty simple! We just need them to cooperate with Venisuela and let us use their dungeons. That's the only thing we need. We don't intend to occupy their land, and we aren't demanding money. They just need to open up their borders and stay quiet while we take care of their dungeons. That's not asking much, is it?>

"Damn... Colombian is still dealing with left-wing guerrilla groups. Big cartels, like the Medellín Cartel, have been wiped out, but small-scale drug cartels are still an issue these days. They'll probably welcome Joker with open arms. Will their current President accept Joker's terms?" I asked.

"That will most likely depend on Gamerica's response, won't it? If they get

involved, Colombian is likely to push back, but..." Amane murmured, arm crossed and expression dark.

I thought about what she had said. Gamera would most likely comment on the situation, but I doubted they would send troops. Even if they decided to bomb Venisuela, they would still need to get the Republic of Kuba to agree first. Either way, that president of theirs was all talk. Looking at his stance when it came to the Kingdom of Ko told me everything I needed to know. He would not make a move if he thought it could endanger him in any way. All bark and no bite was the best way to describe that man.

"It would probably be another story if Joker tried to start something in Mejicanos. Right now, he's still all the way beyond the Caribbean Sea. Howard always calculates potential gains and losses as he goes. Considering their isolationist stance of late, going out of their way to save Colombian won't benefit Gamera."

If anything, Howard was more likely to brag that he had been right all along for wanting to put up a wall between Gamera and Mejicanos. Even taking the dungeons in Kanada into account, the whole of North Gamera still only numbered less than forty dungeons. Gamera was self-sustained and might very well choose to clam up and avoid contact with the rest of the world.

"If I were Joker, I'd use Mejicanos as a buffer zone to make sure Gamera doesn't get involved while I monopolize all of the South Gamerican dungeons. If Gamera doesn't make a move this time, the anti-Gamerican sentiment in South Gamera will only grow. Brezil, along with its large population, may actually end up siding with Joker," I said.

"If that happens, Africa may be next. The spark might even reach the Middle East. Half of the world could fall under the Demon King's reign," Amane added. "Now *that* would be a fantasy story come to life."

On TV, a lady who introduced herself as "The Commentator Auntie" started commentating on the situation.

<I am deeply sorry for the pilots who ended up losing their lives, but I have to say that these events should have been expected. Venisuela is in a state of deep unrest and thousands are suffering there too. We citizens of advanced

countries have pretended to not see their suffering for too long...>

I decided to ignore this pointless speech and stood up.

“Kazuhiko-sama?”

Akane followed behind me. I went to the courtyard, took out a cigarette, and lit it.

“Akane... Do you think we can take down ten wyverns as we are now?”

“Of course we can... Or at least, I wish I could say so, but...”

“It would be impossible, wouldn’t it? Ten Rank A monsters are enough to destroy a country. If the Monster Stampede is unleashed, tens of thousands of monsters even more dangerous than these will swarm the earth, and yet, some people still don’t seem to understand the gravity of our situation. I’ll be honest with you...” I paused. “For a second, I started wondering if humanity was really worth saving. Should we really be fighting so hard to save humanity? Joker’s human as well, and he’s trying to destroy the world. Perhaps that’s what some people want. Maybe humanity just doesn’t deserve to be saved. Maybe Joker’s right...”

“Kazuhiko-sama!”

I came back to myself thanks to Akane’s sharp cry. The beautiful, raven-haired kunoichi was looking at me with a sad expression on her face. I took a deep breath and smiled at her.

“I’m sorry. I ended up showing you my weak side and venting to you. I’ll clear every dungeon and prevent the Monster Stampede. That’s my version of justice, and no matter what anyone else says, I’ll see it through.”

“I’ll comfort you when you waver. So please, don’t try to bear it all by yourself, all right?”

I brought my hand to Akane’s cheek and stroked her silky smooth hair. For the first time in a while, I felt like drinking a lot.

* * *

In mid-June, the double election finally started. The unbalanced fight between the strong Conservative Party and the many weak opposition parties that had

first started in 2012 continued. The situation had barely changed in eight years. The main reason for this lay with the largest opposition party, the Constitutional Democratic Party. Although the most crucial debates of this election were about the Anti-Dungeon policies and the revision of the constitution, the Constitutional Democratic Party kept bringing up a certain cherry blossom viewing party hosted by the Prime Minister more than a year ago that they considered problematic. Most of their speeches only ever attacked Urabe and his cabinet.

“After eight years, such depravity becomes apparent! We need to get rid of the Urabe Cabinet in order to cleanse our country’s politics!” the party leader screamed.

However, the voters didn’t react well. The crowd even started booing him.

“Stop fucking with us! We don’t need an opposition party that’s losing us votes! What are you planning to do about the dungeons?! What about Joker?!”

The party had initially been formed as a coalition meant to be the very antithesis of the Conservative Party, which had consistently managed to remain in power in the post-war years. However, it had easily crumbled after three years in power. It had been formed with the single goal of opposing the conservatives, but once faced with the need to govern the nation, the discrepancies in the goals and policies of each individual group became obvious. Afterward, the party had exploded into several subgroups, but the Constitutional Democratic Party still couldn’t let go of its position as the antithesis of the Conservative Party. This election only made it more obvious than ever.

“Of course we believe the dungeons ought to be taken seriously. However, we still cannot approve of the Urabe Administration’s plans to reform the constitution. Their proposal is full of holes, and it will not protect citizens’ rights!”

“How about you come up with a proposal of your own?! You keep opposing stuff but never propose anything! No one can support you if you keep this up!”

Party leader Edashima’s rebuttal only made the mob more critical. The future of his party after the election was looking bleak.

There was another party that claimed their opposition to Urabe and the Conservative Party but had still managed to garner some support—the Communist Party. They opposed capitalism and were in favor of getting rid of the JSDF altogether. They also called for the Emperor to step down and wanted to dismantle every large company while building a democratic union led by the proletariat.

“The American troops withdrew and the U.S.-Japan Security Treaty has fallen through. Now is the time for Japan to become politically independent. Let us join hands with the third world represented by Joker and strive for a truly equal world where nationality, race, and wealth won’t matter!”

After listening to these words, some people might have thought that they were spouting nonsense. However, they were fully serious. The communists had wished for a proletarian revolution since before World War II. Even facing the threat of the dungeons or the prospect of the world ending, their beliefs were unmovable. They were much more consistent when it came to sticking to their beliefs than the Constitutional Democratic Party could ever hope to be. Of course, their supporters were still extremely few.

“What is the biggest threat that we are facing? The dungeons. First, we need to put our resources into resolving this issue. Let me be clear. I also have heaps of complaints about the Urabe Cabinet. Their cherry blossom viewing party was a sham, the way they handle relations with Woori is awful, and I believe we should be investigating that casino business... But all of that can wait! What matters most right now is getting rid of the dungeons as soon as possible! The second most important objective is making preparations and strengthening our JSDF in the event the monsters break out of the dungeons. This should be our absolute priority!”

An ex-talent who had been very vocal about his opposition to tax increases and nuclear energy had completely changed his mind due to the Dungeon Outbreak Phenomenon. He now supported the Conservative Party. His main reason for that sudden change was that their priorities matched. A crowd cheered and clapped for him when he delivered an impactful speech right in the street, using a wide monitor.

“Using monsters to attack another country before threatening to pursue an

offensive attack if they refuse to hand over their dungeons? Such acts shouldn't go unpunished! Countries right next door are already intending to join hands with scoundrels like Joker. These monsters we saw appear to be called wyverns, and we do not know when they may come for us! We need to strengthen our land, sea, and air defense forces!"

Various conservative candidates also raised their voices. It was usually said that the result of an election could never be known until the results had been revealed, but in this case, the result was obvious from the start. All Japanese constituents were very much aware of this fact.



[Ministry of Defense — Dungeon Adventurer Administrative Bureau —
Ministry of Dungeons Preparation Room]

The Dungeon Adventurer Administrative Bureau continued to prepare for the establishment of the new ministry that would take place after the elections, which were sure to conclude with the Conservative Party's crushing victory. At the same time, this would mark the start of the never-ending fight against the dungeons.

More and more countries were siding with Joker. As for Gamera, they still pretended the situation was of no concern to them. It was long past the point where a single country could hope to solve everything on its own. Yet the seventy-four-year-old president of the United States of Gamera seemed to think a trade bloc would somehow do the trick.

"I don't think we can expect anything from Gamera at this point. Japan should protect itself on its own," Director General Ishihara stated before asking, "Anyway, what did Dungeon Busters say?"

"They've used all the B-Rank cards in their possession to gacha and have obtained A-Rank monsters. They have promised to supply the JSDF with wyverns."

"I see... These cards are extremely valuable, so we cannot afford to waste them. We need to see how much damage F-15 Eagles and the Type 90 air-to-air missile can do to wyverns. Please start experimenting when preparations are complete."

Director General Ishihara issued several orders in rapid succession. Checking how the JSDF weapons would fare against monsters was one of the most pressing issues. Similar experiments were taking place in the EU, with the Crusaders supplying NATO with monster cards. The Oriental Republic of Sina hadn't managed to get their hands on Rank A monster cards yet, so Japan had agreed to share the results of their experiments with them.

"It seems the Woorian ambassador has also requested that we share the results of our experiments with them."

"Tell them to go to hell... I'm joking. But still, we cannot disclose military data to countries supporting Joker," she answered. "Please reject their request politely."

The Ministry of Defense had also been approached by the Woorian government but had completely ignored them. Now that the Sinese threat had disappeared and Rushi was focused on Europe, the only menace to the equilibrium in the Far East was the northern part of the Woorian peninsula and their communist dictator, and now the southern part of the peninsula that had decided to follow in their northern counterpart's footsteps. Unrest was gradually spreading in the south, and it was difficult to predict how the situation would evolve.

"Our very first mission as the Ministry of Dungeons will be to plan for the Tokyo Olympics. Joker has proven that there might be more adventurers who have received the Buster title than we think. On the off chance that monsters are summoned in Tokyo, panic will arise. We need to coordinate with the Ministry of Land, Infrastructure, Transport and Tourism and the National Police Agency to put a strict surveillance system in place."

Director General Ishihara almost wished for the Olympics to be called off entirely, but the IOC insisted that it was especially important to hold a "celebration of peace" in these times of crisis, so the event would go on. In preparation, Dungeon Boot Camps designed for police officers were ongoing in Yokohama Dungeon, Shinjuku Dungeon, and Funabashi Dungeon.

"Our lives would be so much easier if we had access to some tool that could sense dungeon card holders..."

Sadly, such a tool had yet to appear. If the Olympics did not go smoothly, not only the Ministry of Dungeons but also the whole Cabinet might not be able to endure. Ishihara was extremely concerned.

The first half of 2020 was ending in greater chaos than anticipated.



[Republic of Woori — Seoul Special City]

In June of 2020, Japan was in the midst of holding a double election, with intense debates surrounding prospective constitutional reform and establishment of an army. At the same time, heated debates were also taking place in Seoul, the capital of the Republic of Woori, anticipating the intensity of the summer to come. The trigger had been the recent statement of President Park Jae-An, in which he expressed his support for Venisuela, and by extension Joker. Naturally, the nineteen other countries that made up the G20 immediately objected. The reaction of Mejicanos and the South Gamerican countries Brezil and Argentine was especially strong. Their parliaments unanimously agreed to voice extremely harsh complaints. As for the countries that comprised the EU, they tasked their ambassadors stationed in Woori to hand in written protests to the Woorian government. The president, who was holed up in his office at the Blue House, seemed to have failed to predict the scale of the backlash and could only come up with lame excuses, saying things like, “Showing understanding is the first step toward resolving issues.”

<Breaking News: Samshik Electronics’s Vice Chairman, Choi Kun-hee, has announced the company’s intention to relocate its head office abroad. He has referenced diverging views regarding the ways dungeons ought to be handled as well as concerns regarding the President’s support of Venisuela as the main reasons for this choice, stating that conducting business in such conditions would be difficult. The company is currently considering the Oriental Republic of Sina, as well as Japan, for its relocation.>

<Choi Kun-hee has begun an emergency press conference to comment on the issue of Samshik’s relocation, stating that the previous report was incorrect. According to his statement, the group has only expressed worries regarding the current situation and is not considering relocating in any way, shape, or form.

Still, the stock market is going through a rough patch as the won undergoes its biggest devaluation in history...>

<The French auto manufacturer Louis S.A. has announced it is pulling out of the Woorian market altogether, while the Gamerican company, National Motors, will pull out its capital from the country. Two of the three biggest car companies in Woori will effectively disappear as of today. As a result, up to a million people are expected to lose their jobs. It appears that in 2020, both real and nominal growth rates will be negative.>

<President Park has stressed that, once peaceful reunification with the Kingdom of Ko is achieved, the country will reap economic benefits that cannot be fathomed, leading to a complete economic recovery. However, the path to peaceful reunification seems long and uncertain, as a summit between the northern and southern leaders has yet to be organized. President Park is calling for the citizens to unite and strive for reunification as the country is purged of its deep-rooted evil, but demonstrations only continue to escalate...>

Park Jae-An, president of the Republic of Woori, was growing irritated as he watched the reports on different news channels. The same mob that had forced the previous president to resign after the Candlelight Demonstrations was now coming for him. The strength of the people had chased out the corrupt former authorities, just like during the Franze Revolution of old. The current government was the very embodiment of this revolutionary spirit; demonstrators protesting against them was unforgivable.

<Demonstrators claim that the current government's actions, including ignoring the threat of the dungeon, are causing the degradation of the economy and that giving unconditional support to an enemy nation is treasonous. They are calling for the president's immediate resignation.>

Law was a crucial tool when it came to ruling a country. A nation wasn't defined by its laws. If anything, the laws were defined by the nation. In a country as ethnically homogeneous as Woori, the will of the people and their ideals were even more important than the nation itself. The law didn't amount to much in the face of the reunification of the country, the people's dearest wish, and the result of their right to self-determination. It was time to rid the country of the traitorous conservatives that threatened the people's self-

esteem and were always ready to sell out the country. President Park was determined to make this happen during his presidency; he believed it to be his life's mission.

“Mr. President, we have received demands not only from Samshik Electronics but also from other large conglomerates, such as Milae Motor and SG Electronics. They request we cut all ties with Venisuela and cooperate with Japan and the Oriental Republic of Sina on dungeon-clearing initiatives,” said an advisor. “If this continues, our country's economy will completely collapse!”

“The unemployment rate amongst young people has passed thirty percent. We are extremely unlikely to make a recovery. Foreign investors are pulling their capital one after the other and the devaluation of the won is accelerating as we speak. We are keeping the losses in check with currency swaps but a currency crisis will be upon us before the end of the year,” another advisor stated.

Every advisor brought more bad news. The G20 was set to meet in the Middle East in November, but the organizing country had bluntly let Woori know through unofficial channels that they did not need to show up.

“The Venisuelan government has thanked us for our bravery and is asking for active support to help rebuild their country. We received a message of the same nature from the Kingdom of Ko as well. I sent word back that we would provide support as soon as the situation has stabilized on our side, but I'm afraid we do not have the means to send several hundred million dollars to support them.”

Woori hoped to become the bridge between the advanced countries and Joker by staying in contact with both sides. This would allow Woori to heighten its global presence and quiet down Japan, that war-criminal country that kept acting like it ran the whole world. That had been President Park's plan, at least. Now, however, he was faced with rejection from the G20 and monetary requests from Venisuela.

Why didn't it work as I hoped?

“How did Japan react? I believe our army contacted them to ask for their collaboration on dungeon-related matters. Our ambassador should have

contacted Dungeon Busters directly as well.”

If I show the citizens we’re doing something about the dungeons, they should accept the situation. Clearing dungeons will also allow us to show that we’re not simply following Joker blindly. In that sense, clearing at least one dungeon is crucial. The only country that could make it possible in this part of the world is Japan. I need Dungeon Busters on my side.

However, the response President Park received was cold and cruel.



[Edogawa City, Shishibone — Dungeon Busters Headquarters]

After forty years, I had naturally developed bonds and obligations toward people. This wasn’t a bad thing, though. People couldn’t survive all on their own. We lived in a society, a world of give-and-take. That’s why, when someone asked something of me, I did my best to help them. I sometimes made requests as well; that was just how relationships worked.

“I’m so sorry Kazu-chan... Asking for something so...”

Iwamoto, my lifelong friend—we had met during the first year of primary school—had come to our headquarters. He was a Zainichi Woorian and owned a chain of pachinko parlors located in Chiba. The relationship between Japan and Woori was pretty bad right now, but many Woorian people still saw Japan in a favorable light. On top of that, Iwamoto had obtained Japanese citizenship more than twenty years ago and had been a Japanese citizen for a long time. While I did have issues with Woori’s handling of the dungeons, I could still claim loudly and proudly that Iwamoto was my best friend.

“Nice to meet you. I’m Lee from the Woorian Residents Union.”

“I’m Ezoë from Dungeon Busters. Please, take a seat.”

Iwamoto had brought a representative from the Woorian Residents Union, an association often simply referred to as the Union for short. Around seventy percent of the Woorian people living in Japan were members of this association, which was active all over the country. One of the branches was even located in Higashi Matsumoto, Edogawa City.

Iwamoto had been naturalized as a Japanese citizen twenty years ago, so while he wasn't part of the Union, his position as the proprietor of a chain of pachinko parlors did result in a lot of contact with the Zainichi Woorian community. It seemed the Union had asked him to act as a mediator due to his connections to both sides. Iwamoto had told me beforehand that they were likely to request something ridiculous and that I was completely free to turn them down. Since he was trying to change his line of business, this whole ordeal was probably a hassle for him too.

"I would like to make it clear that, while Iwamoto is a precious friend of mine, I am first and foremost the administrator of Dungeon Busters and collaborate very closely with the Japanese government. I may not be able to respond favorably to your request, Lee-san," I said.

"My role was to make sure the two of you could meet and have a discussion. As for what's next, I'll leave the decision fully in your hands, Kazu-chan. You're all right with this, right, Lee-san?" Iwamoto asked.

Upon starting our discussion I learned that Lee-shi, the representative of the Union, had come with two requests. First, he wanted us to convince the Japanese government to allow Zainichi Woorians to become civilian adventurers in Japan. Second, he wanted us to help the Republic of Woori put a civilian adventurer initiative in place.

I took a look at Iwamoto's expression and noticed he seemed not only dumbfounded but also a bit mad at their requests.

"Lee-san! This is too much!" he all but yelled.

Even the ever-calm, mild-mannered Iwamoto was outraged. I raised my right hand as if to tell him to calm down.

"Iwa-chan," I started, "I'm sure even Lee-san knows how ridiculous what he is asking is. I'm guessing the Woorian government tasked the Union with convincing us to assist."

I continued.

"I am truly sorry, Lee-san, but I will not be able to help you. These are important international matters. The Republic of Woori should be making a

formal request to the Japanese government. As for your other request regarding the Zainichi Woorians becoming adventurers, I'm afraid Dungeon Busters is not in a position to make demands of the Japanese government. We do receive requests from the government, but we do not make any of our own. I'm afraid our position would become misunderstood if we started trying to coerce the government. The Union supports the Constitutional Democratic Party, if I'm not mistaken. You should reach out to them."

Lee-shi simply nodded, most likely having understood from the very start that things wouldn't work out. He probably just wanted to bring these topics up with me so he could say he had tried.

I promised Iwamoto I would have a drink with him when I got the chance and ended our reunion.



<They're at the end of their rope,> said Ishihara, who I was speaking to using an online video chat service. <Currently, Woori is extremely divided between supporters of the current president and those who oppose him. Their economy continues to deteriorate too. If this keeps up, the county may end up collapsing all on its own before the Monster Stampede even happens.>

Ishihara was also surprised at what the Union had dared to request. She told me the Woorian government had also tried a similar approach with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Defense but had been rejected both times.

<We'll consider this matter again after the elections. When the Ministry of Dungeons is finally in place, we'll be the ones dealing with these sorts of requests. Anyways, have you decided on your next target? Which dungeon will you be clearing next?>

There were seven dungeons left in Japan. Going from the north to the south were Sendai, Shishibone, Nagoya, Osaka, Hiroshima, Hakata, and Miyakonojo Dungeons. The monsters that appeared on the first floor of each of these dungeons had already been checked, and we had a pretty good idea of their ranks.

"The dungeons in Sendai, Hiroshima, and Miyakonojo are the most urgent.

These are most likely all Rank B. Hataka's is Rank D, Nagoya's is Rank C, and Shishibone's and Osaka's are both Rank A or above. I think we'll handle the dungeon in Hiroshima first. It seems to be slightly easier than the one in Sendai."

<Understood. Oh! I meant to tell you. Someone has managed to get quite deep into Nagoya Dungeon, and all on his own! I was quite surprised to hear he had reached Rank C already. His name is Satou Souta. Do you know him?>

"Him, huh?"

I narrowed my eyes as I nodded. He was trying to take on the S-Rank Osaka Dungeon to avenge his father, the first victim of the dungeons here in Japan. He tended to act rashly at times. Perhaps his youth prompted this behavior, but I had a feeling he might try to dive into Osaka Dungeon as soon as he earned the title of Buster.

<Knowing you, I thought you'd jump on the opportunity to try to recruit him. You don't want to talk to him?>

"Just keep an eye on him for me. There are counselors around every dungeon now, so I guess he won't get any weird ideas. Either way, Nagoya Dungeon is Rank C. Clearing it alone is almost impossible. If he finds himself stuck, we'll be happy to lend a hand."

No rule stated that only Dungeon Busters was allowed to clear dungeons. If anything, I thought it was a good thing to have other teams, like the Crusaders, working on it too. Ishihara seemed to have a different opinion, though.

<As a government official, I must say that we'd much prefer having all the busters with these supernatural powers of theirs under one centralized management. Many people can't help but worry about the consequences of letting an immature young man hold that much power.>

"He's over twenty, so he's an adult. He can just take responsibility... Well, I guess it's not as easy as that, huh? I do intend to have a talk with Satou Souta again. In the meantime, please do pay attention to him and the other adventurers."

The issue of the adventurers' place in society was finally starting to surface.



[Shin-Koiwa Station — Kinouchi Mari]

I was currently standing next to the ticket gate at Shin-Koiwa Station. Today, I was going on my first date with one of my classmates, Yamaoka Shingo. Shingo-kun had told me he had feelings for me a while ago. I had rejected him at the time, but he had still decided to join Dungeon Busters, and we'd wound up spending a lot of time together in the dungeons. I hadn't really know what to do when being told I love you in such a direct way.

"Mari, you need to give him a proper answer soon. Shingo-kun truly likes you. That's why you need to be a responsible woman and answer him. I feel bad for him, being left in the dark like this."

That's what my mom had told me. Emily had also told me it was about time I decided what to do. Even Senyath, our newest recruit, had had something to add.

"Lady Mari, it may not be my place to speak on the matter, but I must say that tormenting this poor gentleman for so long is unbecoming of a proper young lady. Although he is a healthy and, if I dare say, rather promiscuous young man, his feelings for you are genuine. You ought to be up front about the matter and crush his hopes once and for all."

Senyath seemed to assume I would definitely reject him, but I did agree with the fact that I had to give him an answer. That's why I was now on my way to have my first-ever date. *Aaaah... I'm kind of stressed.*

"Mari! I'm sorry I made you wait!"

Shingo-kun had arrived. He looked pretty cool in leather sneakers, a pair of jeans, and a T-shirt with a hemp jacket thrown over it. Since he had joined Dungeon Busters, Shingo-kun had changed a lot. At first, he had just been another high schooler, but quite a few of our classmates and even some of the upperclassmen had confessed to him recently. I'd heard he turned them all down. I wasn't sure why he seemed to think I was any better than those other girls.

"Let's go," he said, holding out his hand for me to take.

I hesitated a little before taking his hand. My face heated up a little. Shingo-kun had become much bolder when I wasn't paying attention.

* * *

We watched a movie at a theater inside a mall in Kinshicho before getting lunch at a nice Italian restaurant next to the mall. Both Shingo-kun and I gave all the money we received from Dungeon Busters to our parents, who then gave us an allowance. I received a hundred thousand yen per month while Shingo-kun told me he got around a hundred and fifty thousand. I could never have imagined having so much money in my hands a year ago.

"I want to buy a motorcycle, so I'm saving up for it now. What about you, Mari?" he asked.

"I guess I'm also saving. To be honest, I don't really know what to use my money for. Ah! I guess I am spending quite a lot on cakes."

We talked about the dungeons and school but also about our private lives. I didn't know how to explain it, but I felt like Shingo-kun was a little like Kazu-san now. He always seemed like he was in control. I told him he had changed a lot, and he smiled brightly at me.

"My goal is to become like Kazu-san. He truly is the kind of adult I hope to grow into," he said.

"Why him? Aren't Akira-san and Hisato-san pretty cool too?" I asked.

I thought everyone in Dungeon Busters was really nice and reliable. To be honest, when I looked at my classmates, I often thought they were rather childish.

"All the men in Dungeon Busters are really cool. They all have their own goals and are ready to put their lives on the line. But what I truly want is to become as strong as Kazu-san. He's able to push everyone forward and face the unknown of the dungeons head-on. I'm sure he has to deal with a tremendous amount of pressure and stress, yet he always pulls through. I end up thinking I want to become like him when I stand behind him."

"I understand."

I suddenly remembered the time I had gone shopping with my mom and Kazu-san. I hadn't been able to stop myself from wishing my father had been a person like him. *I think I really would like it if Shingo-kun becomes more like Kazu-san in the future.*

"Ah! I need to buy a thank you gift for Kazu-san! He's always taking care of me, and I want to repay him somehow."

"You're right. Let's go," Shingo-kun agreed.

As we exited the restaurant, we held hands without giving it a second thought.

* * *

[Kinshicho — Shopping mall — TRY! Next Door's Cuisine]

That day, we were recording the TV program "TRY! Next Door's Cuisine" on the terrace of Fusion, Kinshicho's shopping mall. The program's main concept was to invite young women to cook live, but since many refused to be filmed, we were having a hard time finding participants.

"Hey! What about that couple over there?" the director asked.

The young woman and young man he pointed to had a strange air about them. They were holding hands, smiling at each other, and looked just like the protagonists of a soap opera. They seemed to be in a world of their own, and no one could keep their eyes off them as they walked. They would make a pretty picture on TV.

Right as I decided to go talk to them, I heard a scream. I turned to look in its direction and saw a man swinging a knife around.

"This is bad!"

"The camera!"

The man's yelling was almost unintelligible, though I made out something along the lines of, "The world's ending anyway!!!" He slashed and stabbed at anyone he could reach as he yelled. In the midst of the general panic, the couple we had spotted earlier stepped forward. The air around the young man was completely different now. His happy expression had disappeared, replaced

by a look befitting a seasoned warrior.

“Aaaaah!!!”

The man ran at him, but he easily dodged the knife before grabbing the man’s arm and sending him flying with little effort. He stepped on the man’s back, twisting his arm to make sure he could not get up.

“Mari! Heal the wounded!”

“Yes!”

The pretty girl, who could have easily overshadowed any popular idol, ran toward the people who had collapsed to the floor, injured. A dim light shone as she held her hand over one of them, and they stood up shortly after.



“Hey! Is the camera running?”

“Yes! That’s magic, right?”

These two must have been dungeon adventurers. We had footage of the first-ever use of magic outside of the dungeons. *What a scoop!* After a few minutes, police cars and ambulances arrived at the scene.



[Tokyo Metropolitan Police Department Headquarters — Kinouchi Mari]

After restraining the man with the knife and healing the wounded, we were brought to the police station. The police officers said they wanted to hear about what had happened in detail, but I was allowed to call my mom first. I decided to contact Kazu-san as well, just in case. After all, I had ended up using magic.

“The special law regarding dungeon adventurer crimes clearly states that, while the use of magic above ground is strictly prohibited, exceptions are to be made when magic is used in unavoidable circumstances, such as legitimate self-defense or in order to rescue someone. Shingo and Mari had no choice but to fight and use magic to save these people. In light of this law, there should be no issues with their behavior, right?”

“O-Of course. I am aware of this. We just wanted to hear about the situation in detail and make sure this indeed was such a case. As soon as we are done with our questioning, the two of them may leave,” the policeman answered, meek.

Surprisingly, the person who had come along with my mom was Amane-san. She had immediately confronted the officers, a stone-cold expression on her face. She was so scary that I almost felt bad for the officers. As soon as she turned to face me, however, she gave me the sweetest smile and praised me.

When my questioning finally ended, the sun was already setting. My long-awaited first date had ended up being a mess. It had been fun, though. I didn’t think I would ever forget today. Shingo-kun promised to make it up to me, a remorseful expression on his face, but I shook my head.

“You were cool, you know. Next time you ask me out, do it as my boyfriend,” I

said.

Shingo-kun turned all red before nodding happily. Mom joined me with perfect timing, and a policeman came to drive us home. However, one last disturbance was waiting to happen. As soon as we stepped out of the police station, we were greeted by dozens of journalists. *Dang... The next few days are going to be awful.*



[United States of Gamera — The Pentagon]

Saying the room was a mess would be an understatement. Books and documents lay haphazardly on the floor, which was so covered that it was impossible to tell the color of the carpet. Empty bottles and nut shells covered a desk whose massiveness seemed to indicate the importance of its owner.

A man laid a cardboard box on the desk, casually pushing things out of the way to make space. A few bottles got knocked over, leaking cola all over the documents scattered on the floor, but he paid it no mind. He carelessly crammed his belongings into the box as he hummed.

A beautiful blonde peeked through the doorway, a worried expression on her face.

“Are you truly going to give up, guildmaster?”

“I’m no guildmaster. I’m nothing more than an unemployed man now. I won’t be able to move forward with my dungeon research if I stay here. If the Democratic candidate, Wozniak, wins, our dungeons will end up being cleared by Dungeon Busters or the Crusaders. If Howard wins, we’ll just get more of the same. We’ll keep being unable to clear any dungeons, and Gamera will be left behind as the rest of the world moves forward. There’s no point in staying here.”

“What do you plan to do next?” she asked again after a pause.

Isaac Roland, now former Command Chief, did not answer the question from his former secretary, Rebecca. Although he wasn’t sure how they had caught wind of his resignation, he had gotten offers from several places including private research labs, think tanks... Even the Vatican was trying to recruit him.

However, he hadn't heard a word from Japan's Ministry of Defense. They were slow on the uptake, as always.

"A Ministry of Dungeons, tasked with handling every dungeon-related matter, will soon be established in Japan. I might just join their research team. Even Ms. Ishihara will surely understand the value I can bring with *this*," he said, pointing at his own forehead.

Leaving the Pentagon meant leaving behind everything but his personal belongings; not a single document could make it out of the building. However, no one could be expected to leave their brain behind. The United States of Gamera had been able to locate over six hundred dungeons, but even at the Pentagon, no one but Isaac Roland remembered the exact location of every single one of them.

"Then I shall accompany you," Rebecca declared. "I don't think someone as disorderly and incompetent when it comes to daily life as you will be able to work with the Japanese. They are extremely meticulous. I've already handed in my resignation letter."

"Hang on! You can't even speak Japanese. Even if you stick around, what use will you be?" asked Isaac.

"This is not an issue. As a whole, the Japanese people are indeed rather inept at English, but many bureaucrats can speak decent English. At any rate, you need someone to stop you from acting rashly and make sure your discussions with other people don't end in disaster."

"What do you mean rash...?"

"The only thing you've got going for you is your intellect. Your lifestyle is chaotic, to say the least, and you're hopeless at bargaining and dealing with politics, aren't you? Have you already forgotten how Ms. Ishihara cornered you until you could only stare at her, dumbfounded? You should immerse yourself in research and leave the talking to me."

Now that they could speak as equals, Rebecca did not hesitate to throw in harsh words as she tried to convince Isaac. She was finally making up for all the frustration she had put up with as his subordinate. Isaac might have been a prodigy, but he was an extremely poor communicator and negotiator. When it

came to reading someone's feelings, he was miles behind his former secretary.

"All right. Now, let's clean this pigsty a little. If you leave it in this state, your boss is going to hold a grudge against you, you know."

Rebecca summoned her courage, entered the room with a garbage bag in hand, and picked up an empty bag of chips that had been lying on the floor for over a week.



[Hiroshima Prefecture, Kamiya City — Rank B Dungeon]

Dungeon Busters wasn't an adventurer party; it was the name of a clan that managed several parties. Kusakabe Rinko, Kirihara Amane, Sumida Masayoshi, and Shinohara Hisato each currently led a party of their own. Usually, parameters such as personal history, age, and gender were taken into account when putting a party together, but sometimes, members could invite acquaintances to join their party or the clan. I intended to recruit many more adventurers in the coming months and bring the total number of parties to twenty, which meant a hundred and twenty adventurers.

"I originally intended to recruit members and finish putting together twenty parties sooner, but I had to change plans. The number of B-Rankers and A-Rankers is limited, so we can't afford to increase our members thoughtlessly. We'll stick to our current size until every one of us reaches Rank A. Unless we run into someone truly outstanding, that is."

The other day, I had hesitated a lot after receiving a call from Takao Sakari, a former sumo wrestler around the same age as I who wanted to start a second life as a member of Dungeon Busters. His stature—he was 190 centimeters—and his achievements as a top-division wrestler were impressive enough. However, I didn't feel the same will to fight for others as I'd felt from Masayoshi.

Still, not only Masayoshi but Rinko, Hisato, and even General Manager Mukai approved of him, so we invited Sakari to join us in Abyss for a tryout. I decided to approve his candidacy when I saw him imitate R*boCop to motivate himself in the Safety Zone on Floor 1 after he had exerted all his strength. Someone as earnest as he could only have a positive influence on those around him.

“You rejected Mucchii’s proposal, right?” Akira asked me.

“Of course I did. I stared at him with my mouth hanging open when he first brought it to me.”

Everyone had gathered around the hotpot and laughed at my words. Mutsuo’s most recent idea was about putting together a group called “Dungeon Chest Finders.” Apparently, some talent agency had reached out to him regarding this project. I had told him I thought the name was a little strange. That was when he explained that the “chest” in “Dungeon Chest Finders” did not refer to treasure chests but, in fact, to women’s chests. I had spent such a long time staring at Mutsuo and laughing that I got scolded by General Manager Mukai, a strained smile plastered on his face.

“To be honest, I do think there is some merit in the idea in the sense that it would bring adventurers closer to the general public,” Hisato said, giving a half-assed rebuttal in favor of the idea.

I had also already considered that aspect. However, I couldn’t find a reason for Dungeon Busters to do this sort of thing. It would be better for a group of entertainers to dungeon-dive as miners. After all, idol groups like TNG47 were already filming inside dungeons.

“Acting all formal all the time will only tire us out, but at the same time, I don’t think it’s a good idea to appear too frivolous either. We need society to trust us, considering the inhuman powers we busters wield. I’m not sure running after boobs is going to get us that trust. Maybe we could try to incorporate some fun segments and jokes in our videos, though.”

Dungeon Busters had a channel on the world’s most renowned video platform where we posted videos explaining the proper way to fight, instructing adventurers how to set up camp, and detailing the different types of monsters. We also had a second channel where members posted about their daily lives, which was more than enough lighthearted content in my opinion.

We reached Floor 3 of Hiroshima Dungeon. Last time, the party had turned back at this point. I’d heard that horned rats—giant rat monsters—showed up on this floor. The members that had entered Hiroshima Dungeon previously had almost all been Rank C, but things were different now. Every one of my

Dungeon Busters members had reached Rank B. *We should be able to easily wipe out Rank C monsters now.*

SWISH.

Rinko swung her blade. The giant rat's head was sliced right off, the rest of its body crashing down in its wake. Watching her was just like watching a fight scene from a period drama. She shuffled forward, sometimes twirling around as she cut down one monster after the other. She was a picture-perfect swordswoman.

"I can't let myself be outdone, can I?" Amane said, taking out her new weapon.

She had picked something different from her usual whips, although I supposed this one was also right up her alley.

Name: Scarlet Feng Phoenix Fan

Rarity: Super Rare

Description: A fan made from the brilliant scarlet feathers of the Fenghuang phoenixes. Its destructive power greatly surpasses that of steel. It can be used as a blade and as a shield.

She reminded me of the bodacious office ladies who used to liven up nights at the disco thirty years ago. Back when Friday Night Fever was all the rage, these funky, fresh ladies wore bomb bodycon dresses and ate up one boy after another, keeping standby lovers on the side. Yeah, I was still cool and up-to-date.

"Whoa! What the hell is this thing...? I can already see heaps of poor men lining up to buy you dinner before getting kicked to the curb!"

"Hmm... Is it from that 'bodacious' or whatever era? I have a feeling I won't get it, even if I ask," Hisato said, scratching his head.

Stop! Don't look so serious! It's okay. You'll get it in another twenty years or so.

"Aniki, let's just go," Akira cut in, pulling me out of my depressive reverie. I

was a-okay now!



[Nippon Airlines — In-Flight]

The Nippon Airlines plane that had taken off from Washington's Dulles International Airport made its way toward Narita International Airport. Although every first-class seat could be partitioned for privacy, it was still possible to chat with your neighbor.

After having given up their jobs at the Pentagon, Isaac Roland and his former secretary Rebecca sat on each side of a partition. Still, due to the nature of their discussion, they used their computers to communicate instead of talking. They had spotted several elderly couples in the first-class cabin who appeared to be leaving Gamera for good.

<If the Urabe Administration comes out on top,> said Rebecca, <I expect we'll see more and more Gamericans immigrating to Japan.>

<Definitely. Even I, who doesn't give a damn about politics, am aware of how crucial this election is for the future of our planet. The result is obvious too. Part of the opposition is wasting its time yelling, "Urabe No!" Do they mean to say that they don't care if the world ends, as long as it means Urabe doesn't get to rule anymore?> asked Isaac.

<No way.>

<They surely don't care if innocents have to be sacrificed for the sake of their grand goals. That's how idealists usually are, right? History has proven that many times over with people like Hitler or Stalin... Although I have a feeling that horrid idealist hanging around in South Gamera might be a bit different.>

<You're trying to tell me Joker is an idealist?>

<He's trying to make us think he is, at the very least. He's been proclaiming it loud and clear. He doesn't mind sacrificing seven billion people for the sake of his ideal. This being said, I don't think Joker is that straightforward of a person.>

<What do you mean?> Rebecca asked.

<He's declared himself the "Demon King." That means he thinks his actions

are evil. That's what sets him apart from the other idealists I mentioned earlier. Have people like Hitler or Stalin ever called themselves "evil" or "demonic?" As far as I know, the only other idealist to have dubbed himself "Demon King" is Nobunaga Oda, the Japanese warlord from the Sengoku period. Idealists are always absolutely certain they are right. They get drunk on that feeling of righteousness. Everything they say, everything they do is always right. Naturally, anyone who opposes them is evil. That's the very basis of idealistic thinking. Joker is different, though. He doesn't seem to think he's in the right. He's lucid and has a sense of balance. To put it bluntly, he's perfectly sane.>

<That's all well and good, but I have a feeling that makes him even more hateful, huh.>

<That's where our opinions diverge. You think it makes him all the more hateful while I think it means there may be room for negotiation. My understanding is that Joker only acted after debating it internally for a very long time. Even after deciding to make a move, he still doesn't know whether it was the right choice or not. I wonder if he's using that clown look of his to mask his doubts.>

Having finished his discussion with Rebecca, Isaac put on his eye mask and lay down. Once he got to Japan, he'd be in the same place as the busters who were able to materialize cards above ground. He might even get to vivisect monsters. He fell asleep, thinking about all the little things he looked forward to as a researcher.



[Hiroshima Dungeon — Final Floor — Ezoe Kazuhiko]

It took us one week to reach the Final Floor of Hiroshima Dungeon, a Rank B dungeon. While we had decided to tread carefully, the main reason it had taken this long was the strength of the monsters. We had run into humanoid monsters such as onis, liches that threw magic attacks at us, and even poisonous slimes. In light novels, a party of four or five adventurers was always able to take out all kinds of monsters. In the real world, however, adjusting weapons and formations depending on the number and type of monsters we were fighting was a necessity.

“We might have been wiped out already if the Legend Rare characters weren’t with us. Thanks to them, we’re able to add a lot of variation to our basic five-role formation—tank, melee damage dealer, ranged damage dealer, magic damage dealer, and support. We’re already struggling with a Rank B dungeon. Rank A and S dungeons will be full of stronger monsters with even more unknown attack patterns.”

“As expected, we may have no choice but to gather data on each type of monster, compile it, and devise strategies tailored to each of them. Once we’re done here, we should take videos of the monsters on each floor and brainstorm solutions.”

Dungeon Busters’s most crucial role was to convey information to others. We published videos of the monsters we had fought inside the dungeons we had cleared along with the standard strategy we had devised to fight each monster.

Some journalists had once asked me why I didn’t ask for monetary compensation in order to disclose this information, but that had always been out of the question. We weren’t fighting in the dungeons for the sake of money. We fought to make sure the dungeons were wiped out. It just so happened that we made money out of it as well.

“An adventurer can’t get to Rank A unless they’re able to clear a Rank B dungeon. That makes things pretty tough. We’re probably the only ones with the ability to clear Rank B dungeons at the moment.”

The Crusaders were also doing their best, but they hadn’t even reached Rank B yet. I’d heard they were prioritizing clearing Rank D and C dungeons. In fact, I had seen on the news a few days ago that they had managed to clear the Rank C Dungeon that had appeared right inside the Parthenon.

Once we finished taking videos and pictures of the reliefs in Hiroshima Dungeon, we gathered in front of the Guardian’s room. It was possible that the Guardian would be a Rank A monster, so I materialized Akane and Emily.

“It’s a groß wölfe, a Rank A monster!” Akane yelled, warning us. “It’s one of the strongest beast-type monsters there is!”

Inside the room was a gigantic, almost-three-meter-tall wolf. Once it saw we had all entered the room, it stood up from its napping spot.

Although Masayoshi and N'gie both had their shields at the ready, they were still sent flying back due to the tremendous strength of its first blow. The wolf had simply hurled itself against the shields with its full power.

"It's fast! And how the hell is it so strong?!"

HOOOOOOWL. The gigantic wolf howled before trying to knock N'gie's shield out of his hands with its paws. Suddenly, an explosion sounded. Emily had sent a blast of fire magic right at the wolf's muzzle. It retreated, adopting a defensive posture.

"Are you okay, Masayoshi?!"

"Yeah!"

Masayoshi was a former sumo wrestler, so while he seemed to have taken a heavy hit, his robust body had prevented him from taking too much damage. He stood up, readying his shield once again. The wolf growled as it prepared to attack. It looked ready to jump at us at any moment.

"Groß wölfe can't use magic, but their speed and power are on par with those of Fenrir, the Wolf God. We won't win if we turn this into a contest of strength!" Akane explained.

"As expected of a Rank A monster. All the previous monsters we fought here look like small fries now. Its level is still within our expectations, though," I said.

After our time in Shinjuku Dungeon, we had devised and tried out several strategies to use against Rank A monsters. We had to proceed methodically in the face of a foe strong enough to blow away Masayoshi and N'gie's shields.

"First, we need to stop his movements. Akane, Emily, Hisato, Amane! You take on the beater role, just like during training!" I ordered.

"Got it!"

They forced the groß wölfe to back off incrementally with a combination of ranged attacks, using ninjutsu, magic, and, of course, Amane's whip. The monster tried to bounce off the walls and use the ceiling to increase its mobility and approach us, but in the end, it was still a beast. Using its natural fear of fire against it allowed Emily to direct the beast wherever she wished.

It finally gave up attacking from the front and dived toward us from the side. However, that was exactly what we were waiting for.

“Shield Bash!”

N’gie and Masayoshi unleashed their attack, Shield Bash, at the same time. The wolf narrowly escaped and ended up standing on its hind legs. Akira and Rinko made use of that moment of weakness to strike, dealing the final blow.

“Counted Overhand Stroke! Five! Four! Three! Two! One!”

“Kusakabe-style Sword Arts, Star Rain!”

Akira aimed overhand strokes at the wolf’s belly with both of his hands. Right, left, right... Every time he hit the monster, he retracted one of his fingers. In the end, his last blow was delivered with only one finger, which ended up piercing the wolf’s belly open.

At the same time, Rinko jumped, almost reaching the ceiling. She kicked off the ceiling, gaining speed, and thrust her sword right into the wolf’s forehead. Its brain was destroyed on the spot, and it came crashing down with a big *THUMP*.



On June 28, 2020—the same day Dungeon Busters succeeded in clearing Hiroshima Dungeon—the double election of both Houses of the Diet took place. The result was just as most people had predicted: a crushing victory for the current ruling party, the conservatives. More than two-thirds of the elected Diet members were in favor of the constitutional revision, and a plan to hold a national referendum on the question within the year was put together.

The Constitutional Democratic Party, which had opposed the constitutional change, lost a few seats but was relatively unscathed. On the other hand, the Democratic People’s Party had to deal with a crushing defeat. The Communist Party also lost some seats, while the recent New Reiwa Party, which had changed its mind and now supported the constitutional change, gained seats.

“The situation both within and outside the country is becoming harder to handle by the day. We especially need to make preparations in order to be able to guarantee our national security. As promised in our manifesto, we will put

together a Ministry of Dungeons. This ministry will be tasked with managing all dungeon-related problems, from the handling of dungeons in our own territory to the international operations that are to be conducted with the United Nations,” Urabe Seiichirou explained at the press conference held by the conservative party.

Ishihara Yukie, the very first Vice-Minister for Dungeons, turned off the TV and stepped into the bath. Droplets of water ran down her skin. No one could have guessed she was in her forties from the condition of her beautiful skin. The Dungeon Boot Camp had allowed her to regain the appearance she had when she’d first entered the Ministry of Defense.

“Even if I look young again, no one wants to embrace me, huh...?”

She added some bath oil to the water and immersed herself. Letting out a heavy sigh, she decided to change her train of thought.

Yesterday, Ezo Kazuhiko had contacted her to let her know Dungeon Busters had successfully cleared Hiroshima Dungeon. Today, Gamera’s former Command Chief had entered Japan, asking for a job. She couldn’t help but think he was a pain, bothering her when she was already extremely busy, but it was certain that hiring him would only add to Japan’s momentum.

“Planning the Olympics’s defense measures... Preparing for Japanese adventurers to go abroad... I have so much to do.”

She washed her face and stepped out of the bathtub. She didn’t know if it was due to the temperature of the water or the anticipation she felt when she thought about the fights to come, but her face felt a little flushed.



[Republic of Colombian — Barranquilla]

Barranquilla was the fourth largest city in the Republic of Colombian. Located in the north of the country, it was the capital city of the Department of Atlántico and home to around fifty million people. Every year, a carnival took place there from February to March. Even the dungeons’ appearance had not taken a toll on the Latin Gamera people’s jovial nature.

A long truck ran along Olaya Herrera Street on a day in early July when the

temperature was above thirty degrees Celsius. A man dressed in a clown outfit sat in the passenger seat and took a bite out of his empanada—South Gamerican street food—and drank some water.

“Boss, we’ll be there soon. I think the Colombian Army is awaiting us.”

Venisuela had long since become South Gamerica’s powder keg. Following their latest threat, the world had expressed its support for Sarmiento, the current Colombian president. Supportive words were easily given, of course, but when Colombian had contacted several South Gamerican governments, putting in requests for material help in the hope of receiving arms that could fend off the wyverns, the response hadn’t been too good. Offering that sort of massive military support would easily cost billions of dollars. Naturally, Colombian did not have the means to finance such an endeavor, and Gamerica was left to take on that burden. Still, no one could make that sort of decision amid the elections.

In the end, no one offered Colombian any tangible support, and after two weeks of negotiations, Colombian had no choice but to bow down to Joker and accept his terms.

“I think you’re already all clear on this, but don’t forget we’re the Legion, not a band of outlaws. Whatever you do, whether it’s going out for a meal or fooling around in town, affects the image of our army. You’d better keep that in mind.”

Most Venisuelans walked on eggshells when interacting with Joker and his men. They wouldn’t hurt you as long as you didn’t make an enemy of them. If anything, there was even a chance they would help you out in times of need.

As for the criminals Joker had liberated, a good number had already been captured or killed. Venisuela was steadily stabilizing, despite being ostracized by the rest of the world.

They finally found *it*, inside a shop located on a corner of Olaya Herrera Street. The area was sealed off, but the men guarding it were scattered around haphazardly, and the barbed wire fence didn’t even cover the whole area. Unlike most other advanced countries, Colombian was still pretty much a developing country and could not afford to spend large sums on dungeon

security. On top of that, they failed to recruit civilian adventurers, due to the poor equipment they provided to prospective adventurers. Their only option, in the end, had been to somehow put the surroundings of each dungeon in lockdown and order people not to wander too close.

“All right. Go secure accommodation and some food. Make sure to pay with US dollars,” Joker instructed.

Having received their boss’s orders, his underlings hurriedly ran off. Joker threw his cigarette to the ground and patted an anxious Colombian soldier on the shoulder.

“You worked hard,” Joker said. “We’ll go and clear it now, so rest easy, all right?”

The soldier felt as though a mafia boss had addressed him. He didn’t know how to react, unable to answer.

Despite the likelihood of assassination attempts by intelligence agencies such as the CIA and MI6, Joker—public enemy number one—was happily walking around in broad daylight without a care in the world.

At this time, the Colombian government was agonizing over the situation. Joker and his self-proclaimed army, Legion, had demanded the total cession of all dungeons located on Colombian soil. At the moment, Colombian had absolutely no way of knowing when they would be able to clear the dungeons and did not profit from them in any way, shape, or form. Many had started to think that, considering the circumstances, there was no reason not to give Joker the dungeons if it meant citizens could stay out of harm’s way. On the other hand, accepting Joker’s presence in the country came with the risk of being shunned by the rest of the world. The government half-hoped for Joker and his army to act like criminals so that public opinion would turn against them, but the Legion was perfectly behaved for the moment. They had neither stolen anything nor hurt anyone.

<We, the Legion, fight to destroy the world order. Humanity only has ten years left, no matter what. Gamera, the EU, Japan... All of you will also disappear. Bonds and real estate won’t help you then. I have one piece of advice for the rich! Enjoy your money while you still can!>

Joker's sphere of influence was currently limited to South Gameraica. The exchanges and stock markets in other areas had yet to be heavily impacted. If Colombian collaborated with him, however, it meant that Joker's next target would be Brezil. South Gameraican countries would fall to him one after the other, like dominos, at that point. If it came to this, Gameraica—along with the rest of the North American continent—would no longer be able to ignore Joker. The reason was simple: Gameraica's economy would go through a rough patch if South Gameraica stopped exporting oil, mineral resources such as rare metals, and agricultural and livestock products such as chicken and coffee beans. In fact, prices had already gone up on the forward market, and large sums in foreign currency were entering Colombian.

<Slavery has yet to be dealt with. There are more than 160 million child laborers worldwide. Ten-year-old children are being made to work all day long on coffee plantations for a few dollars a day. Ironically, human rights organization members all over the world chit-chat in endless meetings, preaching as they drink the very coffee that comes from those children's labor. Such hypocrisy makes me want to throw up. Don't you think we, the Legion, are a hundred times more righteous than those geezers?>

The scariest thing about Joker was his ability to pinpoint the world's most grotesque contradictions. A small percentage of the rich preyed on the resources of poor countries. Joker referred to this reality as "the world order" and claimed that his goal was to destroy it. Although they could not express open support, there was no doubt his words echoed in the hearts of many.

"Mr. President, Joker has entered the dungeon. The Gameraican ambassador has suggested that we try to bury him alive, but—"

"They won't budge or send money, and they still try to order us around?!" President Sarmiento spat, outraged.



[Japan Ground Self-Defense Force — Fuji Garrison]

"Impact... NOW!"

The ground shook, and thick smoke rose. The monster had received a direct hit from a shell and instantly disappeared in a puff of smoke. The man who had

been observing the situation through a monitor was pleased.

“It was a success. FH70s are effective against wyverns!”

“Moving on to the next target. This is an orc king, a Rank A monster. It’s much smaller, so it won’t be as easy!”

The three-meter-tall colossus lumbered around.

“Hitting a static monster with a shell isn’t an issue, but it may prove difficult with a moving target,” a woman whispered, eyes trained on the screen.

Ishihara Yukie, Vice-Minister of the Ministry of Dungeons, had made some time in her busy schedule to stop by and inspect the activities of the Fuji Garrison. The JGSDF was working in tandem with Dungeon Busters to experiment with monster extermination techniques. The Busters were materializing Rank A monsters they had obtained from the gacha while the army tested several modern warfare weapons on them.

“So, what does Ezo-san think about using monsters?” asked Ishihara.

“Kazu-sa— I mean, Ezo said that he’d rather avoid using them if he could help it. He’s worried that some people may reach the wrong conclusions if they see the Busters collaborating with monsters. He said this kind of misunderstanding could easily spread and scare the general population,” Kusakabe Rinko, Rank B adventurer and dungeon Buster, answered.

Every dungeon Buster obtained the ability to materialize monsters above ground. Rinko had obtained her dungeon Buster title by taking control of Kanazawa Dungeon. She had then been asked to assist the army.

“You’re right. For better or worse, he is in the limelight. If he were to start materializing monsters outside, people may raise questions, regardless of his intentions,” agreed Ishihara. “By the way, what is he up to these days?”

“He’s inside Abyss with Akira-san. They’re trying to reach Rank A, but they seem to be having a hard time. I heard the usual ranking-up method isn’t working anymore.”

“I see. Well, tell him something for me then. There’s still time. He doesn’t need to rush. And tell him not to overwork himself as well...”

Some people abroad had lost their minds trying to push past human limits and reach Rank C. When it came to Rank A, the hardships were unimaginable. No one would be able to endure all that for the sake of greed.

The same rules apply to Joker and his allies. They must also be fighting for something greater than themselves. It just so happens that this grand goal of theirs is an inconvenience for us...

Ishihara could never say such a thing out loud because of her position, but she did have some level of respect for him deep within her.

Chapter 3: The Tokyo Olympics

[Edogawa City — Rank A Dungeon Abyss]

The method for ranking up was simple. You just had to keep adding to the weight you carried and fight constantly. That was how we had managed to get from Rank F to Rank B. When it came to Rank A, however, this method did not seem to be enough.

“Which would you pick? A dangerous method that will allow you to rank-up quickly but carries a serious risk to your lives, or a relatively safe method that may end up taking a few years?” Shifu Liu asked.

In the past, we had taken his recommendation to mindlessly fight monsters, and while we had grown stronger for a while, we had finally hit a plateau. The explanation was simple: without the Rank B Dungeon Buster title, it was impossible to go above Rank B. That said, even after earning that title, it was still an extremely long, difficult journey to reach Rank A.

“That’s a foolish question. We don’t have years to waste, so we’d obviously pick the fast method.”

“Ho ho! All right. Then I shall explain the training regimen,” said Shifu Liu.

Calling the training regimen Shifu Liu proposed “insane” would still be too mild in comparison to the living hell it was.

“Keep your weighted vests as they are. You’ll constantly carry a hundred kilos, and I’ll help you out with a little pressure. Here you go!”

My body suddenly felt extremely heavy, and I had trouble breathing.

“Argh... A debuff? Dang, I feel awful,” Akira complained.

His smile was strained, and sweat was already running down his forehead. Of course, that wasn’t the end of Shifu Liu’s mad ideas.

“You’ll be fighting Rank B monsters one-on-one,” said Shifu Liu, continuing his explanation. “I will add one more rule. You are forbidden from dodging attacks.

It is time to heighten your recovery speed and build resistance to physical and magical attacks.”

“Hang on, hang on! We’re just going to die, ain’t we?”

“You will have to block their attacks. If you make a mistake while blocking and take a direct hit, you *will* die.”

“Can’t we fight the gacha monsters?” I asked.

Shifu Liu shook his head. If we fought the gacha monsters, we would invariably end up cutting corners at one point or another. This would lead to us showing openings to real foes and losing our lives, according to him. Fighting against dungeon monsters, and keeping in mind how merciless they were, would help us stay on our toes and visualize the fine line between life and death.

“This is the furthest thing from science I’ve heard,” I started. “But the body of an A-Ranker itself is already so far removed from what science deems possible that approaching this in a scientific fashion doesn’t make much sense anyway. All right. I’ll start!”

I faced an ancient mage on Floor 5 of Abyss. It sent a fireball flying my way. I stayed still on purpose and blocked the attack instead of dodging. I felt as though my skin was burning. After becoming a B-Ranker, my body had become more resistant, but the pain of getting burnt had not changed one bit. I advanced, engulfed in flames, and swung my blade.

“This...isn’t easy.”

“Ho ho. If you were a normal F-Ranker, you would have been turned to ash with this one attack. Your current body is incomparable to how you were before. You may not notice it yourself, but your body is much sturdier. You need to keep at it now,” Shifu Liu explained.

“Aniki, do you need a potion?”

“No, I can still bear it. But this method of training will make us go through a tremendous number of potions. Let’s check our stock later.”

A regular Potion could easily heal burns. From what I remembered, we

should've had around twenty thousand Potions in stock. I figured it would be safer to ask other members to help gather at least a hundred thousand.

"I'm starting to understand how so many worlds got destroyed. This is way too hard."

"We're playing on Nightmare Mode," Akira answered before adding, "My turn."

He stepped forward and exchanged places with me. Even at the rear, I could feel the scalding heat of the flames.



[Republic of Colombian — Barranquilla]

"Time for a break!"

At Joker's order, the men headed toward the Safety Zone and took out the food they had prepared from the Magic Pouch. They wore the same type of weight belt divers used, keeping them on as they ate. Although some of Joker's underlings were still stuck at Rank D, others had already reached Rank C. While they ate tamales—a South Gamerican dish made from corn and chicken—Joker went through his notes again.

From what I saw on Floor 1, this dungeon should be Rank B. This will come in handy to train my troops. The only issue will be what to do after we clear it...

He threw down the banana leaf he had been holding and lit a cigarette. He squinted, watching the smoke that rose from it, and thought about his future plans.

Venisuela still lacks supplies. The first thing to do is to turn the dungeons into food farms and get rid of starvation. I also need to recruit more comrades. I'll make sure more people get the title of Dungeon Buster and eventually send a few to Gamera. We'll need to use the Colombian mafia's channels to get them inside the country. Perhaps I should go pay them a visit once we're done here...

"Boss, it's almost time."

Their scheduled break had ended while Joker had been focused on his thoughts. He stood up and noisily cracked his neck.

“All right! Let’s head to Floor 3! Once we’re done here, the whores are on me. Keep ’em balls full, all right?”

Every one of his men cheered, fists raised in the air.

On Floor 3 of Barranquilla Dungeon, they encountered wolf monsters. The men in charge of tanking blocked the attacks while attackers slashed at the monsters with swords and axes. One wolf managed to jump over the line of shields and lunged at Joker. He caught the monster’s head and held it up with both hands.

“What a cute little puppy,” he cooed, a smile on his face. “If you sit like a good boy, I’ll give you a treat.”

GROWL.

“Aw. Not a good boy, I see.”

He suddenly twisted the monster’s head, and with a loud *CRACK*, the wolf disappeared.

“This is a good place to train D-Rankers, huh. We’re staying here for a while.”

Just as its name suggested, the Demon King’s army, Legion, made use of monsters. To be able to materialize these monsters above ground, however, one needed to have earned the title of Dungeon Buster. There were only two dungeons in Venisuela, and one was of Rank S, which made clearing it impossible. That was why Joker had decided to use the dungeons of neighboring countries to increase the number of Dungeon Busters in his army. There were four dungeons on Colombian land, one in Ekuador, and, finally, seventeen in Brezil, the most populated South Gamerican country. If the Legion could clear all of these, they would be able to establish their hegemony over South Gamerica.

This is a race against Dungeon Busters and the Crusaders. They’re ahead at the moment, but their methods won’t be accepted in South Gamerica, Africa, or the Middle East. We’ll catch up soon enough.

Joker lit another cigarette as he observed his men battling the wolves.



[Tsukuba City — Ministry of Dungeons — Dungeon Research Center]

Here at the Dungeon Research Center, an organization that had been put together at the same time as the Ministry of Dungeons, a Gamerican man was currently introducing himself—or rather, giving a lengthy speech.

“I have thrown Gamera away to focus on researching dungeons. Why? Because this country offers the best environment for dungeon research. The gears in my head turn 24-7, every day of the year, thinking only about the dungeons. Since you are fellow researchers, I am sure you can understand. Titles, fame, and money are worthless in comparison to the riddle that is the existence of the dungeons. We may even obtain proof that God exists once we understand this supernatural phenomenon! This is the ultimate research topic, the most important in the history of humanity!”

The scientist, Isaac Roland, addressed his audience using such fluent Japanese that no one would have guessed he was a foreigner from his speech. On the other hand, the blonde beauty who accompanied him introduced herself in English.

“I’m Professor Roland’s secretary, Rebecca Weisburn. As you can see, the professor is a bit of an eccentric and is utterly incompetent when it comes to matters of daily life, but I hope you will watch over him. I would also like to say that I cannot speak Japanese, so please use English if you wish to communicate with me.”

“That will not be an issue. At the very least, I can tell you that there isn’t a researcher here who doesn’t speak English at all. It would be an honor to be able to work with Gamera’s greatest genius, Professor Roland. Thank you so much for this opportunity,” the leader of the research group on magic stones answered.

The thesis that Isaac Roland had published at the end of the previous year, entitled “The Wave Equation Applied to the Connections Between the Void Space and Dungeon Maintenance Energy,” had received a great deal of attention in the scientific community for linking the way time elapsed differently inside the dungeon to quantum mechanics. Even though he was still in his twenties, no scientist would ever think to look down on Isaac.

“Okay! We should be done with introductions now. Professor Roland will not be focusing on any particular aspect but rather be in charge of studying the dungeons as a whole. This means he will be moving from team to team. Professor Roland, please let me know if you need anything. We have countless sponsors, including wealthy individuals and large companies from all over the world, so our budget is pretty much inexhaustible,” the laboratory chief explained before clapping his hands.

The Dungeon Research Center was not relying only on the funds it received from the Ministry of Dungeons. They accepted donations from all over the world. Japan was currently becoming a center of investment, and the wealthy aimed to secure their assets with these. If a nation crumbled, it would no longer be able to support its currency. As soon as trust in the state was lost, money would turn into mere scraps of paper, and if the dungeons were left unchecked, this was not an unlikely scenario.

“All right then. Without further ado... I want to go to Shinjuku Dungeon. I’ll read the documents in the car,” Isaac said, putting his arm through the sleeve of a white lab coat as he left in a hurry.

Shinjuku Dungeon, which had appeared in Hyakunincho, Shinjuku City, had not been opened to civilian adventurers, and the Research Center was currently monopolizing it. The spots at which monsters respawned and the moments when one was taken down were being observed by a high-sensitivity camera system, and research regarding the monsters and enhancement element was being conducted. The research team was also focusing on the Dungeon Core, Monster Cards, and adventurers’ bodies.

A joint research project between Japan and the EU had been put into place in cooperation with CERN—The European Organization for Nuclear Research—so every result was then shared with European teams. Much about the dungeons was still unknown, but results were slowly starting to appear. For instance, researchers had been able to make observations on the energy that triggered magic.

Scientists were also standing up to the dungeons, though in a different way than the adventurers.



[Tokyo Metropolitan Police Department — Tokyo Olympics Security Special Headquarters — Ezoe Kazuhiko]

With the Olympics coming up, every adventurer over Rank E was summoned to the Tokyo Metropolitan Police Department on July 20. The government and local authorities hoped to recruit adventurers in order to bolster security for the Olympics, which was set to kick off in four days.

“The appearance of the dungeons has forced authorities to heighten their vigilance in the face of *terrorism* on a *global* scale. Holding this celebration of peace during these times of *crisis* will become a great *legacy* in the future and leave its mark on the great history of the Olympics. So that Tokyo can prove to the world that it is indeed the *safest* city in the world and a *diverse megalopolis* that welcomes everyone regardless of nationality or culture, we...”

I wondered if I should just go home as I listened to the governor of Tokyo’s introduction speech. Honestly, I did not feel bad for thinking that either.

*Why does this granny keep throwing in English words? Is she trying to imitate that foreign language-loving comedian, *shiba Lu?*

“Ezoe-san, as the leader of Dungeon Busters and representative of the adventurers, could I ask you to make a comment?”

I was suddenly called on, so I stood up. There was no point in starting a useless confrontation here, so I decided to stick to poking a little fun at her.

“Everyone, let’s have a very *together* summer.”

Sadly, very few seemed to get my joke.

“Even if you ask us to provide assistance, civilians can’t simply arrest suspicious people as they see fit,” Amane said. “Our main job would be to stay put and wait in case the worst happens. We’d be stationed at the National Stadium and switch out with each other. Well, I guess it’s not that bad of an offer, since it means being able to watch the games for free.”

It had been decided that her team would participate on behalf of Dungeon Busters. Amane was a former police superintendent. She had plenty of

acquaintances at both the Metropolitan Police Department and National Police Agency, so she was naturally the best person for the job.

“I entered the Busters to set up an organization dedicated to handling adventurer-related crime, so this offer is a godsend. Although, I must say I did not expect these sorts of requests to start coming in for at least six more months. I assume all of this is Joker’s fault.”

“There should only be a handful C-Rankers in the world at the moment, let alone B-Rankers. However, there’s no telling whether one of them happened to have earned the Dungeon Buster title. If something happens, reach out to Akira and me immediately.”

A safe was located right next to the underground staff room temporarily set up for adventurers under the National Stadium. Inside the strictly monitored safe was an aluminum case, packed with several kinds of potions, weapons, and equipment. We should be able to fend off monsters up to Rank B without too much trouble.

“The athletes from the Kingdom of Ko and Venisuela should have gone through a very thorough check, but a little card is easy to conceal. I’m counting on you in case anything happens,” Ishihara told me.

It was finally time to kick off the Tokyo Olympic and Paralympic Games, which were set to last for around a month and a half.



[Tokyo Olympics — Opening Ceremony]

<It is finally time for the Japanese athletes to enter the stadium. During the previous Tokyo Olympics fifty-five years ago, 355 athletes competed for Japan. This time, the Japanese team is the largest it has ever been, with a total of 583 wonderful athletes who will compete in thirty-three different sports. They will surely show us their burning spirit under the blazing sun of Tokyo.>

The Opening Ceremony had started at eight in the evening, and more than sixty thousand people were gathered, their heated fervor filling the stadium. More than two hundred thousand police officers from all over the country had made the trip to Tokyo and were stationed at different spots, conducting

surveillance and controlling traffic. The media center bustled with journalists from every country in the world, broadcasting live. Of course, television stations from the Kingdom of Ko and Venisuela had also sent journalists.

“We can’t do a full background check on every single cameraman, but we did confirm everyone’s identity as well as performed extensive body checks. There hasn’t been an issue yet, but...” Ishihara Yukie, Vice-Minister of the Ministry of Dungeons, whispered, watching the ceremony through a window.

Though she was merely mumbling to herself, the man next to Ishihara reacted.

“Between His Majesty making an appearance, the Prime Minister giving a speech, and visitors from all over the world... We have prepared the best possible stage for a terrorist attack. If a single Rank A monster is thrown into this stadium, the state of the world will greatly change in a matter of minutes.”

Ishihara glanced at the man and let out a sigh.

“At the moment, one Gamerican, one Filipino, and one Sinese man have caused small incidents. None of them were adventurers, though. I have to say, I’m even more anxious right now. I was sure we’d have to handle more issues.”

“The games have barely started, although I guess the Opening and Closing Ceremonies are the most sensitive events. If I were planning an attack, I’d wait for the middle or the end of the event before striking. That’s when everyone’s vigilance is usually at its lowest.”

“I suppose that’s true for the policemen on duty inside the stadium. It’s hard to keep your guard up at all times in this scorching heat. We need to stay focused on our end.”

Ishihara’s cell phone started vibrating, and her expression darkened when she answered the call.

“Another uproar, caused by a Japanese man this time. He was flying a Rising Sun flag right outside the stadium and got into a fight with a Woorian man. The main issue is that this Japanese man is a miner,” she explained.

“Was he violent?”

“Luckily, he’s only an F-Ranker and didn’t do more than grab the Woorian man a little too strongly. Still, it doesn’t change the fact that he’s an adventurer. This is a pain. We got promoted and became a Ministry, but that doesn’t mean we can control every adventurer’s temper.”

“He let the festive mood go to his head and just had to cause an uproar, huh? I guess there are idiots everywhere,” the man said.

They exchanged looks of exasperation and shrugged.



[A Certain Place in Tokyo — Japan-Woori Foreign Ministers’ Meeting]

The Opening Ceremony of the Tokyo Olympics also served as an occasion for political leaders to discuss cross-national matters, such as Joker, the internationally active terrorist who had appeared. The world was waiting for Japan to take the lead and respond to the dungeon crisis in poor countries, like certain African nations, for instance. After giving a speech at the Opening Ceremony the previous day, Urabe Seiichirou was now pouring his energy into summits.

Meanwhile, the Republic of Woori, in spite of being one of Japan’s closest neighbors, kept pushing its anti-Japan stance as President Park did not bother to attend the Opening Ceremony, sending Foreign Minister Kang in his stead. Most countries currently had a poor opinion of Woori for supporting Joker, despite being part of the G20. As the Olympics’s host country, however, Japan could not refuse to meet with the Woorian minister. Thus, the meeting between Japan’s Minister for Foreign Affairs, Moda Toshimasa, and Woori’s Foreign Minister, Kang, started.

“If nothing is done, the world will split into two factions,” said Minister Kang. “The conservatives who wish to preserve the current order, and the revolutionaries who try to make use of the dungeons to fix the wealth disparities between the north and the south in one go. However, I believe that, in the end, both groups long for peace and the prosperity of the human race. My country, Woori, has firsthand experience of the tragedy of being torn apart, split into two halves. Yet, we have also managed to rise from the ashes and accomplish the miracle of turning into an advanced country. I believe we can

become the bridge between the conservatives and the revolutionaries. For this to happen, the conservatives need to extend their hand first. It is our hope that the Japanese government will agree to make concessions and negotiate with Venisuela and Joker.”

After hearing Minister Kang’s words, Minister Moda Toshimasa did not show his exasperation on his face but pondered how to word his answer. The Woorian minister did not seem to understand the situation the same way that he did. Still, he decided to clear that misunderstanding up.

“It appears your country and mine are not reading the current situation in the same way. We do not regard Joker or Venisuela as revolutionaries. He has used the supernatural powers he gained in the dungeons to threaten foreign countries and try to steal riches through violent means. He is nothing more than a terrorist, and we do not make concessions or negotiate with terrorists.”

The meeting ended just as it had started, with the Japanese minister and the Woorian minister remaining miles apart from one another and failing to reach an agreement on any point. One thing did change, however, since this meeting prompted Japan to adopt a full-on anti-Woori stance from that point on.

At the end of August, Japan’s very first cyclical hydrogen energy generation system would start running, and the construction of second and third plants would begin. Once Japan managed to reach a higher degree of self-sufficiency in terms of energy production, it would be able to easily offset deflation and perhaps even enter a new period of high economic growth. With the constitutional reform and the formation of an independent army on top of that, Japan would become a world leader. Building a “Great Japan” was the dearest wish of Prime Minister Urabe Seiichirou and of the whole Conservative Party.

“It can’t be helped. Let us focus on strengthening our relationship with the Oriental Republic of Sina and the Southeast Asian countries as planned. Dungeon Busters should visit the Republic of Sina and the Filipines around October as well,” Prime Minister Urabe said after listening to his minister’s report.

His expression showed that he had expected this outcome. The Oriental Republic of Sina, with its four thousand years of history, was not to be

underestimated. Compared to Woori, however, it wasn't a country that easily broke promises. Once Japan reached complete energy self-sufficiency, the sea lane of the Sinese Sea would not be as crucial as it currently was. Just one year after the start of the Dungeon Outbreak Phenomenon, the power balance in Asia was undergoing dramatic changes.



[International Stadium Yokohama — First Round of the Soccer Competition — Japan vs. The Republic of Woori]

When asked which sport was the most internationally renowned, most people would surely bring up soccer. International Stadium Yokohama was currently packed with more than seventy thousand people. Fans were always lively during soccer games, but today's match-up, Japan vs. Woori, had everyone charged up.

"Shingo-kun, how did you manage to get these tickets?" asked Mari.

"I went through Kazu-san. I couldn't think of a better place for our date."

The two high schoolers who were members of Dungeon Busters had officially started dating in July. Shingo had used his savings pay for a Japanese bike in full and had passed his motorcycle license test. Once he became a third-year student, he would be able to get a heavy motorcycle license as well as a driving license.

Although they had barely started going out, Shingo only had eyes for Mari. Several people were also ready to quite literally kill him if he ever dared make her cry.

Sex is out of the question for high schoolers. The best I can hope for is a kiss. The two had barely held hands, let alone kissed. Tonight, Shingo hoped to take things a little further.

The second half started with the scores still tied at 0-0, and the fans got even more riled up. Shingo and Mari were each holding small Japanese flags with one hand and cheering, but the Woorian team had just as many supporters. The giant screen showed both teams' fans. Suddenly, the camera stopped on Mari, zooming in on her face. She noticed and took Shingo's arm, resting her head on

his shoulder.

“It’s my first time seeing a game in a stadium. The crowd gets really crazy, huh?”

The game ended with Japan’s 1-0 victory. The lovebirds helped gather the trash after the match and happily exited the stadium. They went by the Rainbow Bridge and arrived in Odaiba. It was a little late, but they had a light dinner before going for a walk in Aomi Minami Terminal Park. It was already eleven o’clock, a little too late for two high schoolers to be out and about.

“Mom said that...as long as I get home before midnight, it was okay.”

“Then, can we stay a little longer?” Shingo asked.

They stepped onto the grass and sat on a bench, gazing into each other’s eyes. Although it was midsummer, the sea breeze blowing through the park should have been cool and refreshing, yet both Shingo and Mari felt their cheeks heating up. Shingo reached his hand to Mari’s soft, unblemished cheek, and she closed her eyes. Their shadows intertwined under the skies over the harbor, lit orange in the night.



[Tokyo Olympics — Closing Ceremony]

Before the Olympics started, plenty of potential issues had been raised, such as subway and road congestion, difficulties in directing foreign tourists, and the risk of terrorist attacks. In the end, the event had not caused much trouble and welcomed its conclusion with no major mishap in sight. The adventurers, who had been on their guard the whole time, worrying about a potential terrorist attack, finally breathed a sigh of relief.

“In two days, I’ll be off to Ishigaki-jima for three nights and four days along with all the members of Dungeon Busters and their families,” Ezo explained. “We’ll relax and use the occasion to shift gears by taking it easy at a resort for a while.”

Ishihara nodded, trying to keep her killing intent in check. She had to deal with the establishment of the Ministry of Dungeons and had forgotten the meaning of the word “rest.” On top of that, the crazy Gamerican researcher

who had recently joined them hadn't allowed her to take a decent summer vacation. And yet, the man in front of her was casually bringing up his plans to slack off.

"Is that right? Make sure I can still contact you in case of emergencies. And, you know, if you feel like it, maybe you could bring me along for a little while by using your teleportation abilities. I don't want to force your hand, but..." Ishihara trailed off.

Ezoe laughed and nodded before exiting the Olympic Stadium. The festive mood lingered, and plenty of tourists were walking around. It would probably remain this way for a few more days.

He debated going to Shinjuku or Roppongi for a drink, but he figured he wouldn't be able to settle down there and decided to go to a bar around Mizue Station instead.

"Hmm?"

He was heading to the toilet to use Teleportation when he suddenly felt as though someone was watching him and turned around. A man, a foreigner, stood one hundred meters down on the other side of the crowded street. Next to him was a young girl. The strange thing was the girl's hair color. It was blue, but the color looked so natural that it was hard to believe it had been dyed. There were plenty of people donning flashy outfits, perhaps because the Closing Ceremony had just ended, so she did not stand out too much. Still, Ezoe's eyes were glued to her for some inexplicable reason.

"Who the heck...are they...?" he whispered, in spite of himself.

Unlike Shishido Akira, Ezoe wasn't able to sense others' strength. However, he still felt as if the air around those two was out of the ordinary.

For a split second, he thought he saw the corners of the man's mouth turn upward. The next moment, they had both put on clown masks. Ezoe dashed toward the man. Although his brain told him it wasn't possible, his instincts had recognized the other man instantly. Before Ezoe was able to cover fifty meters, a group of foreigners cut into his path. If a B-Ranker like himself crashed into them, they would surely die. He had no choice but to stop.

“Fuck! Get out of the way!” Ezoë yelled.

The group of foreigners—they seemed to be Sinese—appeared to be drunk, and it took Ezoë quite some time to get past them. When he finally stepped foot on the other side of the road, the two clowns had already disappeared.



[Ishigaki-jima — Ezoë Kazuhiko]

Dungeon Busters was an SME with sixty-eight employees, including both full-time and part-time employees, but its earnings were on par with large corporations. In one above ground day, the company earned around two hundred million yen, which meant over forty billion yen a year. Needless to say, a lot of this money went into paying the adventurers, feeding them, and maintaining their facilities. Dungeon Busters had a return on assets of around eight percent. For a company that had been created as the extension of a personal business, this was already more than enough benefit.

“No need to overthink the cost. Enjoy yourselves. I don’t mind spending a few hundred million on this trip,” I said.

“Ezoë-san,” General Manager Mukai cut in immediately. “Having a company trip is all right, but there is no company in Japan that would spend over one million yen per employee. Please spare a thought for me. I’m the one who’ll have to explain this spending to the tax office.”

Some adventurers became depressed or developed PTSD from the stress of being inside the dungeons. The members of Dungeon Busters were able to maintain a stable state of mind mainly thanks to the considerable amount the company spent on recreational activities for its employees. General Manager Mukai also understood this, but the civil servants he dealt with tended to operate solely on precedent and required a great deal of explanation to understand how adventurers lived. Without General Manager Mukai and his extensive knowledge—as a former bank employee, he knew as much as most tax counselors—I would have likely given up on being an adventurer ages ago.

“Mukai-san, it’s all thanks to you and the other office workers that we’re able to dive inside the dungeons without worry. Please, enjoy your time with your family.”

Many adventurers had yet to marry, but I had allowed them to bring a date anyway. Some did not have a significant other to bring while some had way too many partners to be able to pick one. Either way, I let all of them individually decide how to handle things.

What about me then? Well, I was alone, obviously. I planned to surprise Vice-Minister Ishihara and bring her here for a while, but because of her position, she couldn't openly come to Ishigaki-jima. Once we reached the hotel, I intended to go get her with my teleportation skill so she could enjoy the beach. If she were to be found out, it might turn into an issue, but as long as she didn't leave a trail, there would be no problem.

"Thank you for choosing our hotel for your stay once again, Ezoe-sama," the manager of the Ishigaki Grand Continental Resort Hotel greeted us as we entered the hotel.

We were a big group of around a hundred, including family members and others. On top of that, we had already visited this same hotel earlier this year in March. We'd spent a lot when factoring in the rooms, food, and services such as massages that had been recommended, so the hotel must've considered us very important customers.

"So... Why the hell did you guys bring so much stuff, Mutsuo?" I asked.

It seemed Mutsuo and his friends had sent their luggage over in advance, and I could see some electronic equipment piled up.

"We brought cameras and computers to shoot and edit videos. I had to make sure we could handle 4K video editing, so they're equipped with the best graphic cards on the market and have 64 GB of RAM."

"Why would you need that?" I asked after a pause.

"To film our vacation in Ishigaki-jima and upload it, obviously! Mari-shi has been incredibly popular lately, so if we put out a video of her in a swimsuit, we may just reach ten million vie—"

He stopped abruptly, probably sensing the killing intent oozing from behind him. Mutsuo nervously looked behind him. Mari glared at him, arms crossed. She was a D-Ranker, fairly close to Rank C. To put it bluntly, she was a thousand

times stronger than Mutsuo.

“You’re gonna have to get on your knees and beg Mari and Shingo if you really want that footage,” I said with a sarcastic laugh, patting Mutsuo’s shoulder.

Birds of a feather flock together. True to the saying, the IT department of the Busters was a gathering of otaku. I hadn’t really complained about it since they got the job done and helped create a relaxed atmosphere, but General Manager Mukai seemed to handle them like a bunch of problem children.

“Let’s gather for a barbecue on the beach tonight. After that, you’re all free to enjoy your time as you see fit. Ishigaki’s shopping center, Misakicho, is right here if you take a taxi.”

I stepped into my room and materialized Akane. I’d call Emily and the others before the barbecue. I assumed Emily would probably stick with Mari and enjoy Ishigaki-jima after that. As for Senyath... Well, I couldn’t really allow it to walk around.

Akane was already wearing clothes appropriate for a southern island vacation. In fact, she was more or less wearing a swimsuit. It was all right for her to be dressed like that in front of me, but it would be a bit much for other men to see. I draped a shawl over her shoulders and watched it droop.

“It’s 2 p.m... We still have four hours...”

I carried her to the bed and pushed her down.

* * *

We had rented out a corner of the private beach and set up several portable stoves. We had prepared enough food for three hundred people, mainly grade 2 and 3 Ishigaki beef but there was also fish and plenty of vegetables.

Everyone held up their glasses.

“To the successful Olympics and the future of Dungeon Busters... CHEERS!”



Ishihara Yukie, the Vice-Minister of the Ministry of Dungeons, whom I had brought as a guest, gave a toast. I had teleported to the spot in Kudanshita we had agreed upon ten minutes ago. Since we had rented out this space, she wouldn't be seen by anyone else. I had booked an extra room without specifying any name as well, so she would sleep there tonight and return to Tokyo tomorrow evening.

"Shingo-dono, outdoor cooking is a man's job," Senyath explained. "If you cannot properly cook some meat, you will never become a respectable manservant."

"I am *not* a servant!" Shingo yelled.

Senyath wore a—*cat-sized?*—casual blazer and gave Shingo directions as he tried to cook meat. It wasn't wrong. Grilling meat on the barbecue was a man's job. Men were busy cooking thick slices of meat on the other stoves. As for Mutsuo and his friends, they were busy catching it all on camera. I wanted to forget about the dungeons for the span of a holiday...or at least that was what I'd hoped to do when Ishihara approached me.

"Ezoe-san, could I talk to you for a second? There's something I need to tell you before we get too drunk," she said.

"I'm guessing you mean work?"

"Yes. It's about that man you assume to be Joker."

I had already reported spotting a man who could have been Joker on Shinanomachi's main street on the day of the Tokyo Olympics Closing Ceremony. Since we had been over a hundred meters apart, I hadn't been able to see his face in detail.

"He has dark brown hair, appears to be around thirty, and is accompanied by a blue-haired girl. However, that man did not do anything and simply put on a clown mask... It's regrettable, but neither the Ministry of Land, Infrastructure, Transport, and Tourism nor the police will make a move based on this. We're continuing to be wary of potential terrorist attacks, but nothing more can be done at this point."

"I expected as much," I said. "That was just my gut feeling. I'm thankful that

you tried to discuss it with the Ministry and the police.”

“You seem so sure of yourself, though. Why is that?” Ishihara asked.

“The air around them was just that different,” I said after a while. “I’m not sure how to explain it. It felt the same as spotting a lion in a flock of sheep. And that blue-haired girl... She’s probably a Legend Rare character.”

I closed my eyes and recalled the events of that day. The crowd was a blurry mess in my memories. Only two figures stood out distinctly. They had put on their clown masks while looking right at me. It was only natural that I’d assume it was Joker, or at least, someone related to him.

“Do you think you could take him in a fight?” Ishihara asked.

I thought about it for a second and shook my head.

“I don’t know. Akira and Shifu Liu seem to be able to sense their opponent’s strength just by looking at them, but I don’t have that kind of ability. The only thing I can say for sure is that he’s not a crazy terrorist who acts without thinking. He wouldn’t have quietly watched if he were. I think he might have come to check on me. Perhaps he was even inviting me to head to Venisuela to pursue him...”

“When an adventurer wants to leave the country, they must first obtain the permission of the Ministry of Dungeon. It’s the law. I’m not letting you go to Venisuela,” said Ishihara.

The day would come when I would have no choice but to face Joker. I assumed the CIA, MI6, and other such agencies were planning to assassinate him quietly, but I would eventually have to settle this with my own two hands. That’s what my gut was telling me. I was certain of it.



[Ishigaki-jima — Kinouchi Mari]

Shingo-kun had brought his parents and little sister along, but I only had my mom with me. He must have thought we’d get lonely because he immediately introduced us to his family. Since we attended the same school and worked together as members of Dungeon Busters, our mothers seemed to have a lot to

talk about and were happily chatting. I was glad to see my mom enjoying herself.

“My son has changed a lot in the past few months. I think Ezo-san and the others have had a positive influence on him, but you’re the main reason he made the effort to change. I’m really thankful, Mari. As his partner, please take good care of him from now on,” Shingo-kun’s dad told me, a serious look on his face.

My face turned bright red and I stuttered a bit as I assured him I would.

His parents approve of our relationship...

Shingo-kun was also congratulated by other members of the Busters. Most of them were like Senyath-chan, though, and encouraged him to get even stronger. Akira-san even wanted to teach him new moves.

“Ho ho ho! You have some potential, young lad. If you keep training diligently, you’ll become a great help, even inside Rank S dungeons. You’re much better than Ezo, at the very least. That’s for sure,” Shifu Liu told him.

“You reached Rank D, so your body has become quite sturdy, but you’re still lacking when it comes to fighting skills. If you were to enter a Shinmyoukan worldwide tournament, you’d probably reach the top four. When we go back to Tokyo, I’ll make some time and teach you karate techniques,” Akira-san said.

“It’s good to seek strength, but always remember that it won’t be enough. You should practice Kusakabe-style waterfall meditation to discipline your heart as well,” Rinko-san added.

“Shingo-dono, you should be thankful,” Senyath-chan said. “Since they’ve been kind enough to provide you with the necessary environment for growth, the rest is up to you. I highly recommend you train so hard that you end up six feet under.”

“That’s a pretty good idea. How about going to heaven and begging the gods to give you a cheat ability?” Emily-chan teased him.

“I’d be dead then!”

Emily-chan and Senyath-chan seemed to enjoy Shingo-kun’s reactions and

teased him all the time. Still, their words seemed to somehow motivate him, so it was a good thing. As for me, Shingo-kun's place in my heart kept growing bigger and bigger.

"How nice. Are the two of you going on a date tomorrow?" my mom asked me, all smiles.

Now that we were here in Ishigaki-jima, enjoying a fun trip with everyone, it was hard to believe that we had still been struggling to support ourselves and buy food a year ago. The dungeons were a big issue, but I still couldn't help but feel thankful for them bringing us closer to Kazu-san like this.

"You don't have to hold back because of me, you know," she added. "I'll be enjoying the hotel's spa with Yamaoka-san, so go have fun."

Emily-chan will probably hang with us as well. It would be fun if the three of us went diving.



[Tropics Bar — Ezo Kazuhiko]

After the barbecue, it seemed a lot of the bachelors—including Akira—headed to Misakicho. Although Akira seemed frivolous at first sight, he actually had everything together, so it was probably fine to leave things to him.

I didn't join them, instead having a glass of whiskey at the hotel's bar. Vice-Minister Ishihara sat next to me. The bartender seemed to want to give us some privacy and stood as far from us as he could. There were no other customers around us either.

"What's with this atmosphere?" she asked.

"We're just two adults having a drink together. Don't worry. I'm a bit of a coward, so I wouldn't dare hit on someone like you."

"You sure are. Oh well, I don't mind. I'm glad I finally had the chance to forget about work for a while. I'll probably spend the day lazing around at the spa tomorrow. Please take me back to Tokyo after dinner."

I was not acting this way because of a lack of experience. In fact, I had had plenty of lovers before. I had no intention of looking at Ishihara that way,

though. I didn't see her as a woman, but rather as an important partner in my fight against the dungeons.

"There are only two Rank B dungeons left in Japan, one in Sendai and one in Miyakonojo. Then there's the Rank C dungeon in Nagoya and the Rank D dungeon in Hakata..." I paused. "We can get rid of these four within the year. The Rank A dungeon Abyss and the Rank S dungeon Avaritia will probably take us some more time, though."

As soon as I said this, Ishihara lowered her voice and switched back to Vice-Minister mode.

"Clearing dungeons inside the country is important, but you should start working abroad soon. As soon as the Paralympics end, I want you to go check out the Republic of Sina's dungeon. It's located right on Dūnhuà Lù, one of Taipei's most prominent avenues. They've been going around the issue by controlling traffic, but they seem to be having a difficult time finding alternative routes that lessen congestion issues. They want the dungeon completely gone."

"They want to erase the dungeon? Well..." I paused. "I don't really mind, but what do we stand to gain, then?"

"We're still negotiating with them at the moment. The Japanese government wants the Republic of Sina to give up its claim on the Senkaku Islands. Compensation for the Busters will only be traveling and lodging expenses, though."

"Does that mean the government will owe us a favor?"

"You'll be doing it to better your reputation. As the situation stands now, Dungeon Busters will end up monopolizing every dungeon in Japan. You will pocket hundreds of billions of yen every year without doing a thing. Do you think public opinion will see that in a positive light? Even if Japan eventually nationalizes the dungeons, you'll be keeping ownership for the next few years. If you want the public to accept that, you need to improve your image. Working without compensation for the good of the country is more likely to get the people on your side than merely clearing dungeons and reaping the benefits."

"Ha ha... We are to show our patriotism, huh?" I asked. "I agree, though. Adventurers, just like the JSDF, must be loved by everyone. At least for now."

In light novels, people tended to casually enter dungeons, farm magic stones, roll the gacha, and go home happily, their pockets full of potions and items. The real world didn't work like that, however. It was only a matter of time before A-Rank monster cards were classified as weapons of mass destruction. Most countries would also try to control strong adventurers and use them as single-man armies. The masses would then cower in fear and reject adventurers.

Still, when you took the considerable advantages of exploiting dungeons into account, it was impossible to avoid going down this path. It was human nature to always seize the opportunity in front of you in spite of the potential future drawbacks.

"Enough business talk. I heard that this bar served a drink that won a prize in the Awamori Cocktail Contest," Ishihara said before ordering one.

The bartender started masterfully shaking her drink. I also emptied my glass and ordered a cocktail. I wasn't usually that fond of sweet drinks, but I decided to enjoy the Tropics's specialty tonight.



[A Certain Place in Venisuela]

"Have you heard about the story *Omela's Prosperity*?" the man wearing clown makeup asked, eyes staring at the camera.

The red makeup made it seem as if the corners of his mouth were curled upwards, but his eyes were deadly serious. If anything, you could see the anger in his eyes.

"Once upon a time, long ago and far away, was a town named Omelas. Its inhabitants thought it was a paradise. Everyone was healthy and happy, living in delight. A bell chimed, resonating through the festive city and filling everyone's heart with never-ending bliss. All children grew up receiving love and affection from everyone around them."

"But where did Omelas's peace and prosperity come from?" you may ask," Joker continued. "Well, under the city was a small room. That basement room had no windows, only one door, and was closed off with a heavy lock. It was barely lit, a small amount of light pouring through a little gap in the wall. Inside

that room was a child, sitting alone on the floor. No one could tell if that child was a boy or a girl. They appeared to be around six years old, but they were actually ten years old. Lacking proper nourishment, the child had barely grown.”

“That child,” Joker carried on, “hadn’t been born in that small basement. They could remember the warmth of the sun and the loving voice of their mother. That’s why they kept calling out to the people outside the room. ‘Please! Let me out! I’ll be good! I promise I’ll be good!’ The citizens of Omelas never answered the cries of the child. In time, the child became unable to scream anymore. Their limbs were incredibly thin, and their belly was distended. All the child was given each day to survive was a meager half-full bowl of cornmeal and animal fat. They hadn’t been given clothes, and they shivered, all alone in the basement.”

“Why did they treat that child so poorly?” Joker asked. “That’s what you’re wondering, right? Well, the people of Omelas knew the child had to stay there. Some of them knew why. Some didn’t. But everyone was clear on one thing: for the town to remain prosperous and peaceful, the scenery beautiful, the people amicable and kind, the children healthy, the scholars wise, the workers skilled, the harvest bountiful, and even the weather pleasant, that single child had to bear the misfortune of the whole town.”

The clown halted his story briefly and lit a cigarette. He let out a puff of smoke before looking straight into the camera and continuing.

“If you were a citizen of Omelas, what would you do? ‘Making that poor kid bear all that misfortune is horrible! Let’s free them!’” Joker paused. “Well, it would be easy to make this kind of declaration, but letting that child out of the basement would mean breaking the peace of the city and bidding farewell to its prosperity. Many would become destitute and suffer from starvation. Jealousy and mistrust would plague the city, as people become unable to fulfill their desires. Naturally, you also would go through these hardships. Would you still free this child?”

“Our world is the city of Omelas. The diamonds worn by glamorous Hollywood actresses are mined by children in Africa. Silica, the main ingredient of silicon, is also mined by people paid a mere three hundred dollars a month. These people enter mines in spite of the risk of catching tuberculosis for such a

ridiculous salary. And yet, the rest of the world refuses them better compensation. After all, the materials will also become more expensive if wages are increased, and many industries will suffer from the blow. If you're able to watch this video, you are undoubtedly a citizen of Omelas."

"Privileged people of advanced countries call me a terrorist. To protect their peace and prosperity, they need someone else to bear hardships. They think that allowing me to free that someone will destroy their way of life... And they're right. In the eyes of the citizen of Omelas, I would naturally be a terrorist. Still, I would like you to ask yourself a question. Between the citizens of Omelas, who are ready to sacrifice a small child to preserve their own happiness, and me, the one trying to break this cycle, who's truly evil?"

The camera was turned off, and the clown put out his cigarette. In fantasy stories, the Demon King would patiently wait for the hero to come to fight him. A real Demon King had no business waiting. He'd try to appeal to the hearts of the masses and have them doubt the hero.

Joker was biting into an apple when his underling walked in.

"Boss, the preparations have been made. We're awaiting your orders."

"Great, we're finally ready. Time to deal with Brezil."

The four dungeons located in Colombian had already fallen into his hands. The D-Rank dungeon had already been cleared, and progress had been made on the C-Rank dungeon. Soon, he'd have more Species Limit Breakers and dungeon Busters in his army. Once that happened, Joker would be able to bring forth many more monsters on the surface. If he threw a thousand Rank A monsters at them, the Brazilian army wouldn't last long.

"Just to be safe, have the Colombian army remain on standby close to the Caribbean Sea. Once we're done with Brezil, we'll attack Panana. I wonder what Gamera will do once we take control of the Panana Canal and seal it off," Joker said before letting out a dark chuckle and leaving the room.



[Venisuela — Capital City, Caracas — Executive Office of the President]

Nicolai Clyde, who had been acting as temporary president, had officially

been appointed President of the Republic of Venisuela. His first job was to stabilize the country and start building relationships with countries in North Africa and the Middle East. The Slave Collar he wore sometimes forced him to take action regardless of his will. However, he wasn't experiencing too much anguish at the moment.

Build a country where the inhabitants won't have to go hungry, suffer from the cold, or be ruled by violence.

That was the order Clyde had been given, and it ended up aligning with his own wishes. He had made use of the dungeon item Jointly Sealed Covenant to get rid of all corrupt officials in one blow. Police forces were now working to the best of their abilities, and order was being restored. If he could manage to revive the economy, everything would be fine. He just needed foreign currency to make it happen.

"Mr. President, we have received an answer from the United Arabian Alliance. They have promised to invest if we stop magic stone production in every dungeon. They're ready to invest one hundred billion dollars at the moment."

That was good news. Middle Eastern countries relied heavily on their oil exports. If every country was able to undergo an energy transition and switched to using magic stones, the Middle East would revert back to a barren desert. He had expected that the oil tycoons wouldn't hesitate to pay up in this situation, and he had been right on the mark. With that money, he should be able to kick-start the Venisuelan industry.

"We need to focus on electricity first. Ask the Republic of Woori to send us skilled engineers so we can reopen power plants as soon as possible. We also need working oil refineries."

Although the Republic of Woori could boast about its technical expertise, its economy was currently in shambles. If Venisuela requested engineers be sent in exchange for Gamerican currency, the Republic of Woori wouldn't be in a position to refuse. If Venisuela was able to seize Brezil, the biggest agricultural country in South Gamerica, the food shortage would also be dealt with in one fell swoop.

"How ironic. In the end, it's not one of the many people preaching justice and

freedom but a villain who calls himself the Demon King who saved our country...”

Adventurers could influence the economic situation of whole nations. This truth was sure to shock the world. From now on, a very specific type of human resource—adventurers—would become a country’s source of power. Clyde wondered if, on top of the current adventurer initiative system, he should try to incorporate adventurer training courses in the school system. He’d discuss that idea with his ministers at the next meeting.



[Brezil — State of Roraima — BR-174]

With a land area of over 8.5 million square kilometers and a population of over two hundred million people, the Federative Republic of Brezil was the largest country in South Gameraica. While it had the twelfth largest economy in the world, its GDP per capita was only around nine thousand dollars—too low in comparison to most advanced countries. Brezil was part of BRICS, and for a long while, had managed to maintain an impressive rate of economic growth. In recent years, however, it had been going through a slump, even experiencing periods of recession and negative growth.

The political scene had also been thrown into turmoil after a large scandal involving a prominent oil tycoon had come to light. People had sought a strong leader in these times of low economic growth and corruption. This political climate had allowed one man to rise in power.

In January 2019, the far-right politician Joaquín Borges came into office. As soon as he started his term, he pushed his free-market agenda, giving maximum priority to implementing economic policies. He also made headlines due to his radical statements; he celebrated past dictatorships, referring to these years as “glorious times,” and explained that women should not be paid as much as men as they could get pregnant. Such statements were criticized by many in Brezil, but this did not stop Borges from securing passionate supporters.

“Demon King? Don’t make me laugh! He’s just a delusional terrorist!” Borges yelled.

After Venisuela fell into Joker’s hands and Nicolai Clyde officially took office,

Borges addressed the rest of the world, harshly condemning the country. Although the EU wasn't usually receptive to this kind of vulgar attitude, it vocally supported Brezil this time around. The saying "the enemy of your enemy is your friend," was truly accurate. Japan also showed support for Brezil, publicly condemning Venisuela.

Although Borges was very vocal about the situation, it wasn't clear whether he intended to strongly oppose Venisuela. He had ordered the Brezilian diplomats stationed in Venisuela to come back and closed off the border, but that was about it. The main reason for this apparent inaction was that moving the army was not a very pragmatic choice in Brezil's situation. In fact, attacking Venisuela in the midst of its economic collapse did not have any benefits. It wasn't even assured that Borges would emerge victorious if he did engage in an armed conflict because the Brezilian army wasn't all that well equipped in the first place.

A country the size of Brezil had no choice but to spend tremendous amounts on its military. Conscription was mandatory for Brezilian men, and the army was 198,000 men strong. The navy and air force effectively had to be added to get the full number of soldiers. Due to this, the military budget of Brezil was around twenty-eight billion dollars when its GDP was around 1.885 trillion dollars. Most of that amount was spent on personnel expenses, so the army was constantly suffering from a lack of funds.

This was part of the reason Venisuela's blitzkrieg tactics and speedy invasion of Colombian had given Brezil a huge shock. With monsters thrown into the mix, it became possible to fight a modern-day army without having to spend huge amounts of money. Keeping them in their card form most of the time almost meant that spending money on food and transportation wasn't necessary. Every country that struggled with financing their army, Brezil included, naturally wanted to incorporate monsters into their own forces. Yet, an obstacle stood in their way. They had no way to materialize monster cards above ground.

Only those who have earned the dungeon Buster title can materialize monsters outside of the dungeons.

Right as Brezil was about to belatedly start nurturing dungeon adventurers

who could fulfill this condition, the Colombian tragedy repeated itself once again.

“What are these buses doing here?”

The BR-174 was a federal highway that went through Boa Vista—the capital of the State of Roraima, located in the northern part of Brazil—and ended at the Venezuelan border. In September of 2020, that border had been strictly closed off, and several units of the Brazilian army were guarding the area. One Brazilian soldier noticed three buses heading toward the barricade and was slightly puzzled at the sight. They stopped two hundred meters away from the border’s checkpoint, and several armed men stepped out. The Brazilian soldier immediately raised the alarm.

“Finally here... Well, shall we start?” Joker said, getting off the bus and leisurely watching the Brazilian soldiers hurriedly pointing their guns at him.

Joker threw down his cigarette and spread out a deck of cards as though he were about to do a magic trick. Monsters appeared on the cards, and the soldiers were sent flying. A popping noise sounded as a despairing sight greeted the poor soldiers. Gigantic wolves, one-eyed giants armed with clubs, and wyverns fell upon their enemies.

“These guys are soldiers. They should be ready to face death at any time. Finish them all off,” Joker ordered. “Don’t kill the civilians in Boa Vista, though. They’re to stay alive and continue to diligently pay their taxes for us.”

“Boss, please wear a bulletproof vest at the very least!” one of his underlings said, handing him the vest.

Joker ignored him. He was a Species Limit Breaker. He wouldn’t die so easily, even if he did suffer some bullet wounds. If he ended up dying here, though, it would just mean he wasn’t all that strong anyway, so that wouldn’t matter.

“You guys should be careful instead. Don’t go getting killed off in such a place. I still have much to show you all. Follow me!” he said, stepping casually toward the border, his men behind him.



[Capital of Brazil, Brasília — Alvorada Palace]

News of the Legion's attack immediately reached the president. President Borges called on the National Security Council to consider his options. Although the Brazilian army's equipment was outdated, they still had the strongest land, naval, and air forces in South America. If the American army joined them, they'd be able to repel Joker easily.

Borges went through the American ambassador to request that troops be sent. He also sent word to Argentina, the southernmost South American country, asking for help. He then had to plan delaying tactics. The Americans weren't currently thinking of anything but the presidential election. In the event they did not dispatch troops, Brazil had to find a way to stop Joker's offense and create an opportunity to retaliate.

"Joker's Legion is already closing in on Boa Vista. Assuming they'll keep moving down the BR-174... We should set up the defensive line here," the Chief of the General Staff said, pointing at a map.

Everyone agreed. Brazil was blessed with natural defenses. If someone tried to attack from the north, the go-to strategy was to make use of these natural defenses to set up a line of defense.

"We'll set up the defense line around Manaus, in the State of Amazonas. The whole state will act as a defensive zone. Have land, air, and naval forces collaborate. Make sure to stop Joker there, no matter what."

The enormous Amazon jungle lay in the west, and the vast State of Amazonas was in the south. The State of Amazonas was so ridiculously large that not only land and air forces but also the navy could be deployed in that single state. However, Manaus was an economically influential city in which foreign businesses were continually investing. Evacuating the population as fast as possible was crucial.

"One month," the president continued. "In one month, Manaus will enter the rainy season. We don't know how much of an impact the rain will have on the monsters, but Joker himself is still human. The heavy rains of the Amazon should have some impact on him."

"Mr. President, what should we tell the citizens?"

In spite of their current issues, Brazil was still part of BRICS. The country was

also home to plenty of journalists. President Borges would have liked to control the information flow and limit coverage, but this method was likely to have an adverse effect since anyone was able to run their mouth on social media.

“Contact every TV channel and media company immediately. We’ll be calling an emergency press conference.”

If there was no way to hide the news, it was better to act fast and announce everything as early as possible in order to limit the chaos. He also had to devise countermeasures to avoid riots, panic buying, and price gouging. The wealthy would most likely flee when they heard a war was starting, going abroad in their private jets, but regular citizens did not have this option. If the country wasn’t able to protect them, many would end up losing their lives.

“We’ll declare a state of emergency and put martial law into effect in major cities, like Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo. We also need to make sure there are minimal logistic issues. I won’t forgive anyone who tries to use the situation for their own ends.”

The president uttered orders in quick succession as his aides went to isolate themselves in another room to draft speeches. Most ministers reached for their cellphones in the last few minutes of calm they had, contacting their families and urging them to leave the country.

“O Lord, please bless our country’s future...” President Borges prayed, cross in hand.



[State of Roraima — State Capital, Boa Vista]

Many sounds filled the city—crying children, gunshots, soldiers screaming in Portuguese. They would not bow down to the oppressor, they said.

Name: Translation Jelly
Rarity: Rare
Description: After eating this jelly, the user will be able to understand any language for 72 hours. The Translation Jelly is not konjac-based.

“You guys eat it too. First, we need to secure gas and food supplies. Pay with Gamerican dollars, but make sure to exchange some for Brazilian reals, just to be safe. Oh, and feel free to kill armed soldiers, but don’t you dare touch schools or hospitals,” said Joker.

“Boss,” one of his underlings reported. “We’re going to need some more time to fully disarm their army up north. I also need to notify you that the first group in charge of surplus goods transportation departed.”

The Venisuelan economy was on the path to recovery, but the country still suffered from a shortage of goods. The lack of toilet paper, for instance, was especially severe. Joker’s men had bought the piles of toilet paper that were lined up in Boa Vista’s supermarkets and shipped them out to Venisuela immediately.

The Legion’s ultimate goal was to put half of the planet under its direct control. They had no intention to forcefully requisition goods in a place like Boa Vista. After all, the citizens of Boa Vista would eventually become part of the Legion’s empire as well.

“Word of our attack must have reached the central government by now. The president will likely call a press conference and use the mass media to blame us. Our side needs to upload a video as well. Show the state of the city. As for the title, it shall be...”

A name that will ring a bell not only in Brezil but also in the whole of South Gamerica...

Joker thought about what words could represent the Legion’s true nature and suddenly brightened, dancing happily where he stood.

“Let’s pay our respects to the great Simón Bolívar and go with ‘Libertadores!’ Hya ha ha!!!” He burst out laughing at the name he had come up with.

South Gamerica had managed to gain independence from European rule thanks to a group of revolutionists called the Libertadores, or Liberators. A man who had nothing in common with the revolutionaries of old was proclaiming himself the successor of these great men everyone in South Gamerica knew about. This time, his enemies weren’t only European nations but the whole world.

There was only one reason Joker hadn't been attacked from all sides yet. No one knew how many monsters he had under his control and how strong they were.

"We'll make Brezil fall as fast as possible."



[September 2020 — Miyakonojo, Miyazaki Prefecture]

After finishing up our Olympics security duties, we members of Dungeon Busters held a meeting to discuss future plans and decide who would be in charge of each project. Clearing the B-Rank dungeons of Miyakonojo and Sendai was the most important task. However, it was decided that Kirihara Amane's team—which was mostly made up of former police officers—would not be joining, as the police forces had decided to put together an adventurer crime brigade. On the other hand, Amane's party was tasked with clearing the Rank D dungeon of Hakata on its own before focusing on the brigade. Clearing a whole dungeon on their own would surely help them build up their self-confidence as well.

"So the rest of us will head to Miyakonojo, right? I have a question, though. How come their airport is called 'Bougainvillea?'"

Miyazaki Airport was often affectionately referred to as "Miyazaki Bougainvillea Airport" as an homage to the businessman who had dedicated his life to revitalizing tourism in Miyazaki. He had used the bougainvillea as Miyazaki's symbol to stimulate tourism.

I had visited Miyazaki several times myself. The prefectural governor—a former entertainer—had made an effort to popularize Miyazaki's specialties and tourist attractions in recent years. Nowadays, you could eat chicken nanban—a chicken dish served with a tartar sauce—pretty much anywhere in Japan.

Miyazaki was still hot in September. We stepped out of Bougainvillea Airport and saw nicely spaced rows of palm trees as well as buses going all over the prefecture. Still, we didn't hop into the bus heading to Miyakonojo. The city of Miyakonojo was even larger than Tokyo, which meant that, if we took the bus now, we'd be stuck using taxis to get around for the whole trip.

“I reserved rental cars. This way,” I said.

We turned right after exiting the airport. If you continued to the right after passing Miyazaki Airport Station, you reached a row of car rental shops, where I intended to get several SUVs.

This time, Akira, Rinko, Masayoshi, Hisato, and their parties would all be participating. That made us a large group of twenty. I had decided to get everyone to come in order to give all parties real, hands-on practice at clearing dungeons. Eventually, each party would need to clear dungeons all over the world. They needed to build up as much experience as they could beforehand.

“Miyakonojo City is located roughly one hour from here, but I’d like to stop somewhere on the way. Can you all add this address to your GPSs?” I asked.

“Kiyotakecho? Why are we going there, Kazu-san?”

“Since we came all the way to Miyazaki Prefecture, we obviously have to go try the ramen that’s only available here.”

“Is this why you picked a flight that would land around noon...?” Rinko asked after letting out a sigh, exasperated.

Shut up. I don’t care what you guys think. It’s unthinkable to come to Miyazaki for work without stopping by Furaiken Kano’s main restaurant.

* * *

We left the airport, and instead of getting on the highway, headed south down scenic roads. After a while, the restaurant was in sight.

“We’ll have large tonkotsu ramen with every topping you have. For everyone.”

Although we were past lunchtime on a weekday, Furaiken Kano’s main restaurant was fairly busy. Reservations were needed, so I had contacted the restaurant ahead of time and saved spots for all twenty of us. We came through the door at the promised time, and I immediately ordered for everyone. The large tonkotsu ramen were 910 yen per person. Adding mustard greens, boiled eggs, bean sprouts, and roasted pork was 490 yen, which brought the total to 1400 yen per person.

“It was a bit cheaper ten years ago, but I guess it makes sense with the shop becoming so popular,” I said.

“Aniki, you visited Miyazaki in the past?” Akira asked.

I nodded. I’d already been to Miyakonojo once. It had been a short while after I’d gone independent. My first time in Miyazaki had been when I was hired by a certain alcoholic drink company to train their staff. One of my university friends worked in that company’s HR department and had been the one to offer me the job.

“Whoa! That’s one rich tonkotsu ramen!” Rinko exclaimed.

“Sure is! Get me one more bowl! Bring some gyoza and fried rice as well!” Masayoshi added.

Usually, Miyazaki ramen was pretty light, and the noodles were soft. If I had wanted to eat this kind of classic Miyazaki ramen, I could have had some at the ramen place located on the first floor of Miyazaki Bougainvillea Airport. The ramen they made here was the complete opposite, as though the recipe had been designed to fight back against the popular Miyazaki ramen. I loved it, and I wasn’t the only one. The ramen this place made was even pretty famous among the Yokozuna wrestlers. The rebellious spirit this ramen embodied was the cornerstone of the prefecture’s new market development.

“We’re not going into the dungeon today, Kazu-san?”

“Considering it’s past noon already, I thought it would be a bit of a waste,” I answered. “Once we check in at the hotel, I’ll give you guys the rest of the evening off. There’s a shopping district called Mutacho in the west of Miyakonojo. The area around Miyakonojo Station is also pretty developed. Don’t go drinking and driving, though, all right? Use a taxi if you have to.”

“Aniki,” Akira called out. “Do you have any cool places to recommend?”

“There are a few dishes you absolutely can’t miss in Miyazaki Prefecture. The first one is the ramen we’re having right now. Another one is chicken sashimi. There’s a place that serves this right in front of Miyakonojo Station, but since some people can’t handle the idea of eating raw chicken, I picked ramen instead and didn’t make a reservation for everyone there.”

“I heard charcoal-grilled chicken is also pretty famous here.”

“There’s a famous charcoal-grilled chicken place in Mutacho, but if you can find that in Tokyo as well. Chicken sashimi is pretty much impossible to find anywhere else. After all, you need to use the freshest chicken possible. If you wait more than half a day to eat it, it’s already too late.”

I ordered another bowl and thought about Amane, who wasn’t present this time. *She should be in the middle of clearing Hakata Dungeon with her party. I wanted to go too... They have squid sashimi there...* There was no way I’d ever get to eat that in Tokyo.

I’ve been to Hakata several times already, so maybe I’ll just teleport there next time I have a break...

I slurped my firm noodles as I thought about the many dishes I wanted to have.



[Miyakonojo Local Product Promotion Center — Parking Lot]

We went down the Miyazaki Expressway and pulled onto National Route 10, heading toward Miyakonojo Station. After a while, we saw Miyakonojo Roadside Station on our left. I’d heard that that roadside station was the best in the Kyushu and Okinawa area; it was bustling even on a weekday.

Right next to the roadside station stood the Miyakonojo Local Product Promotion Center building. On the first floor, dozens of local products were being displayed. The B-Rank dungeon had appeared right in the parking lot of this building.

The 43rd Infantry Regiment of the Miyakonojo Garrison had been dispatched to seal off and guard the parking lot. At first, the army had intended to close off the whole area, including Roadside Station Miyakonojo, but the Miyakonojo Tourism Association and the Department of Economy, Trade, and Industry at city hall had sent numerous petitions, eventually succeeding in reducing the size of the sealed-off area.

“I’m Colonel Nakamura, Commander of the 43rd Infantry Regiment of the JGSDF. I will be in charge of assisting you,” Colonel Nakamura introduced

himself, bowing to us.

We returned his salute.

Currently, the JGSDF was still in charge of guarding the dungeons, but talks were ongoing between the Ministry of Defense and the newly established Ministry of Dungeons. These talks didn't have much to do with the potential benefits that could come from handling the dungeons but rather with the way the area around them ought to be organized. If the Monster Stampede did occur, the areas directly surrounding the dungeons would become the first defense line against the monsters. If monsters came crawling up from the dungeon using the stairs, it might be possible to fend them off with machine guns. Naturally, no one knew what form the Stampede would take, so it seemed like the Ministry of Dungeons would be tasked with brainstorming and devising solutions for all kinds of possibilities.

"This is the only dungeon that appeared in the south of Kyushu, so the City of Miyakonojo is hoping to make it into a new tourist attraction of sorts. The mayor would also like to hand you a letter of thanks in person once you are done clearing the dungeon," said the city hall representative.

I forced a strained smile. The moment we'd announce the dungeon was successfully cleared would most likely be aired on national television. The mayor clearly picked that time to hand me a thank you letter to advertise the city. This city was the complete opposite of Kanazawa City, which had hoped to see the dungeon entirely destroyed. Still, I had no intention to refuse. If the number of adventurers increased, we'd be all the more prepared to face the Monster Stampede.

"We'll have each team work in relays as we move forward. First up is your team, Masayoshi," I explained.

Masayoshi's team got ready as we set up camp in the Safety Zone of Floor 1. The first week in the dungeon would be dedicated to mapping the first four floors. In the meantime, the rest of the members would wait above ground, myself included. Masayoshi and his teammates should head back up and join us in around one aboveground hour.

"Don't overdo it, all right? If advancing further seems too dangerous, come

back,” I warned.

“I know. Don’t worry.”

There were plenty of tanks—mostly former sumo wrestlers and Gamerican football players—in Masayoshi’s team, but there were also people who could use magic and skills like Reconnaissance. All in all, they were the perfect team to handle that tedious first step, as they all had great endurance.



[Ministry of Dungeons — Dungeon Adventurer Initiative Review Committee]

Many young, promising individuals from different ministries had been transferred to the Ministry of Dungeons that had been newly established in Kasumigaseki. There were several reasons for these transfers. First, the Vice-Minister was a woman in her forties. Second, the main goal of the Ministry was to prevent the Monster Stampede from happening in ten years. And third, young minds were flexible and more likely to adapt and understand the unprecedented phenomenon of dungeons. Thus, most section chiefs were in their thirties, and none of the directors-general were older than forty-five.

After successfully handling the Olympics, the next mission of the Ministry of Dungeons was to prepare a revision of the dungeon adventurer initiative that would accompany the constitutional reform. Members of Dungeon Busters had not been invited to sit on that review committee. The current initiative was temporary and relied heavily on practical examinations. That was why the opinion of civilian adventurers, and those of Dungeon Busters and Ezo Kazuhiko in particular, had been critical.

If the opinions of a single person were reflected in the revision, however, it would call the integrity of the whole system into question. As such, the members of the review committee had agreed to build regulations from scratch without relying on outside opinions.

“I must once again propose that we reconsider the question of the remuneration of adventurers. At first, it was necessary to attract new prospective adventurers, so the buying price was set to a hundred yen per gram, but many adventurers are starting to earn over a hundred million yen a year. The energy industry also hopes the price of magic stones will drop further

so that energy can be sold even more cheaply.”

“Lowering a buying price that has already been set is likely to have an adverse effect on adventurers’ morale. Although they are earning more than a hundred million yen a year, we have to remember that time inside the dungeons is 144 times faster than time above ground. Even with a price set at a hundred yen per gram, energy prices will be low enough. The rest is up to the efforts of individual companies.”

“There is also a limit to the number of adventurers we can employ. Ezoe-shi has brought up a limit of around three thousand people, which seems like a likely number. Please have a look at this.”

A chart was projected on the screen. It showed the total number of adventurers as well as the number of reservable spots for the dungeons that had been opened to the public—Sapporo, Yokohama, Funabashi, Kanazawa, and Hiroshima.

“As of now, adventurers are being registered as parties. When a team of miners makes a reservation, they are given a time slot of one aboveground hour. Soon, we’ll also be able to open the dungeons of Sendai, Nagoya, Hakata, and Miyakonojo, which will bring the number of accessible dungeons to nine. If they are open twelve hours a day, from 8 a.m. to 8 p.m., we can offer slots to up to seven hundred fifty-six teams per week. There are a few more adventurers in total if we add busters, but even when Shinjuku, Shishibone, and Osaka are eventually opened, we won’t be able to offer spots to more than a thousand teams. These teams could gather around forty-five thousand tons of black magic stone, but it will be far from enough teams if they need to mine for red magic stones that produce crude oil as well. In that situation, lowering the price would be an aberration.”

After exchanging opinions on the price of magic stones, the committee then discussed ways to deter adventurers from committing crimes. The only possibility to increase the number of adventurers was to allow several teams of miners to enter the dungeons during the same time slot. However, this would also increase the risk of criminal offenses. If a Legend Rare character card were to appear, a bloodbath could very easily ensue.

The committee wanted more adventurers, but they also wanted to prevent crimes. The discussion became more and more disorderly as diplomats looked for a way to solve this dilemma.

“Hmm... Guys?”

The one who had just raised his hand was Isaac Roland, who had recently arrived from Gameraica. He had stayed in his laboratory in Tsukuba until the very last minute and come to the meeting still wearing a lab coat.

“I have a feeling you’re all overcomplicating this. Why not just use the Jointly Sealed Covenant? If we have them all pledge not to kill another human being inside the dungeons, the issue would be easily solved. Monsters aren’t humans, so it shouldn’t prevent them from doing their job either.”

“We have discussed this possibility already. Some have raised concerns that using this item to constrain people would be a violation of human rights. The UN has ruled that this item was to only be used to prohibit adventurers from bringing dungeon items to the surface, but there are still vehement complaints from human rights organizations. Going any further would be difficult...”

“What nonsense. Companies also transfer or order around employees regardless of their consent, and it’s a given that employees have to listen to their bosses. If they’re not willing to sign the covenant, they’d still have the option to give up on being adventurers. They’ll earn millions of dollars every year. They should suck it up a little.”

Isaac’s words would have been perfectly acceptable in Gameraica, where individualism was king. However, Japan was a country that valued collectives over individuals. Responsibilities were also often taken up by groups rather than individuals. Some leftist groups were criticizing Urabe, saying that his administration was totalitarian and that he acted like a literal Nazi.

“If this law impacted every Japanese citizen, I’d also think it was problematic. However, it would be restricted to civilian adventurers and take effect exclusively inside the dungeons,” Isaac continued. “Putting shackles on them from the get-go is another way to prevent crime. Politicians just need to sway public opinion, and everything will be fine. I’ve been thinking this for a while, but the Japanese government tends to neglect these kinds of tactics too often.”

“Professor...” the committee chairman started after a pause. “As a Gamerican, I believe it would be wise for you to refrain from commenting on Japanese politics too much. However, I do think there is some truth to your words. We should submit the solution we believe to be the most appropriate and leave the final decision in the hands of the government. The Vice-Minister will explain the situation to the Ministers,” he said, concluding the meeting.



[Miyakonojo Dungeon — Sumida Masayoshi]

When Ezo-san had first told me to become a team leader, I’d wanted to refuse. I then heard Takao Sakari, a former sumo wrestler who had gone all the way to the Komusubi rank—the fourth highest rank—was to join my team and got even more restless.

“Masayoshi-san, the chanko nabe’s served!”

“Oh... Thanks...”

Although I had stopped competing without ever reaching the first division, the former Komusubi, Takao Sakari Seiji, still handed me a bowl with a smile. To be honest, I had wanted to exchange positions with him and make him the leader of the team, but he had refused, stating that he was “still inexperienced as an adventurer.” The other members also treated me as their leader, so I couldn’t allow myself to show them my weaknesses.

I sighed, putting down my bowl.

“All right, let’s go. Come on, come on! We’re going strong!”

I slapped my face with both hands and stood up. We were headed to Floor 4. This dungeon was supposed to be Rank B, but most of the monsters relied only on brute strength, which made them easy targets for us.

“Next up are boars, huh? If I remember right, they’re supposed to be Rank C...”

A large, two-meter-tall monster charged at us, sharp tusks at the ready. However, this kind of attack was nothing. I stepped firmly on the ground and moved my body forward in one swift motion.

“Dosukoi!”

I sent the monster flying with my Shield Bash, and Seiji struck it down again using his Green Dragon Crescent Blade. The body of the boar lay on the floor, neatly separated in two, before disappearing in a puff of smoke.

Name: Frost Fair Blade

Rarity: Super Rare

Description: According to *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, this blade was the favorite of the Lord of the Beautiful Beard. The divine protection of Emperor Guan will be bestowed upon the user.

Ezoe-san had told us that the real Green Dragon Crescent Blade —or Frost Fair Blade—had apparently been forged during the Song Dynasty, and as such, could not have been around during the Three Kingdoms period. “They could never have made that back then, considering their metalworking techniques,” he had explained. To be honest, I didn’t really care about the details. Either way, Seiji had taken a liking to the sword, joking about letting his beard grow to match it.

“We’re almost done mapping Floor 4. Should we head back soon?”

“Most of the monsters here rely on sheer power. We might as well stay here to fight a little more. Are you all good with that?” I asked.

We had plenty of food as well as potions. We shouldn’t run into any issues. I wanted my team members to reach Rank C, so I decided to stay on Floor 4 for one more day.



[Miyakonojo Dungeon — Ezoe Kazuhiko]

While I was above ground, waiting for Masayoshi’s team to finish surveying the first floors, I received a call from Vice-Minister Ishihara. The Catholic Church of Colombian had given information that the Colombian army was on the move. Colombian had fallen into Joker’s hands, so the army moving could only mean one of two things. Either they were revolting against Joker, or they were supporting the Legion in a new fight.

<I'm sorry to burst your bubble, but a revolt is very unlikely. Venisuela's only demands were about resuming diplomatic relationships and gaining control of the dungeons. Besides that, they've promised not to interfere in Colombian matters. That's what they say, at least, but you can pretty much consider Colombian to be a vassal state of Venisuela at this point. The army's also under Joker's command. I'm guessing this maneuver is a way to keep Gamera in check.>

"So they moved the forces that were on the Venisuelan border to the shores of the Caribbean Sea because they're wary of Gamera? Then Joker's next target should be..."

<That would be Brezil. The Brezilian forces have been moving toward the Venisuelan border, but I don't believe it will be very effective. According to some military specialists, Joker's army is already strong enough to match Gamera's.>

"That assessment seems a bit exaggerated, but they aren't that far off the mark either. The monsters Joker uses in his Legion are gacha cards. That means that he'll have an endless supply of soldiers as long as the dungeons exist. A regular army won't be able to face that."

<Some members of NATO are starting to push for the incorporation of monsters in their armies as well. The Vatican won't ever approve of that, though. The Crusaders act as the guardians of the Catholic faith. It'd be unthinkable to have them summoning monsters.>

"You're right, although that might change if they're forced into a desperate situation..."

<We're also trying to secure a decent number of Rank B monster cards at the Ministry of Dungeons to prepare for the worst, but only a Dungeon Buster can materialize these cards above ground. In the end, other superhumans are the only ones who can take down Joker.>

"Once he's done with South Gamera, Joker will surely set his sights on Africa. Rolf and the other Crusaders are likely to cross paths with him before we do."

Taking Catholic dogma as well as the geopolitical and historical ties between

Europe and Africa into consideration, it would be impossible for the Crusaders to ignore Joker. They were bound to clash in the near future.

<The Gamericans are currently engrossed in their elections, and President Howard's approval rating is falling lower and lower. I hate to rush you, but please try to clear as many dungeons as fast as you possibly can.>

The situation was rapidly deteriorating. After I cut my internet voice call with Ishihara, I anxiously waited for Masayoshi to return.



[Fukuoka Airport — Kiri-hara Amane]

A man was waiting for us as we stepped out of the arrival lobby of Fukuoka Airport.

"It's been a while, Kiri-hara."

"Uchimura-kun, thank you for coming to get us."

Uchimura Yousuke and I had attended the same national university, and we had entered the National Police Agency as bureaucrats together as well. He was now the superintendent of the Fukuoka Prefectural Police. I respected him as an officer, but I didn't think much of him as a man. He wasn't really manly enough.

When we got to the taxi stand, three unmarked police cars were waiting for us. My team was only made up of five members, so two cars should have been enough, but Uchimura told me he needed to see me in private so we rode alone together in one of the cars.

"To think that you really quit the police force to become a dungeon adventurer. When I first heard it, I couldn't believe it at all."

"Well, I still have my sights set on becoming the first female Commissioner General of the National Police Agency. I'll be back in the force soon enough as well..."

"What? How come?" Uchimura asked.

"I'll be joining the Adventurer Crime Countermeasures Headquarters once it's established under the National Police Agency. There are more and more

adventurers every day. It's only a matter of time until some of them turn rogue. If the criminal is a high-Rank adventurer, even the Special Assault Team won't be able to handle it, let alone regular officers."

"No way!"

Uchimura must have thought I was joking and let out a little laugh as he drove us toward the destination. He saw how serious I looked and tried to camouflage his laughter as a cough.

"Wait, you're not joking," he said, after a while.

"If you're doubtful, should I show off a little and go take down all the yakuza in Fukuoka? I should be done within the day."

"Hang on. There's no way you—"

"That one was a joke," I said with a smile.

It seems hearing me laugh made him relax a little. I have a feeling he might be reading the situation wrong. I said I wouldn't do it, not that I couldn't do it.

I wasn't sure whether Uchimura properly understood me or not, but he turned his attention back to the road and changed the topic.

"Well, us policemen do have a debt to settle with the dungeons. I heard you weren't the only one to make the leap and become an adventurer," he said with a grim expression.

I agreed with him. We did have a debt to settle with the dungeons. Being on the field or behind a desk made no difference here. One of our own had been killed by the dungeons. Strange monsters were running rampant right under our feet, here in Japan. Not a single officer who took pride in their job could be content with looking the other way

"That man was part of the Osaka Prefectural Police, right? As of now, he's the only Japanese person to have lost his life to the dungeons..."

"Yeah. Sergeant Satou... No, he was promoted by two ranks, so I should refer to him as Inspector Satou... I heard he always took good care of his subordinates. Many mourned him."

"Did you know his son became an adventurer?" I asked. "He wants to avenge

his father. I met him once, and I must say the thirst for vengeance I could see in his eyes left me a bit uneasy. If other former officers truly became adventurers, it'd be good if they could be there for that kid... Well, adventurers' personal information is classified, so I can't really confirm whether there are any anyway."

"I know some people in the Osaka Prefectural Police. I'll ask around."

The car continued down the Urban Expressway Circular Route and finally entered the city. The dungeon had appeared close to Kuramoto Crossing, which was located in Gofukumachi. It would have been truly troublesome if it had appeared right in the middle of the crossing, but luckily, it seemed to be on the sidewalk instead. Traffic was partially halted currently, but there were plans to build an underpass so pedestrians could cross the road.

"This is the crossroads between Taihaku Street and Shouwa Street, you know," Uchimura told me. "If we were to stop the flow of traffic here, the whole city would end up paralyzed. To be honest, the police department would like to see that dungeon disappear."

"The Ministry of Dungeons wants it preserved for now. I do understand your concerns, though. When a dungeon appeared on Yokohama Shindo Road, I was the one in charge. It becomes a huge headache for those handling traffic when dungeons appear on major roads."

The car entered the parking lot of the Yamato Royal Hotel, situated in Hakata Gion. One night in that luxurious hotel cost over thirty thousand yen, but I could easily claim back all my travel expenses. Dungeon Busters paid great attention to the hotels we stayed at when we headed out on missions outside of Tokyo. After all, potions couldn't take care of mental fatigue. Having a good rest was key when it came to lowering your stress levels.

"Well then, we'll be off, Ane-san."

After checking in, my teammates headed out to Nakasu for a good time. I still had things to settle, so I didn't join them.

Uchimura had been waiting for me and we made our way to Kuramoto Crossing together, which had been closed to pedestrians ever since the dungeon appeared and JGSDF soldiers had set up a barricade. On top of that,

several police cars were on standby next to the dungeon area, which meant that half of Taihaku Street was closed off as well. I was puzzled. Traffic was heavy, just as I imagined it would be at such an important intersection. *Even taking that into account, aren't there still way too many guards?*

“Quite tight security you have going on here,” I observed. “In Yokohama and Kanazawa, dungeons have also appeared on main roads, but the areas weren’t so well guarded.”

“Well...” Uchimura trailed off. “It didn’t used to be like this. We upped security after the Tokyo Olympics. Woori said they’d collaborate with Venisuela, right? This dungeon is the closest to Woori and might eventually become accessible to citizens. We get a lot of tourists from Busan so we need to be careful.”

Woori—or the Republic of Woori—had recently announced plans to help Venisuela revamp its oil refineries. These refineries would in turn allow the Venisuelan oil industry to recover. Many countries in both North and South Gamera, including the United States of Gamera, had expressed displeasure at this turn of events.

Everyone expected Woori to try to act as a mediator between Joker and the advanced countries during the upcoming G20 summit, scheduled to take place in November in the Kingdom of Saud Arab. Naturally, Japan, Gamera, and the EU had no intentions of playing along. Even the Oriental Republic of Sina had shown their annoyance, stating that Woori was “free to do whatever they liked” but that they “could not agree.”

“There haven’t been any incidents yet, so there are no reports of that, but some Woorian tourists have been sighted checking out the area around Hakata Dungeon,” he explained. “The JSDF soldiers told me that the way these people carried themselves led them to think they were fellow soldiers.”

“Woori isn’t part of the International Dungeon Adventurer Organization. I assume they’re starting to fret over their lack of intel on the dungeons. How regrettable... If they just joined the IDAO, Japan would help them. Still, can’t anything be done about these people?”

“Looking at the barricade isn’t forbidden, as long as they’re not trespassing.

Since they're not breaking any laws, we can't do anything about it. Even if we were to prove they were soldiers, they could still say that they only came to have fun in Japan during their holiday. Handling spies is the job of the Public Security Intelligence Agency, not us."

We passed through the barricade as we spoke and entered the prefabricated building that had been constructed next to the dungeon. There, I received a briefing on Hakata Dungeon. The monsters on Floor 1 were apparently weak enough that most soldiers did not consider them monsters at all. Just stepping on them was enough to kill them. *It should be similar to Sapporo Dungeon, then.*

"All right, there shouldn't be any issues. We'll most likely be done by tomorrow evening."

"Tomorrow? That's fast!" Uchimura said.

"Clearing a dungeon is just like doing office work. You simply end up wasting time if you drag things out. Setting up deadlines and getting through the work in one sitting is much more efficient. Wouldn't you agree?"

I got off the folding chair and stretched a bit. Uchimura-kun looked at me, seeming a bit flustered. Oh, now that I thought about it, I was wearing a T-shirt and a pair of jeans today. My curves were in plain sight.

"Hmm... Would you like to...get dinner with me tonight?" he asked.

That wasn't very smooth now, was it? If you want me, you're going to need to do better. Surpass human limits, for instance.

Still, I couldn't help but wonder how an elite bureaucrat like him would cry out if I teased him with my whip.

"I'm sorry. I like to rest up before I dungeon dive. Please drive me back to the hotel."

Was I always such a lascivious woman? Perhaps disciplining monsters in the dungeons for so long had made me a little mean.



[Miyakonojo Dungeon — Shinohara Hisato]

The team I led was composed of members ranging from eighteen years old to twenty-five years old. There were more than nine hundred thousand patients with incurable illnesses in Japan. Among them, some had genetic diseases, which meant that even an Extra Potion—which could only cure acquired diseases—could not heal them. Still, we could still help thousands of people.

I had only managed to acquire a thousand Extra Potions in the past six months. Some of the people I had saved using their power had already reached out to me, however, saying they wanted to help. On top of that, the knowledge that Extra Potions did not work on some diseases was already a step forward for researchers. After all, it was impossible to tell whether an ailment was genetic or not in many cases.

“Damn!”

The girl spinning a war hammer around was Yamamura Naomi. We were the same age. She had developed juvenile idiopathic arthritis when she was in her teens and suffered from the side effects of steroids for years. She had made a full recovery, thanks to an Extra Potion, and decided to become an adventurer.

“We’ve saved up tons of C-Rank Cards! B-Rank dungeons are amazing!” Osada Youichirou said, laughing as he unleashed a blast of magic.

He used to have primary nephrotic syndrome and had been admitted to the same hospital as my sister before eventually becoming my first teammate. The two of them had been very lucky. As fate had had it, I, someone who had found Extra Potions, knew them. Things were a bit different now, as the Ministry of Dungeons acted as an intermediary, providing Extra Potions to the most critically ill patients first. They also bought potions from other adventurers, which meant that Potions were incredibly expensive.

Well, if medicine that could cure any illness was to circulate at a very cheap price, most pharmaceutical companies would go bankrupt in the blink of an eye. Kazu-san had explained that to me, and I understood, but I wanted the potions that my team acquired to be given away for free, at the very least. We had negotiated with the Ministry of Dungeons, and they’d agreed to distribute these for free to low-income families.

Some doctors remained cautious, of course, and expressed their concerns.

They thought that Extra Potions shouldn't be used since no one knew what side effects dungeon items could cause in the long run. But incurable diseases were referred to in that way because our current understanding of medicine couldn't do anything to treat them in the first place. Patients who were suffering, and their families, clutched at straws. If I had a chance to help these people, I'd take it, no matter what.

“Let's bring down ten more monsters and take a break!”

We were almost done with Floor 6. I expected Rank B monsters to show up on the next floor. After our break, we'd check out Floor 7 before heading back up for a while. Kazu-san and Akira-san were sure to have a turn after us. *I can't lose to them!*

“All right. My turn!”

I took out my sword from the scabbard at my hip and infused it with fire. *I'll show you the power of a mystical swordsman!*



[Miyakonojo Dungeon — Ezo Kazuhiko]

Useless trivia: Miyakonojo City was home to one hundred sixty-five thousand people. That was roughly the same as the population of Urayasu City, Chiba Prefecture. However, there were over eighty ramen places here, more than twice as many as in Urayasu. Miyakonojo was a true battleground for ramen shops.

“That's...great and all, but why are we having ramen, again?” Hisato complained.

The dungeon exploration was going well, and our members had managed to reach Floor 7 by noon in aboveground time. It was finally time for B-Rank monsters to show up.

Hisato didn't seem to appreciate my goodwill. *And here I am trying to cheer everyone up with some nice ramen before we head into battle.*

“We mostly eat stews and meat-based dishes inside the dungeons, right? Having some ramen before heading in will make everyone want to survive

another day just so they can have such divine food again. To put it shortly, it's good for morale," I answered casually.

I wanted to point out that I checked out rankings of the best ramen restaurants in Miyakonojo online, and the highest-ranked establishment wasn't actually situated in the city center. It was a place called Ganko that served Nagahama ramen, located just a few minutes away from the Miyakonojo Local Product Promotion Center. When the time for lunch came around, many people gathered at this restaurant. A reservation book had been installed by the door, and it was not uncommon to wait for half an hour inside your car before being able to get a spot.

The restaurant had regular tables and private tatami rooms, so we could technically have sat together. I felt that would be too much of a bother to other customers, though, so we entered in smaller groups. The other customers were still fazed by our appearance. *Well, we do tend to impress people.*

"I'll have a large roasted pork ramen and gyoza."

The food was great, but this place wasn't only renowned for its dishes. The service was high quality too. I had written that we didn't mind us being split up and given counter seats in the reservation book, but they prepared tables and private rooms so we could stay together in groups.

"So good!"

We all dug in. Even Hisato, who had been complaining a few minutes ago, was happily slurping his noodles. The ramen was pretty oily at first, but after adding in some mustard greens and pickles, it felt rather light and easier to eat. There was also a plate full of soft-boiled eggs that we were free to eat.

"I'll have another bowl! Give me twenty packs of mustard greens to-go as well," Akira said.

What a ridiculous order. I guess he wants to add it to his meals after we enter the dungeon.

In the end, everyone went for a second helping and even had a few onigiri on the side. Not putting on weight in spite of this lifestyle was one of the perks of being a dungeon adventurer.

“If everyone’s good, should we go?”

We turned right after exiting the restaurant and found a small smoking area. After having a smoke, we headed back to the Local Product Promotion Center on foot.

* * *

On Floor 7 of Miyakonojo Dungeon, we came face-to-face with ogres, Rank B monsters. Masayoshi, Rinko, and Hisato had all reached Rank B, but their teams were composed of Rank C and Rank D members. Getting all of their teammates to rank up was our hidden goal this time.

“There’s only one monster ahead. If you all attack together, you should be able to defeat it, even if some of you are still Rank D. If you care about your life... Keep moving!” Shifu Liu said.

He watched everyone’s movements carefully and gave detailed instructions. While getting from Rank D to Rank C wasn’t all that tedious, ranking up further was hard. We had set camps in the Safety Zones of Floor 6 and Floor 7, but the mental burden of fighting your way to the next rank could become too much to bear. I had the three teams fight for four hours at a time in a relay system.

Akira and I also joined in on the fighting, but we’d always apply debuffs to ourselves before doing so. Since we had both earned the title of Rank B Dungeon Buster, we had been fighting with debuffs applied, but we still hadn’t managed to reach Rank A. According to Shifu Liu, though, we were getting stronger a little bit at a time.

“Training will never betray you. Why do you think martial arts are still being practiced after thousands of years? The answer is simple. When it comes to martial arts, hard work always pays off more than talent,” Shifu Liu explained.

In the end, several of our members reached Rank C, but no one managed to get to Rank B. More than thirty days—in dungeon time—had passed, and after seeing how everyone was doing, I made the decision to go back to the surface.

“With more of us here, it was bound to become more stressful for everyone. We did split up and use the Safety Zones of two floors, but involving so many people in such a large-scale clearing initiative comes with invisible issues.”

I continued.

“We’ll be taking a break. Today, we’ll be heading out to Mutacho together. There’s a yakiniku place that specializes in Miyazaki beef there, you know. After partying and eating to our hearts’ content, we’ll all take tomorrow off and resume in two days.”

Everyone looked relieved. It was tiring enough for more than ten people to share a small room of around ten square meters, but adding the stress of fighting monsters nonstop while being around the same twenty or so people for a whole month led to an unimaginable amount of stress building up.

I did feel a bit anxious about all the time we were wasting, but I didn’t let my feelings show. We’d have been long done if I had selected a few B-Rankers to enter the dungeon with me. However, that wouldn’t have helped nurture the rest of the group. I had to remind myself to think of this as an investment for the future.

Chapter 4: Operation Joker

[Edogawa City, Tokyo — Dungeon Busters Headquarters]

Now that the Tokyo Olympics were over, it was time for the Tokyo gubernatorial election. The debates were centered around three main issues. Many people were currently anxious about Japan's economy and its potential decline. Thus, the first question was how Tokyo City would position itself in that context. The second point concerned the treatment of the fantastic beings that were dungeon adventurers and the dungeons as a whole. Finally, how would the city treat foreigners, now that the world was split in two because of Joker, especially those from the Middle East, Africa, and South Gameraica?

<If I am elected this time, I promise to enforce a "three zeroes" policy. I have dubbed my program the "Tokyo Renaissance." First, zero corruption. I will make use of dungeon items and have every civil servant here in Tokyo City swear that they will not accept or offer bribes. Second, zero water bills. As you know, Tokyo City has several water treatment plants. The red magic stones that have been found in Sapporo Dungeon can be mixed with sewage water to produce heavy oil. The benefits we obtain from selling that oil will be used to ensure smooth water distribution and maintain the infrastructures we currently have. We will not need the citizens to pay water bills any longer to sustain this. Third, zero incurable patients. Extra Potions, a type of item found inside the dungeons, have the ability to cure any disease. This medicine is currently being sold at a high price. However, the city will offer subsidies, so patients who live in Tokyo can have preferential access to this treatment.>

Mukai seemed skeptical as he listened to the current governor's speech on TV. Last time, that very same politician had promised to enforce a seven zeros policy, but where were the results?

<Isn't it obvious that dungeons should not be kept in our city? Joker, who is currently wreaking havoc in South Gameraica, is attacking countries that have dungeons. This means that if we just get rid of the dungeons, Japan will remain

safe. I believe every dungeon on Japanese soil ought to be destroyed. Tokyo should lead the way and erase the two dungeons located within the city first. We shall then convince Kanagawa Prefecture and Chiba Prefecture to follow suit so that we can get rid of every dungeon in the Kanto area. There is no need to rely on dungeon items and magic stones. We need to make use of renewable energy sources. Solar energy, in particular, is key. We also ought to tackle the hate issues foreigners are increasingly facing. Woorian schools will receive grants, and hate speech targeting foreigners will be strictly prohibited.>

This candidate, a former lawyer, was calling for the full destruction of every dungeon. However, dungeons were under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Dungeons and were a national issue. It was not a matter on which the city of Tokyo alone had any power. Regular people couldn't get to the last floor of Shinjuku Dungeon, which was a C-Rank dungeon, in the first place, let alone the Rank A Shishibone Dungeon. How did he intend to go through with his plan?

<Strange entities like the dungeons must be handled at the national level. A local government body should focus on local issues. What are these local issues, you ask? Well, first of all, we have to deal with these outliers who dared to join hands with Joker! That country still has a close relationship with Venisuela and will even send skilled workers there! And still, millions of these lowlifes come to Japan every year. How can we be sure the underlings of that self-proclaimed Demon King aren't hiding among them? I believe we should deport every Woorian from Tokyo. We will also have every foreigner who enters the city pledge that they will not carry out any criminal activity while in Japan. This can be done. We just need to prepare Jointly Sealed Covenants at every airport.>

Mukai let out a strained laugh as he heard the speech of the former activist who was now a fervent nationalist. He somewhat understood where that politician was coming from, but his views were way too extreme. Taking measures against Joker was important, and it was true that wariness toward foreigners was at an all-time high, but carrying out this kind of plan out of the blue would prompt the whole world to criticize Japan.

“Mukai-san, we got a request from a candidate asking for Dungeon Busters to endorse them...”

“Again? We keep telling them that we will not make any political

statement...”

Mukai turned off the TV, tired of listening to them.



[Miyakonojo Dungeon — Ezoe Kazuhiko]

I believed that the biggest difference between Rank C and Rank B and above monsters was intellect. Up to Rank C, monsters were pretty much badly programmed robots. They did not learn, exchange information with other monsters, or try to devise new strategies through trial and error. Put simply, their behavior followed a predetermined pattern.

However, monsters of Rank B and above were different. They’d try to gather information on intruders. They’d send out one of their own to fight the enemy and ascertain their strength. Then, they’d make sure to pass on the information they had acquired to the rest of the monsters on the floor and plan out the best way to take down the enemy. Fighting against them meant fighting a true war.

If monsters were merely simple-minded beings like they were in light novels, whoever had the strongest physical or magical abilities would just win each time. *Ah... That would be so much easier.*

A truly dangerous opponent was one who learned and evolved after each battle.

“Fuck! It attacked from my blind spot!”

Hisato ran to his teammate, an Extra Potion in hand. The enemy wasn’t all that strong, a mere goblin. Taken on separately, a goblin was barely as strong as a Rank C monster. However, several would team up to fight in an organized fashion. Hisato’s team was well balanced, but all of the members were young. They tended to be rash, as most youngsters were. The monsters had taken advantage of an opportunity, and one of the team had been stabbed by a goblin.

“Don’t panic! He won’t die from that! If you run to him without thinking and break formation, they’ll take advantage of that, and your whole team will go down!”

They could handle fighting a single B-Rank monster, but going up against a whole team was something else. In these situations, teamwork was key. Hisato and his party usually communicated with each other using basketball terms such as “assist” or “screen.”

“I’m sorry. The order I gave them was misguided,” Hisato apologized.

“No, the monsters just advanced faster than you had imagined,” I told him. “I don’t think your 2-1-3 interception formation is bad, per se. The strategy that the goblins used, however, letting the three monsters in front die so the one behind can deal a blow, can only be used by monsters.”

Hisato seemed to be reflecting on his actions, but all of his team members had already reached Rank C. His party should be able to handle Rank C dungeons alone. Naturally, the way ahead of them was still long. Neither Akira nor I had managed to get to Rank A yet, after all.

“Akira and I will handle the next ones. We’re reaching Rank A in this dungeon. Akira, are you good to go?” I asked.

“Of course,” Akira answered. “Shifu, if you please.”

“Ho ho! I’ll start with twenty percent, then.”

Shifu Liu applied debuffs to us after we stepped forward. The oxygen we could take in was reduced by twenty percent, and the gravitational pull increased by the same amount. In this state, we could still more or less take on monsters. Tomorrow, we’d move onto thirty percent, then forty on the following day. In three days, we’d finally have to face a fifty percent debuff. We’d only be able to breathe half as much oxygen while the gravitational pull would become fifty percent stronger. The reason we hadn’t directly moved on to that last step was to avoid contracting altitude sickness.

“So it’s like we’re two thousand meters above sea level, huh? All right, let’s go!”

The two of us took on the monsters a party of six B-and C-Rank adventurers had previously been fighting. That was only possible thanks to the Legend Rare characters that supported us.

Name: Akane

Title: Glamorous Kunoichi

Rank: A

Rarity: Legend Rare

Skills: Ninjutsu (Lvl. 8), Detection (Lvl. 5), Prostitute (Lvl. 5)

Name: Liu Fengguang

Title: Fist Emperor

Rank: A

Rarity: Legend Rare

Skills: Comprehensive Fighting Techniques (Lvl. 8), Disciple Cultivation (Lvl. MAX), Body Weakening (Lvl. 7)

Name: N'gie

Title: Warhammer Giant

Rank: A

Rarity: Legend Rare

Skills: Shield Mastery (Lvl. MAX), Hammer Mastery (Lvl. MAX), Guardian Barrier (Lvl. 9)

Akane’s “Sex Technique” had changed to “Prostitute” for...reasons. I wasn’t sure why it was now the name of a profession either.

Anyway, the issue at hand was that Akane and Liu Fengguang had reached Rank A at the same time, while N’gie had reached Rank A when we cleared Hiroshima Dungeon. I had an inkling this had something to do with who had ownership of the card. I had been the one to receive Akane and Liu Fengguang, but N’gie had appeared when Akira had earned his Dungeon Buster title. This probably meant that Akane, Emily, Liu Fengguang, and Senyath were influenced by my titles, while N’gie was influenced by Akira’s.

“But neither Emily-chan nor Senyath ranked up, right?”

Name: Emily

Title: Saucy Mage

Rank: B

Rarity: Legend Rare

Skills: Esoteric Technique (Lvl. 9), Summoning (Lvl. 8), Alchemy (Lvl. 1)

Name: Senyath

Title: Courteous Cat-Sith

Rank: C

Rarity: Legend Rare

Skills: Butler (Lvl. 6), Escape (Lvl. 3), Poisonous Tongue (Lvl. 5)

Akira’s question was right on the mark. Although Senyath had ranked up a little, Emily was still stuck at Rank B. I assumed this was because they were always with Mari and Shingo, who were still Rank D. I intended to ask them whether they wanted to aim for Rank C after they graduated high school.

“Mari and Shingo are still kids. Clearing the dungeons is our responsibility as adults. I’d rather they don’t become Limit Breakers, if possible.”

Mari had only started helping me out to earn some money in the first place. Her situation was totally different now, as she wasn’t in dire need of cash anymore.

As things stood, killing monsters in the dungeons wasn’t enough any longer. Joker’s appearance meant that the greatest enemy of humankind was now other human beings. If things escalated, we adventurers might be forced to become murderers.

“Don’t worry. Everything will be fine. Mari-chan and Shingo are both way more responsible than you give them credit for. Shingo especially has become much more mature since Senyath joined us,” Akira said. “Teenagers sure grow up fast, huh?”

Are you trying to spite me? Is that it? I know I’m already an old man! At over

forty, I most likely won't grow as a person anymore.

I ignored Akira's remark and focused on fighting the goblins. I might have gotten used to my current state, but I was now able to dodge their blades with the smallest of movements. I would then thrust my own sword precisely between their eyes. There was no need for superfluous movements or excess strength.

"I see these two have adapted fast," Shifu Liu started. "Listen, Hisato. In terms of physical abilities, you and Ezo are rather similar. However, there is a big gap in terms of mentality. Well, humans are highly emotional beings. When being surrounded by enemies on all sides, it's only natural to feel tense and to feel fear well up inside of you. There is only one way to surpass this and avoid freezing up. Get used to such situations. All in all, with old age comes wisdom and experience."

The youngsters all nodded along to Shifu Liu's words. *Hey! Why are you agreeing? "With old age comes wisdom?" How old do you all think I am? I'm only forty!*

"Look! Goblin shuriken!"

Akira had grabbed a goblin by the head and spun it around before throwing it as a projectile. Fighting Rank C monsters was now a game rather than an actual fight. Surely, this meant we were getting closer to Rank A.



[Miyakonojo Dungeon — Floor 8]

We went down to Floor 8. We'd reach the bottom in another floor or two. A monster that looked like a strange hybrid between a lizard and a chicken came plodding toward us.

"It's a riddle basilisk! It can use petrification breath!"

"A basilisk? It doesn't really look like an iguana to me, though..."

The monster continued advancing until it was more or less two meters away from us and opened its mouth. My blood turned cold at that moment. Both Akira and I jumped to the sides to avoid it. The basilisk closed its mouth again

and turned to face me. Akane was faster, though. Her kunai had already gone through the monster's head. I could feel my back dampening, cold sweat covering it as I took deep breaths.

"What the hell was that...?" I asked.

"The scariest thing about these kinds of breath attacks is that you can't see them. It becomes hard to gauge how far you need to go to avoid it. I'm also not sure how long its breath stays active once it has been released."

"I see. It's not like in the games, huh?"

In RPGs, there were also attacks along the lines of "poison breath" or "paralysis breath," but these attacks were much scarier in real life. It was impossible to avoid something you couldn't see, and even if you did manage to avoid it, it was unclear how long it stayed in the air or how far it could reach.

I tried to extend my hand into the space I had been standing in earlier to give it a try.

"Kazuhiko-sama!"

"It's all right. I'll use a potion if I need to."

Luckily, my hand was perfectly fine. Checking the range of the attack was worth taking such risks. If we didn't gather more information on breath attacks and figure out paralysis, it might very well cost us our lives in the future if we stumbled upon stronger foes.

"Akira," I started. "Actually, everyone! We'll stay here to train for a while. We need to get to the bottom of things here. Shifu Liu, please help us."

"Ho ho! You want a training regimen to teach you how to avoid invisible attacks, is that right? Understood. I'll be thorough."

Thus, we started facing riddle basilisks to get a better understanding of breath-based attacks.

When facing Rank B monsters, losing focus was out of the question. On top of that, if anyone ended up being petrified, we'd have to treat them extremely quickly as basilisks aimed at the petrified spots, hitting them with their tails to smash them. *What an annoying attack.*

“Damn! Several are coming at once! We need to keep our distance! If they manage to surround us and exhale all at once, we’re all dead!”

I had Akane, Hisato, and the others who were able to deal damage from afar work hard. Once we had gathered enough magic stones and cards, we headed back to the Safety Zone for a break.

“Good. Now, let’s materialize a riddle basilisk and study its breath in detail. We need to know not only the range and duration of the attack but also whether a body part that’s been petrified remains petrified forever. I’d also like to check whether being fully petrified immediately kills or not. We’ll use these cards to conduct some experiments.”

Since we were faced with an unknown attack, the first step was to gather information. I summoned a riddle basilisk and had it use petrification breath. I had goblins, among other monsters, stay put in front of them to see how it’d affect them.

“If someone takes on the attack fully, their whole body gets petrified in a second, but if they extend their arm into the attack’s range and remove it immediately afterward, only the arm is affected. The attack range is more or less two and a half meters, huh?”

I held a stopwatch in hand and roughly measured the distance several times, writing it down in a notebook. Those seeing me do these things for the first time watched me in awe while Akira, fully used to this by now, materialized monster after monster for me to experiment on.

“It’s our first time seeing an attack such as this. We also need to keep in mind that if another monster uses petrification breath, it may not work the same way. Next, let’s check if we can modulate the strength of its breath. From what I’ve been able to gather, I noticed that the range is a two-and-a-half-meter radius in a half-circle in front of the monster. If that area were to become narrower, however, it may reach further...”

“Aniki, should we call it a day?” Akira asked.

He seemed to be feeling sorry for the rest of the members as I’d kept them waiting for so long. To be honest, I kind of hoped every team would learn to conduct such experiments and contribute to Dungeon Busters’s understanding

of dungeons. Dungeon Busters was still too young as an organization to carry out systematic information gathering on such a scale.

“Got it. But I’ll still be carrying out this kind of research regularly. We know next to nothing about the dungeons. This means that if anything new appears, we absolutely need to make hypotheses, experiment, and verify our results over and over again. Knowledge obtained in this way will be useful not only to us but also to the rest of the world. I’d like each team to remember this. Clearing dungeons is impossible without trying to understand them.”

I spoke with a stern expression so, in turn, everyone listened carefully, nodding with serious faces.



[Hakata Dungeon — Kirihara Amane]

This was my first time in a D-Rank dungeon, and as expected, the monsters were weak. Ten or so Rank D adventurers might have been able to somehow clear such an easy dungeon. It spelled out danger, though, as it meant that earning the title of Dungeon Buster was also that easy. In other words, increasing the number of people who could summon monsters above ground wasn’t all that hard. The Ministry of Dungeons ought to be careful and remember this as well.

GRRRRRRR.

We were currently on the Final Floor of Hakata Dungeon. A two-headed dog monster stood in front of us, growling. *What a poorly trained dog. I’m going to train you harshly with my whip, puppy.*

“DOWN!”

My whip cut through the air. One of the dog’s heads immediately drooped. It seemed like it understood who its master was. The other head was still roaring, though. *A little punishment is in order, huh?*

“What an impertinent dog! I told you to stay down!”

My whip struck its nose. *Right on the mark.* The gigantic two-headed dog let out a whimper and laid down on the floor. *Good. A dog ought to listen to its*

master's orders!

“A-Ane-san... The Dungeon Core appeared.”

Oh my. My teammates look all pale. Am I that scary? I'll need to show them my nice side for a while after this.

“Great. Then, I'll claim the title, as planned. I don't really intend to use the skill I'll get, but the best way to get the old geezers at the top to listen is to show them...”

As I walked toward the Dungeon Core, I felt something touch my leg. I looked down and saw the dog from earlier. It looked like it wanted to stay with me. *Oh my. Do you want me to keep you?*

“Heh heh heh... If you want me to keep you, show me you're a good boy. What do we do to show obedience to our master?”

The two-headed dog heavily fell to the ground, rolling to present its belly to me. I nodded, and it happily barked once before turning into a card.

“What good timing. I'll make him into the mascot of the Adventurer Crime Brigade.”

I put the card in my folder and touched the Dungeon Core.



[Miyakonojo Dungeon — Floor 8]

We were still fighting the riddle basilisks and had gained a quasi-total understanding of the way petrification breath worked. If several basilisks attacked us at once, we had long-ranged fighters attack and tried to sneak in close-range attacks from the sides. The basilisks could only breathe out in one direction, and they weren't all that fast. As long as we struck without hesitation, there was almost no risk of getting hit ourselves.

“HA!”

Akira kicked a riddle basilisk up in the air before striking it down with an axe kick. Akira moved as fast as a lightning bolt, and everything was over in the blink of an eye. At this point, he truly wasn't human anymore.

“Ho ho ho! As expected, Akira reached it first!”

Name: Shishido Akira

Title: Species Limit Breaker, Dungeon Buster, Rank B Dungeon Buster

Rank: A

Possession Limit: 19/25

Skills: Card Gacha, Martial Arts (Lvl. MAX), Fighting Spirit (Lvl. MAX),
Nunchaku Mastery (Lvl. 9)

Akira had been the first one to reach Rank A. According to Shifu Liu, that was due to the difference in natural talent between the two of us. Well, it was ridiculous to compare someone who had been diligently practicing martial arts since childhood and someone who had never gotten into a fight until his forties. It couldn't be helped, and I wasn't frustrated at all.

“My Nunchaku Mastery is getting better. I guess adding a skill slot was worth it.”

As the name of his skill suggested, he mostly swung around his nunchaku like they did in the kung fu movies that had been so popular half a century ago.

To be honest, I was much more interested in the skills that had been maxed out. I had also wondered about this when I'd seen Akane's status. Why could skills even be maxed out in the first place? It meant that there was no more room to grow. I could understand such a mechanic in a game, but did such a thing exist in real life too?

“All right. I expect Ezoë will be next. Should I make your life even more hellish from now on?” Shifu Liu asked before strengthening the gravity around me again.

I heard loud steps coming closer. I was sweating profusely as I fought the riddle basilisk.

Name: Ezoë Kazuhiko

Title: First Contacter, Species Limit Breaker, First Buster, Rank B Dungeon

Buster

Rank: A

Possession Limit: 0/∞

Skills: Card Gacha, Recovery Magic, Inducement, Teleportation, Analyze,

“Finally...”

If our strength could be quantified in a physical attack stat or a magic defense stat, like in RPGs, how much easier would everything be? I had finally gone from Rank B to Rank A, but it had taken a long time. Since I had been getting gradually stronger every day, I didn't really feel all that different after ranking up.

“Perhaps I should use my last skill slot to get Status Effect Resistance. Since breath attacks exist, it wouldn't be all that weird for gaze attacks to exist as well. Being able to resist such effects is crucial,” I said.

Before I had a chance to do that, exhaustion took over. I was suddenly so tired that my legs could barely hold me up. I went back to the Safety Zone and slept like a log. When I opened my eyes, the dungeon had been cleared already.

“We did try to wake you up, Aniki. But you wouldn't budge so...” Akira trailed off. “Sorry.”

I couldn't believe my ears, but I had apparently been asleep for around thirty hours. I normally would have woken up a few times at the very least, but that hadn't happened. Akane had stayed with me while Akira had led the rest of the party to the next floor and eventually cleared the dungeon. After some debate, it had been decided that Hisato ought to become the next Rank B Dungeon Buster.

“No, I'm sorry. I hadn't noticed I was getting so tired. Actually, my brain still can't keep up.”

“Even if you reach Rank A, your mental state will not change. You fought tooth and nail and finally became an A-Ranker. You would get tired after that,” Shifu Liu said. “Well, now it's finally time, isn't it?”

I nodded. He was right. Two of us were A-Rankers now, which meant every condition had been met. The day we'd challenge the Rank A dungeon Abyss was getting closer.

"Aniki, should we head out on a little trip to Taipei before that? It'll be a good change of pace, and we'd get to go for free, right?"

The Republic of Sina had indeed sent us a request. It would be Dungeon Busters's first overseas trip. Since it was to become the precedent everyone would look to, it was probably best if I joined the trip myself. We'd have people from the Ministry of Dungeons and Ministry of Foreign Affairs accompany us too.

"Let's think about that above ground. Amane should be done clearing Hakata Dungeon by now as well. I want to take out a whiteboard and summarize everything properly."

Everyone agreed. Akane and the others reverted to cards, and we exited the dungeon. Big smiles lit up the faces of the city hall staff of Miyakonojo when we reported our success.

I then made an internet video call to the Ministry of Dungeons. Vice-Minister Ishihara first looked relieved before following up with some bad news.

<Joker made a move. His army is fighting the Brazilian forces on the border.>

I realized that we weren't the only ones moving forward.



[Brezil — Boa Vista Outskirts]

I first met that girl in the basement of an abandoned building in the slums of Caracas. I was intrigued by her blue hair, as I'd never seen anything like it.

"Live however you like," she had told me.

"You... What did you make me drink?" I asked. I stood up, groaning.

"This," she answered simply, showing me a little bottle filled with a red liquid.

I had been hit violently on the back of my head and pushed down a flight of stairs. The person who had attacked me was a kid from the slums, one who had

just been discharged from my hospital a few days prior. He had come with other kids and ganged up on me, hoping to steal whatever meager possessions I had, before throwing me down the stairs that led to this basement.

The feeling that welled up in my chest as I rolled down the stairs wasn't anger but sadness. Helping a sick child was the natural thing to do as a doctor. However, as a result of my actions, I had been attacked and was on the verge of dying. I had fractures everywhere, perhaps even on my skull.

And yet, that strange girl had made me drink some sort of liquid, and I felt completely fine.

"What in the world is this...?"

"This is a High Potion. You can get more of these there," she said, pointing to the back of the room.

It was a weird room. The basement was barely lit, the wall itself seeming to be glowing, but I could still see every corner. A single knob was on the wall the girl had been pointing at. *A door?*

"Where am I?" I asked.

"We are on Floor 1 of a dungeon, inside the Safety Zone. I just appeared as well, so I don't know much more."

"A dungeon..."

I walked to the door and reached for the knob.

"If you touch this knob, the Dungeon System will grant you the ability to check your status," the girl said from behind me. "Once that happens, you can't turn back anymore. If you want to run away, now is—"

I shook my head, cutting her off. Those kids were probably still up there, and I was extremely interested in this medicine—this High Potion—she had talked about. I was still confused, but my instincts were screaming at me. If I reached for that knob, the door to a new world would open.

"I want to change this country... No, the world."

I grabbed the knob and suddenly felt like something was flowing into me.

The man wearing clown makeup opened his eyes. The rumbling engine—characteristic of old trucks—and the monotone colors around him had made him doze off for a short while. He straightened his posture and drank some water from a plastic bottle.

“Boss, we’ve passed the Uraricoera River. We’re eighty kilometers away from Boa Vista,” said the driver to Joker, who sat in the passenger seat.

BR-174, the road that linked Venisuela and Brezil, was a two-way road with two lanes. However, not a single car was coming from the opposite direction. The city Joker and his men were going to, Boa Vista, was located roughly two hundred and twenty kilometers away from the border, but there were barely any buildings in between. The only scenery around the BR-174 were vast grasslands, extending as far as the eye could see. Every few dozen kilometers, some sort of restaurant could be seen on the side of the road, but besides these, you could only spot trees, prairie, and reddish, barren land.

“I see... Hey, did I...? Did I say anything?”

“What?”

“Nah, never mind.”

Joker ignored his subordinate, who currently looked very puzzled, and glanced at the scenery outside. He was once again reminded of how vast Brezil was. In the two hundred and twenty kilometers that separated Boa Vista from the border—more or less the distance from Tokyo to Shizuoka in Japan—there were almost no buildings whatsoever, only vast plains all around. The truck was leisurely going through this no-man’s-land that was as big as the Kantō Plain.

“No need to rush. The Gamericans are probably staring at us with their satellites. Let them look,” Joker said before lighting the cigarette he held between his teeth.

He narrowed his eyes at the smoke before once again turning his sight to the outside. The fight at the border had ended in an overwhelming victory for his side. However, the police and the state army were sure to be waiting in Boa Vista. There was a high chance the fighting would evolve into urban warfare,

which meant leaving it to monsters alone would be a bit difficult as they might not be able to differentiate between civilians and soldiers.

“Should I have monsters surround the city and take down the resistance with C-Rankers...?”

The truck stopped right as Boa Vista was about to appear on the horizon. To move further south on the BR-174, one had to cross the Cauamé River. However, the bridge had been destroyed.

“Boss, what do we do?”

“We’ll abandon the vehicles here and gather new supplies in Boa Vista, I guess...”

Joker stepped out of the truck and stretched. Each side of the road was covered by trees, so snipers weren’t a threat at the moment. After checking that all of his men had exited the vehicles, Joker squinted, looking into the distance. A barricade had been put up across the river, and soldiers, guns in hand, were awaiting them. They had taken down the bridge and were planning to attack while Joker’s troops were crossing. This was the most basic of basics when it came to war tactics, but sadly for them, they were up against the wrong opponent. Fighting a regular army made up of normal people with such tactics would probably have worked, but it was far from being enough against Joker’s Legion.

“I could just materialize some monsters here, but since we have an audience, I’ll take the chance to show off what the Demon King can do.”

Joker and his men looked up at the sky. He threw down his cigarette and took two bazookas out of his Magic Pouch.

“I’ll open the way. You guys follow me. Hya ha ha... You’re in for a surprise, Gamerican fuckers. Behold the power of a Species Limit Breaker!”

Joker went off, a bazooka resting on each shoulder. In the blink of an eye, his speed had surpassed anything a human was capable of. He ran at over eighty kilometers per hour and leaped once he arrived at the edge of the broken bridge. He intended to cross the distance to the other shore—almost a hundred meters—in one go.



The figure of a clown holding bazookas and fluttering midair looked like something right out of an anime. The men of the Roraima State Army were also flabbergasted, staring at Joker with their mouths open.

“Hola! Muito prazer! (Hello! Glad to make your acquaintance!)” Joker greeted before pulling the trigger in midair.

Rockets flew from the two bazookas resting on his shoulders and blew up the whole barricade. Joker then fell not-so-gracefully, right in the water.

“HYA HA HA HA!!! The recoil was stronger than I’d thought!”

Joker’s makeup had half disappeared, and his suit was drenched, but he seemed to be in a good mood. His underlings were crossing the river one after the other and lunging at the State Army soldiers. Although Joker’s troops were few in number, each man was worth a thousand warriors. A hundred Rank B goblins were also thrown into the mix.

“Boss, please go change your clothes.”

“Yeah, I’ll leave the rest to you.”

Joker’s little show, aimed at Gamera and the rest of the advanced countries, had just ended. It was time for them to begrudgingly realize how valuable adventurers could be to an army.

Joker put on another suit and quickly fixed his makeup. After efficiently cleaning up the remaining troops, Joker and his men continued their way to the city on foot.



[United States of Gamera — Pentagon]

The experts who had gathered at the Pentagon were using satellite imagery to ascertain the military potential of Joker’s Legion. However, the numbers they were getting from the observational data they had at hand were absolutely ridiculous.

“Is this some sort of joke?” one of them finally asked after a long pause. “His results are right out of a comic book or a science fiction movie! What are we to do with this?!”

“His running speed is over fifty miles per hour. He can jump several dozen meters at a time, is able to evade bullets, and can stop a tank bare-handed... How ridiculous... We’d be better off fighting those huge robots that show up in Japanese cartoons.”

After a long discussion, the military experts came to one conclusion. If Joker became even stronger than he was now, the current military balance of the world would collapse. Their recommendation was simple: Joker ought to be eliminated before it was too late. Thus, a secret agreement between Gamera and Brazil was born.

“We have the Brazilian government’s approval. Our only chance to strike is when Joker leaves Boa Vista and heads south.”

“There are only two roads to Manaus. He’ll either continue down the BR-174 along the western bank of the Branco River or go to the east bank and follow the BR-432. No matter which road he picks, he’ll go through Vila Nova Paraíso and will have no choice but to continue south on the BR-174 from there.”

“We’ll fire a Tomahawk Land Attack Missile from an Arleigh Burke-class destroyer and go for a pinpoint strike. If we use Block 4, it should be possible...” They paused. “But won’t Joker be able to intercept it if he materializes some wyverns?”

“The situation is very different now. There are barely any civilians around the BR-174, unlike when he was on the coast. We can fire as many missiles as needed. Now is not the time to look at numbers. No matter how many dragons he has under his command, I doubt he could intercept dozens of Tomahawks.”

The TWS—or Tomahawk Weapons System—was the pride of the Gamericans. As the speed of computer calculations had improved, the TWS had become incredibly precise. The latest system, which had been nicknamed Block 4, made use of both satellite monitoring and communication systems, allowing missiles to precisely hit a moving target over a thousand kilometers away.

Ronald Howard, the president of the United States of Gamera, had made up his mind and decided to attack Joker after receiving a plea for help from the Brazilian government.

Currently, the Gamericans were mostly preoccupied with the ongoing

presidential race, with Howard himself in a very precarious position. Striking Joker down at this juncture would boost his popularity and allow him to get reelected. In the end, Howard was making a move out of self-interest.

“Keep tracking the trucks heading south from Boa Vista, and keep in communication with our allies in the field. We need to know which truck Joker’s in!”

Finally, the strongest military in the world was baring its fangs at the Legion, which had so brazenly challenged the current world order.



[State of Roraima — Boa Vista — Joker]

This city, whose name meant “good view” in Portuguese, was located around seven hundred fifty kilometers to the north of Manaus, the capital of the State of Amazonas. Boa Vista had once flourished, thanks to the mining industry. Now, it was an agricultural center that mainly produced soybeans and rice. Tens of thousands of immigrants had poured in due to the insecurity in Venisuela in recent years, and the citizens had been worried about the deterioration of public order.

Right now, however, was no longer the time for mere worries. The advance of the Legion had forced some citizens to flee the city while others had locked themselves inside their houses. The Civic Center Square, located at the heart of the city and usually bustling with activity, was deserted. Several roads converged at the Civic Center itself, but not a soul could be seen on any of them.

<Aah. Mic check. One, two... Hya ha ha! Hello dear citizens! My name is Joker! This city is now under the control of the Legion. I have something extremely important to tell you, so listen closely, okay?>

Joker broadcast his announcement all over the city. He spoke in Spanish, though, which meant that most citizens could not understand him. A few seconds later, the voice of the mayor could be heard, and the citizens were finally able to grasp the situation.

<My dear citizens. The men of the Legion have declared that they have no

intention of oppressing us. Anyone who is still worried is free to flee toward Manaus. The Legion also asks that every shop and restaurant resume their business as usual. They have promised not to loot or rob anyone. They will swiftly punish any individual who dares to commit such acts. I have been discussing the current situation with Joker for several hours, and I can now tell you that I trust his word on these matters. Please do not panic, and continue on as usual...>

Naturally, Joker had already put a Slave Collar on the mayor's neck. However, Joker's men still exchanged American dollars for Brazilian reals, paying cash each time they bought whatever they needed. Some hoodlums had tried to make use of the Legion's advancement to loot shops, but the men of the Legion hanged them all. They even decorated their corpses with little boards hanging off their necks on which every single one of their sins had been dutifully written.

Scare the people. However, do not hurt them physically.

That was the very basis of Joker's rule. He made sure Brazilian laws were respected and had the citizens carry on with their lives as usual, resuming their economic and civic activities.

One thing changed, however: the destination the goods produced in the city were shipped. When selling anything, the citizens had to prioritize the Venezuelan government over the trading companies of advanced countries and major multinational grain companies. Then again, as the selling price did not change, the farmers were not particularly dissatisfied with this new obligation.

"Hya ha ha... The futures contract market is going through one hell of a ride. Well, the wealthy have enough money to play around with investments. I'll squeeze whatever I can out of them," Joker said, laughing happily as he looked at his computer screen.

He sipped his coffee. He had borrowed one of the rooms of the Civic Center but was actually sleeping at a nearby hotel and dished out over ten thousand dollars a day.

"Boss, we're done loading the trucks. We have secured clothing and food. Are we departing soon?"

“Let’s wait a bit longer. Some people are currently heading south, running away from us. They may get caught in the cross fire if we advance now. Eight hundred kilometers... They should be there in three days at most. We’ll leave then.”

Gamerica could ignore Colombian, but they’d never watch Brezil fall without making a move. Brezil was the biggest agricultural country in the world. If their beef export stopped, the fast food restaurants that represented Gamerica would be ruined in an instant. If the price of coffee beans, soy, corn, and other such goods suddenly rose, almost every country in the world would suffer as well. To stop all this from happening, the only solution was to get rid of Joker. However, Gamerica wouldn’t get into a large-scale military conflict in the middle of an election, which meant they’d try to fire a missile without getting close to the fight.

At the very least, that was what Joker himself would have done.

“It’s very likely that a missile will come flying at us from the direction of the Atlantic Ocean when we head South. That’s the high-and-mighty Gamerican’s favorite tactic, after all. When that fails, the Gamericans won’t be able to show their faces anymore. I’ll get Howard’s blood pressure to rise so high a blood vessel will pop right in his little brain. HYA HA HA HA!!!”

Joker laughed in delight before taking another sip of his strong coffee.



[United States of Gamerica — NNN News]

In the end, the United States presidential election was a show. Billions of dollars changed hands during this big festival, held once every four years, while every media outlet bustled around. In preparation for election day, November 3, 2020, the Republican and the Democrat candidates both toured the country, giving speeches in various locations. Everywhere they went, hundreds of supporters flocked to them. Campaign merchandise was sold to raise funds and food stalls could be found in the vicinity. It truly was a festival.

Another crucial part of this festival were the debates that aired on TV. Both candidates faced each other and went over their programs, careers, and personalities. Winning meant becoming the leader of the strongest nation in

the world while losing meant wasting billions of dollars and being left to wander all alone. This battle fought with words was pretty much the modern equivalent of the Colosseum of old. In this context, a rating of nearly forty percent was a matter of course.

At the moment, Ronald Howard, the current president and candidate of the Republican Party, was engaged in a heated debate with Peter Wozniak, the Democrat Party candidate, on NNN News.

“You said you were planning to outsource dungeon clearing and dispatch our troops all over the world. How do you intend to deal with that terrorist who’s wreaking havoc in South Gameraica? We’ve never needed our army at home more than at this very moment. We need to put up an iron wall. Sending troops off all over the place will only weaken our defenses here. You don’t give a shit about what will happen to the Gameraican people, do you?”

“I have a feeling you’re the one who’s not getting anything. It doesn’t matter if the rest of the world’s destroyed as long as Gameraica’s still standing. Is that it? Both the dungeons and that terrorist called Joker need to be handled by the international community. Together. Gameraica being selfish and hiding inside its shell is what prompted the Oriental Republic of Sina and Japan to become allies. A whole new economy based on dungeon resources is taking over in the EU and Asia as we speak. The rest of the world is going to leave us behind. If this keeps up, we’ll miss the train of progress.”

Peter Wozniak, a young politician of thirty-eight, had emerged victorious after the Democratic National Convention in July. He had been criticized for his lack of experience, but he had reworked his dungeon policies over and over again and nominated Jonathan Byron, his rival at the Democratic National Convention, as his running mate. Byron had already held the position of vice president during the presidency of the last Democratic president and had plenty of political experience. He had been chosen as running mate for his knowledge of how to deal with Congress and his diplomatic skills, but Byron himself was insisting that he had only agreed due to Wozniak’s compelling words.

“Only thinking about Gameraica won’t cut it in this situation. This crisis concerns the whole world. You have been a politician for over fifty years. Working alongside me to face this great peril could become the culmination of

your career!”

After witnessing the passion and dazzling vision only a young man could bring to the table, Byron had decided to step down. He may not have gone down so easily during peacetime but he himself felt that, as a seventy-eight-year-old man, he couldn't stand up to the dungeons and the so-called Demon King—the greatest crisis to ever threaten humanity. He had also advised the current president, who was also in his seventies, to withdraw.

“If you step down now, you will be remembered as the man who graciously bowed out to protect humanity. We lived through the Cold War. Our time is over. Our role now is to nurture this young hope.”

Naturally, Howard had laughed in his face. He wasn't some wizened old man. He was still manly, vigorous; he ate burgers and fried chicken at every meal, and had retorted as much.

“Believe me, the world has no choice but to face the threat of dungeons. That's why Gamera needs a strong leader. Gamera will protect itself. Our founding fathers protected this land, and we'll do the same thing. If we don't stand up for ourselves, we'll never beat the dungeons. A weakling like you going on and on about cooperation and talks will never be able to take charge and lead this country!”

Howard's supporters clapped. Wozniak remained perfectly calm. He shook his head and let out a sigh before answering.

“Mr. Howard,” he said calmly. “Your macho attitude can only work against humans. I am not sure you would understand since you've never entered a dungeon, but no matter how much you yell at them, monsters won't bat an eye. Men and women, old people and children, even you and I, to monsters we're nothing more than fodder. What this country needs isn't a macho president with a tough-guy attitude. We need a level-headed person who will gather the correct information about dungeons and devise realistic policies to counter them. If you are reelected, the number of casualties will only go up.”

“Do you have no pride as a Gamerican?! We have the strongest military in the world! If our army takes on the dungeons, we can't lose!”

“You're mistaken! Our true enemy is neither a country nor that terrorist.

Inside the dungeons, adventurers have to fight indefinitely against monsters! Do you think that just ordering soldiers to go will cut it? Fighting inside dungeons isn't that easy to handle!" Wozniak exclaimed.

Neither man was listening to the other, the main reason being that their understanding of the current situation was too different. One thought that the current Gamerican army could conquer the dungeons while the other was convinced that soldiers who only moved based on orders would never be able to do this. Their understanding also clashed when it came to the South Gamerican terrorist.

"Gamerica will never negotiate with a terrorist. However, Joker does seem to have a lot to say. While I do not want to negotiate with him, I still believe we should hear him out."

Ronald Howard's face changed color as Peter Wozniak said these words, and he slammed his fist on the table.

"Are you an idiot?! He's trying to steal our wealth and scatter it around. He's basically telling us to give up our money and be poor. I'll never tolerate this! Talking to that man is out of the question!" Howard yelled.

"Still, we cannot ignore that Joker has added monsters to his forces and is currently expanding his influence in South Gamerica. His means and principles are not comparable to those of the Muslan State of the Middle East. The United States of Gamerica also has a deep relationship with South Gamerica. We can't just leave him be any longer."

"Of course not. And I intend to take care of him. Mr. Wozniak, you've been spouting nonsense, but I'm different. I'm currently moving forward with a secret agreement with Brezil. I will be able to announce some good news in the next few days. I'm sure everyone will understand who's best suited to become the president of the United States of Gamerica then," Howard asserted, looking full of himself.

Many organizations and experts tried to judge who had been the most convincing during the debate, but the results were even.

A few days later, however, what President Howard had spoken about finally came to be, just not in the form that he had hoped.



[Atlantic Ocean — Arleigh Burke-class Destroyer]

James Turner, the captain of the *Murphy*, a guided missile destroyer belonging to the Fourth Fleet of the American navy, had spent the past few days tense yet excited. The latest version of the TWS, Block 4, had been completely updated but had yet to be used in a full-scale battle. The newest system was in a whole different league compared to the one that had been used thirty years prior, during the Gulf War. Even monsters could not escape this attack.

“Captain, we’ve received the latest orders from the Chief of Staff. The operation is a go.”

“All right... Give me the mic.”

Turner stood up and tightly grasped the microphone he had been handed.

“Attention! Captain to crew. We have received our final orders from the president. ‘Clown Hunt’ will now begin. It is time for final verification. Satellite communication system!”

“CLEAR!”

“Guidance System!”

“CLEAR!”

The Tomahawk Weapons System made use of several systems to guide missiles to their targets reliably. Every system was under the responsibility of a specific person who had to keep track of things.

“Every system is good to go.”

Everything had been checked. The only thing missing now was the order to fire. Turner held the microphone tightly in his left hand and spoke to his men one last time.

“I am sure some of you are wondering if such a large-scale operation is really needed to get rid of one single person. Remember, this guy isn’t human anymore. He’s a monster who can face an army single-handedly. Not only does the prestige of the United States depend on this mission, but so does the fate of

the whole world. Today will go down in history as the day when humanity's wisdom and love of freedom and justice triumphed over the wicked devil!"

Turner then raised his right fist high in the air.

"Let the bullets rain on that clown bastard!!! FIRE!" he yelled, bringing down his fist to slam on the table.

At that moment, the whole destroyer shook. All the Tomahawks on board had been launched at once in order to kill one individual more than a thousand kilometers away.



[Brezil — BR-174]

After stopping for a short rest in a village called Incra, Joker and his men continued down the BR-174, heading south. Eventually, they reached the equator. Joker was pondering whether he should take a picture as a souvenir to show off to Gamera later on when one of his subordinates called for him.

"Boss..."

"STOP THE TRUCK!"

The three trucks stopped right in the middle of the road. Their coordinates were precisely 0°2 N 60°38 W. Everyone exited the vehicles and lined up neatly on the east of the road. Joker took out a cigarette and lit it.

"It's coming... Twenty seconds to go."

"I'm counting on you, Giovanni."

A young man who looked no older than twenty stepped forward and walked to a bush. Joker and the rest of his men kept silent as they stared at the sky, looking east. Finally, they saw what they were waiting for.

The Tomahawk missiles had first gained fame during the Gulf War in 1991 and had been continuously updated since then. The latest system, nicknamed Block 4, was their fourth version. Their current performance was mind-boggling.

They had a maximum range of three thousand kilometers, although this depended on the specific warhead, and the location of the impact had an error

margin of only a few meters. They flew at 0.75 mach speed and could course-correct automatically to track a moving target, thanks to their connection to a satellite system. The warhead was also equipped with an infrared detection device which meant the Tomahawk would accurately hit its target no matter how foggy or dark the environment was. On top of that, these missiles only flew around ten meters above ground, making them extremely difficult for radar to track and fighter aircraft to take down. It was an unforgivable arrow that would hit its target from thousands of miles ten times out of ten.

“The missiles have not encountered any obstacles...”

Twenty Tomahawk missiles had been launched from the destroyer *Murphy* and were flying toward their target a thousand kilometers away, autonomously avoiding the trees and buildings that stood in their way all the while. Although these missiles were only half as fast as those usually deployed by the army, the distance they could cover and their precision were best in the world. Captain Turner was now certain the missiles were going to hit their mark, as was his whole crew.

Naturally, the same went for those waiting in the White House. Howard was munching on fried chicken and drinking Diet Coke as he stared at the images being sent via satellite. He couldn't wait to see his odious enemy's body shredded to pieces.

“Target locked! Fifteen seconds to impact... Ten. Nine. Eight. Seven...”

The Tomahawk missiles were aimed precisely at Joker. Soon, twenty missiles would swoop down on a single person at subsonic speed.

“Two. One. Impact!”

All twenty Tomahawk missiles blew up at the same exact time, satellite imagery showing the explosion.

Every soldier aboard the *Murphy* rejoiced at the bombing's success. The White House was just as ecstatic. Thick white smoke filled the whole screen, but there was no doubt the missiles had hit their target. Everyone, including the White House Chief of Staff, applauded as a bottle of high-quality champagne costing around three thousand dollars was brought into the room. Howard did not usually drink alcohol, but even he had a glass, considering the

circumstances.

The festive mood was the same aboard the destroyer *Murphy*. Turner shook hands with his executive officer and navigating officer as they congratulated one another.

“Once we confirm that everything is over, we’ll make a report to headquarters and then have a party. Drinking will be allowed, of course.”

“Great!”

In the midst of laughing, the soldier charged with satellite communication started in disbelief at the data he had just received.

“W-Wait!” he suddenly yelled. “The target... The target hasn’t been destroyed!”

“What?! Show me the images!”

The white smoke had been cleared by the wind. The sight that awaited Turner and the others was that of Joker casually smoking his cigarette with his hands tucked into his pockets. In front of him and his men, a fifty-meter tall wall had appeared out of nowhere. Joker let out a puff of smoke and looked at the sky before sticking up his middle finger.

It looked as though he just mouthed the words <I’m sorryyyyyy!> in English.

* * *

“GODDAMN IT!”

President Ronald Howard flew into a rage, smashing his glass of champagne on the floor. The “Ultra Long Range Attack” that everyone had thought to be a perfect plan had ended in utter failure.

Analyzing this failure could come later. For now, what mattered was getting President Howard to calm down.

“Fuck him! Well, then it’s time to get the nuclear arsenal out! Drop an ICBM on Brezil!!!” President Howard yelled, calling for an intercontinental ballistic missile.

“Please calm down, Mr. President! We have promised Brezil that we’d only

use ordinary warheads. If we drop a nuclear bomb now, we'll never be able to fix our relationship with Brezil ever again, even if we *do* manage to take out Joker in the process."

"Shut up!" President Howard shouted. "He's made a fool of me! I'll use a nuclear bomb to fucking murder that—"

At that moment, something suddenly happened to President Howard. His eyes rolled back into his head, and he fell to the ground. He was having a stroke.

Howard was a giant. He weighed 107 kilograms and his body fat percentage was over thirty. If you also took his age into consideration—he was already seventy-four—it was plain to all that his health wasn't the best. He kept clamoring that he was "the healthiest anyone could be" to the Gamerican people, but he secretly suffered hypertension and hyperlipidemia.

<Ronald Howard has been rushed to the hospital.>

This headline spread all over the world.

* * *

Meanwhile, Joker, who had just narrowly escaped Tomahawk missiles, had not budged from his spot and was currently checking on his men. A gigantic mud wall had erupted right before their eyes, called forth by Giovanni's earth magic. Giovanni looked a little pale, so Joker had him drink a Magi Potion. Perhaps he had overexerted himself by using so much magic at once.

"You did good, Giovanni. Earth magic is very effective, as expected. I hope the day comes when you get to use it for agriculture instead of this."

"Thanks, boss."

Giovanni came from a provincial city in Venisuela and was the son of a farmer. Far-left policies had greatly compromised his livelihood, so he had gone to Caracas to look for work. In the end, he hadn't been able to find any and had been living in the slums until Joker picked him up. He adored Joker as if the man was his own father, sticking to his side ever since.

"Thank you too, Chico," Joker said. "Without your detection skill, none of us

would have made it out alive.”

The man whom Joker had just addressed, Chico, was a two-meter tall giant with tattoos all over his face. He was built like an American football player, with a broad chest and thick arms, while the tattoos on his face made him look like a gangster. In truth, he was a pretty shy person and had only gotten his tattoos in order to avoid getting picked on in the slums.

“Do you think you’ll be able to sense enemies further away from now on?”

“I’m sorry. I already knew the attack would come from the east, so I was able to focus and caught it in time, but I don’t think I could do any better...”

“I see. Don’t worry about it. You did great today, and I expect good things from you in the future as well.”

Joker continued.

“All right! Let’s get going, then. We shouldn’t see any more missiles raining down on us for the time being.”

Joker sat in one of the trucks running at around eighty kilometers per hour, lost in thought. He had put on a strong front earlier, showing appreciation to all of his men, but it had been a close call. They had only been able to make preparations and intercept those missiles because they were Tomahawks, which were rather slow. If the missiles had exceeded Mach 1, they would have had no way to block them. The reason he was so set on going down the BR-174 was also that, by staying inland, they could stay out of the range of supersonic missiles.

Even though I surpassed the limitations of the human species, I’m still too weak to withstand a direct attack from modern weaponry. Once I clear a Rank A dungeon, I’ll become an S-Ranker. I’m guessing mythical beasts will be able to rival heavy machine guns, like Gatling guns...

True strength meant being able to get your opponent to accept your conditions. Everyone in the world competed for strength. Nations competed with one another, just as businesses and individuals did. This was basically life in a nutshell. You then had to be even stronger to prevent anyone else from stealing what you had obtained. Thus, the class system had been born.

There was only one way to crush that system: becoming stronger than the rich.

Dear Gameraica. Dear people who have it all. I'll teach you that there is someone more powerful than all of you...

At some point, Joker had closed his eyes.

Chapter 5: First Advance Overseas

[Japanese Ministry of Dungeons — Ishihara Yukie]

Joker's Legion invaded Brezil right in the middle of the United States presidential election. The Brezilian army's resistance was fruitless, and the Legion breached the border before heading south. Gamerica decided to work with Brezil and launched an attack, sending Tomahawk missiles from the Atlantic Ocean, but the operation had been a failure. Howard then had a stroke during a fit of rage and still hadn't regained consciousness...

News of the Gamerican president's illness reached the rest of the world in the blink of an eye. An emergency meeting between high-ranking officials was immediately organized at the Ministry of Dungeons to discuss the impact these recent events would have on the Gamerican elections as well as what it meant when it came to the dungeons.

"Howard is still unconscious, and considering his age, it's highly unlikely that he'll be able to take on his presidential duties again even if he does wake up. The Vice President, Michael Bates, will take over his duties for the time being, but the elections are in a mere three weeks. The Republican Party will have a hard time putting up another candidate before then..."

"Does that mean the Republican Party will have no other choice but to give up the election? I had assumed that Michael Bates would become their candidate by default in such a case."

"No, Bates had been designated as running mate, but he didn't even run during the primary election. On top of that, Howard isn't dead. His vice president and his family will probably continue campaigning for him. If he doesn't get better, the runner-up of the primary election will eventually step up, though."

"The runner-up was..."

"That would be businessman Rock de la Banderas. He runs in the Republican

primary every single election and usually loses. Since the current president was also running this time, all the other candidates ended up giving up on the primary before the voting even began. In the end, he was the only one running against Howard. He barely got one percent of the votes, but he's still the runner-up and the only one who can step up if Howard is incapacitated."

"That's ridiculous. Well, we also had such a businessman in Japan, didn't we? He kept saying smiling was the most important thing and put together the Happy Meal Party or something."

"Vice Minister. And that name was made up to make fun of him online. De la Banderas would become the Republican Party's new de facto candidate if Howard doesn't recover. Still, that doesn't mean we'll get to see a proper election. Banderas has already declared he wouldn't run. Since the elections are in a mere three weeks, I think it's fairly likely that the Republicans just won't have a candidate to present, which means the next president will be..."

With Howard's collapse, the elections were now in the hands of the Democrat Party. Even if Howard recovered in time, it had been proven that his health was far from being as good as he had pretended it was, and gathering supporters again would be difficult. Theodore Roosevelt's record of being the youngest president of the United States of Gamera in history was likely to be beaten soon.

"Indeed. It's very likely to be Peter Wozniak, the Democratic candidate. We're about to see a major turning point in their foreign policy. Let's examine his dungeon policies once again."

They went through the campaign pledges of Peter Wozniak, candidate of the Democrat Party and soon-to-be president of the United States of Gamera. All in all, Wozniak's plan concerning the dungeons was simple: he planned to consult Japan and outsource dungeon-clearing endeavors. His program could be summarized in five points.

One: clearing all thirty-one dungeons on Gamerican soil was the most pressing objective. Wozniak would contract the Dungeon Crusaders or Dungeon Busters to achieve this.

Two: Gamera would join the IDAO—International Dungeon Adventurer

Organization—and set up a civilian adventurer initiative so that Gamerican adventurers could enter their dungeons.

Three: Gamerica would use the Japanese Civilian Adventurer Initiative and adventurer crime countermeasures policies as a base. They would then build their own systems within one year, which would be designed to take all of the specificities of their multiethnic society into consideration.

Four: the Joker problem should be approached through both hard and soft power. Gamerica would endeavor to support poorer countries, including Venisuela, while designing countermeasures to face criminals such as Joker. They would push for the creation of a special organization designed to focus on adventurer crimes under Interpol.

Five: the United Nations Security Council as well as the United Nations General Assembly would vote to forbid adventurer and monster cards to be used as part of the military of any country.

“What makes them think we’ll play along after they unilaterally decided to pull out their troops, trampling the U.S.-Japan Security Treaty? Well, that guy *is* an idealist after all. I guess we could work with them then, depending on the conditions they offer. Should we ask for a cutting-edge nuclear-powered aircraft carrier complete with fighter aircraft?”

“We will need to talk this over with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Defense. To be honest, what interests me the most is his plan concerning Joker. He and his Legion should be closing in on Manaus in the State of Amazonas. This will surely result in a fight with the Brezilian army.”

Ishihara let out a sigh. The job of the vice-minister of the Ministry of Dungeons was to think beyond the scope of Japan. Exchanging information with the IDAO, communicating with the office of the Crusaders within the Vatican, handling the requests of the various Asian countries that asked for adventurers to be dispatched, giving advice on adventure initiatives... The Ministry had a broad range of activities. Ishihara sat at the very top of that organization as Vice-Minister, but that chair was far from comfortable. Actually, it was almost a torture device.

A lot of vice-ministers retire after two years, which goes to show how hard it is

to handle this job. Well, I am getting stressed out. I should probably take some time to head to the beauty salon...

Someone called out to Ishihara, and she regained her focus. The Foreign Minister of the Republic of Woori had apparently just departed for Venisuela. The Woorian seemed to be treating these talks as groundwork before the upcoming meeting of the G20 next month.

Ishihara sighed again, exasperated by their thoughtless pursuits.



[Roppongi 3-chome, Tokyo — Japan—Taiwan Exchange Association]

It had never been all that well known, but Taiwan was not the name of a country but was rather the name of the island. The country was called the Republic of Sina. After World War II, a civil war had broken out in Sina, and the government of the Republic of Sina was forced to flee to Taiwan. The Oriental Republic of Sina—or the People’s Republic of Sina—had then pressured the UN to remove the Republic of Sina from the UN, thus securing its own place in the international community. They had gone through their allies—Albanya, in particular, had spearheaded the affair—and had succeeded in passing the United Nations General Assembly Resolution 2758—the Albanya Resolution for short—which had effectively removed Taiwan’s representatives from the UN.

It was said that many in Taiwan held great sympathy for Japan, and that was one of the reasons that led to the Albanya Resolution. Japan had strongly opposed Taiwan’s expulsion from the UN, of course, and had gone through every possible democratic channel to prevent it.

In the end, the resolution had passed. Taiwan had been removed, and a dark stain remained on the recent history of diplomacy in Japan.

Japan’s support for Taiwan even ended up influencing the Japan-Sina joint communiqué which normalized Japan’s diplomatic relations with the Oriental Republic of Sina. As part of normalizing relations, the Oriental Republic of Sina had requested that Japan cut all ties with Taiwan. This demand had not been added in the joint communiqué, but the Japanese Foreign Minister at the time had declared that “the treaty between Taiwan and Japan had lost its significance and should end.” Thus ended Japan and Taiwan’s official

relationship.

However, as a result of this vague statement—rather characteristic of Japan—both countries put together non-governmental organizations, and resumed working-level relationships, though political relationships were out of the question. As such, the relationship between Taiwan and Japan was rather peculiar. This diplomatic success of Japan was soon imitated by other countries, such as Gameraica, and non-official but nonetheless very real diplomatic links were formed between Taiwan and most countries.

“I’ve been to Taiwan twice in my life,” I started. “The climate is nice, the people are cheerful, and the food is incredibly good. On top of that, many Taiwanese have a soft spot for Japan, and they usually treat us very amicably, as long as we’re polite and mind our manners.”

“I like Taiwanese food too,” Akira said. “I had some great Taiwanese ramen in Nagoya.”

“Hmm... You know that dish has nothing to do with actual Taiwanese food, right? Strangely enough, they call it Nagoya ramen over there.”

Akira looked utterly surprised by what I had just told him as we entered the building of the Japan—Taiwan Exchange Association in Roppongi. No visa was needed to visit Taiwan as a tourist, but this trip was for work. We didn’t know exactly when we’d be able to return to Japan, so we needed to get a visa first. As for my driver’s license, I had to go through the JAF—Japan Automobile Federation—and apply for a translated version. After that, I’d be free to drive in Taiwan with my Japanese license.

“Tourists don’t need visas, do they, Ezoe-shi? Why do we need to get one?”

Mutsuo and the other members of the IT department seemed puzzled. *Come on, guys. You’re also here to work!*

“We’re all going there to clear a dungeon. We obviously need a visa. It’s our first time going on a business trip abroad, so you’re coming with us too. There are tons of things to check and analyze—how big the dungeon is, how long monsters take to respawn, the drop rates, whether the status windows are different or not...” I explained.

“Then we need to make sure we have good enough internet to work. Wait, do they have Wi-Fi in Taiwan?”

Mutsuo and his pals ran off to confirm all this with the staff of the Japan—Taiwan Exchange Association. The lady at the front desk forced a smile as she explained various things about Taiwan to them. If memory served me right, the internet coverage in Taiwan was even better than in Japan. Apparently, Mutsuo and the others were more worried about security aspects, though. They weren’t fond of the idea of having to go through a foreign provider and decided to use a Japanese operator, even though we were in Taiwan.

“Ezoe-shi, I took the chance to ask for you, and bringing electronic cigarettes inside the country is forbidden. Be careful.”

Taiwan was a country where few people smoked in the first place and regulations on cigarettes were much stricter. Both electronic cigarettes and heated tobacco products were forbidden. Well, I only smoked regular cigarettes, so I didn’t care either way. Just to be safe, I intended to bring several portable ashtrays, though.



[Ministry of Dungeons — Ishihara Yukie]

All of the ministries located in Kasumigahara took part in regular vice minister press conferences. Unless something out of the ordinary happened, however, the content of these press conferences did not make it into newspapers. Nevertheless, not only Japanese media but journalists from all around the world gathered for the press conferences of the Ministry of Dungeons.

Japan was unparalleled when it came to dungeon clearing and research on dungeons at the moment. The Crusaders, who operated in Europe, had also cleared a similar number of dungeons, but each of these belonged to the country in which it had appeared. This meant that Japan was still able to gather more—and often better quality—information regarding the dungeons.

The employee in charge of the public relations department of the Ministry started the press conference today, like always.

“Today, we have something to announce. The dungeon located next to the

Miyakonojo Local Product Promotion Center in Miyakonojo, Miyazaki Prefecture, and the dungeon located on the Kuramoto Crossing in Hakata, Fukuoka Prefecture have both been cleared by Dungeon Busters. Miyakonojo Dungeon has been confirmed to be a Rank B dungeon while Hakata Dungeon is a Rank D dungeon. As of now, only four dungeons remain uncleared. These are located in Sendai, Miyagi Prefecture; Edogawa City, Tokyo; Nagoya City, Aichi Prefecture; and Osaka City, Osaka Prefecture. The JGSDF is working on opening boot camps in these locations as well.”

The sounds of cameras taking pictures filled the room.

Dungeon Busters had a PR department, but news related to dungeon policies was always announced by the Ministry of Dungeons first. The Buster’s PR department focused solely on sharing information on how to best fight monsters, how to camp inside dungeons, and what new equipment and items they had found inside the dungeons.

“We are currently receiving requests from various Asian countries asking us to dispatch adventurers. After receiving news of the most recent achievements of Dungeon Busters, we have decided to task them with clearing a dungeon in Taipei City for the Republic of Sina. Dungeon Busters has already agreed. I am sure that some of our citizens will object to the fact that we are allowing Dungeon Busters to clear dungeons abroad while there are still dungeons that haven’t been cleared in Japan. However, it has become apparent that simply clearing dungeons within our own country will not be enough as terrorists become increasingly active in certain places. The world has to unite around the UN to face the greatest calamity to ever threaten mankind. Thus, we have decided to first lend a hand to one of our neighbors, the Republic of Sina.”

Now that the general statement was over, it was time for questions. The current governor had emerged victorious in the Tokyo gubernatorial elections, and I was asked to comment on one of the statements the governor had made.

“In preparation for a future in which dungeons exist, I’ll up the security of the city to make sure that Tokyo remains the safest city in the world forever,” the governor had said.

I had answered that our efforts would be concentrated on raising adventurers

and making sure all the dungeons were cleared so regular citizens did not have to worry.

To be honest, the governor kept making vague conceptual statements that didn't mean much in actuality. If monsters suddenly attacked Tokyo, neither the Tokyo Government Office nor the National Police Agency would be able to do anything. I just hoped they wouldn't stand in our way and become a hindrance if that ever happened.

"My name is Jong, and I work for the Daily Woori. I have a question regarding your dispatching of adventurers abroad. You've cited the proximity of the Republic of Sina as the reason you decided to send adventurers there, but Japan's closest neighbor is Woori. I believe our government has sent several requests for help to the Ministry of Dungeons. Why have you chosen the Republic of Sina over the Republic of Woori? Neither of us is a member of the IDAO, so I am sure this fact did not play any part in your decision."

At the moment, the relationship between Japan and Woori was catastrophic to say the least. However, there were plenty of Zainichi Woorians living in Japan, and many people, especially left-wing activists, were calling for a rapprochement between the two countries. Most Japanese citizens were against this rapprochement though, unlike ten years ago when the Woorian wave was all the rage, and downright hated Woori or had a rather poor opinion of the country at the very least.

"You are correct. Neither country is part of the IDAO. But this is not the reason that led us to make this decision. The Republic of Sina is not a member of the UN, meaning they would not be able to join the IDAO even if they wished. On the other hand, Woori has made the decision to oppose the IDAO even though the Republic of Woori has produced a Secretary-General of the United Nations in the past. The Oriental Republic of Sina is already aware of the upcoming deployment of the Busters. Once the dungeon is cleared, the Oriental Republic of Sina and Japan will issue a common recommendation to the IDAO so that the Republic of Sina may join with a special status."

"Do you mean to say that you cannot trust the Republic of Woori?"

"That is not what I said. However, the Republic of Sina has observed the basic

rules of the IDAO since the very start and expressed its desire to join the organization, if possible. In comparison, the Republic of Woori has openly defied the IDAO. I believe it should be crystal clear which country ought to be prioritized. Wouldn't you agree?"

Reporters from every other country nodded while the reporters from Daily Woori and Urinara News looked dissatisfied.

The situation in Woori was messy at the moment. The current chaos had first been triggered by a reevaluation of the minimum wage, which had then brought down the economy. The plan's failure to bring together both parts of the peninsula, the comfort women issue, and the conscripted worker issue came up again, and further deteriorated the relationship between Japan and Woori. The appearance of the dungeons and the withdrawal of Gamerican troops had finally managed to bring down President Park's approval rating to a meager twenty percent. Demonstrators now crowded the streets every weekend.

Regardless, President Park had not given up on his obsession with unifying the north and south. Ever since he had declared himself in favor of Joker, the rest of the world had turned its back on his country. Many Woorians already considered their country ruined. They needed Japan's help but knew full well they could not expect it. They were up against a wall.



[Republic of Woori — Blue House]

In Gamera, President Howard had collapsed. In Japan, Dungeon Busters was finally ready to go abroad for the first time. In Europe, the Dungeon Crusaders had successfully cleared a Rank C dungeon. And in South Gamera, Joker and his troops, the Legion, were finally on the verge of confronting the Brazilian army. At the very same time, the government of Woori, Japan's closest neighbor, was filled with gloom.

"Peter Wozniak, the Democrat candidate, is very likely to become the next president of the United States of Gamera. Unless something unexpected happens, his win is set in stone. The US Woorian Mutual Defense Treaty has never been voided, so he will likely dispatch troops again. If that happens...

Well, I'm afraid our chances of reconciliation with the Kingdom of Ko will be close to zero."

"General Secretary Kim's younger sister Kim Yuh-Jun has blamed us in the past. She said our country was responsible for the breakdown of last year's talks between the Kingdom of Ko and Gameraica. After the Gamerican troops finally pulled out, we were able to work on the reconciliation of the north and south as well as future reunification. Now that we've expressed our support of Joker, the north was finally beginning to accept the idea of a rapprochement. However, our breaking with the north will be unavoidable if the US-Woorian Mutual Defense Treaty is brought back from the dead and Gamerican troops are stationed on the peninsula once again. The north and the south may remain estranged forever," Park Jae-An, the president of the Republic of Woori, said with a grimace.

He was on the verge of accomplishing his greatest objective, the reunification of the north and the south, but now, everything might just fall apart.

"Do we have any means at our disposal to stop Gamerican troops from coming back?" he asked after a pause.

President Park was starting to feel impatient. His dream was almost within his grasp. The Gamerican troops, the worst plague to ever fall upon his country, had finally withdrawn, and most of the pro-Japanese traitors had been taken care of. By expressing his support for Joker, he had made sure that the whole world knew that the Republic of Woori was acting to solve the worldwide issue of poverty. Becoming a nation relevant enough to have a real influence, not only in Asia but all over the world, was one of the dearest wishes of the Woorian people.

Of course, all of the above was nothing more than wishful thinking on the part of President Park—and his government. Japan, the EU, and Gameraica all considered Woori a potential enemy ever since the country had come out with a declaration in support of Joker.

Japan in particular had suspended its visa exemption measures for Woorian citizens after the Olympics. "There is no way to know when a terrorist from the Republic of Woori will enter our country," Japanese authorities had said. At this

point, diplomatic relations between Japan and Woori had pretty much been severed.

“If we do not let the Gamerican troops back, we’ll be announcing to the world that we’re siding with Joker. If that happens, Gameraica and the EU may join Japan and refuse visas to our citizens. If it comes to that, we’ll truly be ostracized by the rest of the world.”

“Many of our major companies are considering relocation, and some have already put relocation plans into action. If this continues, our country will go down the drain. I can only advise you to reconsider and collaborate with Gameraica and Japan...”

President Park Jae-An let out a dramatic sigh at these words. Cleansing society of social evils and achieving the reunification of the north and the south... Pursuing these ideals far outweighed anything else, including the constitution and any other laws in this country. In fact, these ideals were just and righteous on an absolute, universal level. Anyone who opposed this—be they a person, group, or organization—was both anti-nationalist and just plain evil. Gameraica ought to support the reunification of the Republic of Woori, and Japan ought to rectify its fallacious understanding of history and offer a heartfelt apology as well as compensation to their victims, the Woorian people. *Why doesn’t the world recognize the righteousness of our ways?*

“I had Foreign Minister Kang leave for Venisuela in preparation for the next G20 meeting, which will take place at the end of November. Even Wozniak, who is likely to become the next president of the United States of Gameraica, has said that while he had no intention to negotiate with Joker, he still wanted to hear him out. We need to negotiate with Joker and President Clyde ahead of time. If we can mediate and get both sides to talk to each other, our citizens will surely be impressed, and I’ll regain their support right away. This will inarguably be a big step toward reunification as well.”

The president’s aides and members of his entourage who still had some awareness left would have admonished him under normal circumstances, saying that all of this was impossible. However, President Park had been in office for three years and had already gotten rid of everyone who did not agree with him. As a result, most of the central figures of his government were

thoroughly convinced by his pro-north stance. History had proven time and time again that when idealist leaders who ignored reality held power, their countries were bound to fall into ruin. The Republic of Woori was about to repeat history.



[Republic of Sina — Taipei City — Ezoe Kazuhiko]

Two airports served Taipei. One was Taoyuan International Airport, where most planes arriving from Japan landed. The other was Taipei Songshan Airport, located within the city. Dūnhuà Lù, the major street on which a dungeon had appeared, lay right outside Taipei Songshan Airport, so we naturally decided to enter the country through Taipei Songshan Airport this time.

“I have been waiting for your arrival, dear members of Dungeon Busters,”

A staff member of the Japan—Taiwan Exchange Association came to greet us as soon as we were done with our security screenings. Each member had put their frequently used cards in a pouch, then turned the pouch itself into a card. We had transported these with the rest of our luggage, but the method would prove difficult to use in the future. At the moment, few people could materialize cards above ground; the only people who could achieve this in Japan were all members of Dungeon Busters. However, the number of busters would inevitably go up, and international rules—as well as an organization under the IDAO dedicated to checking monster cards, weapons, and verifying the names and means of transportation of every traveling buster—would soon become necessary.

I should make a report to the Ministry of Dungeons about that. I’m pretty sure they’ve already thought of this but it wouldn’t hurt.

“I’m afraid journalists have gathered in front of the airport. If you’d like, I can have the car meet us at the back entrance, so we can avoid them.”

“That won’t be necessary. This is the first time Dungeon Busters has worked abroad. We should go out and face the media. I’m sure it will also give the people of Taipei some peace of mind.”

Only fifteen countries had official diplomatic links with the Republic of Sina.

On the other hand, the relationships between Taiwan and Japan as well as Taiwan and Gamercia were confined to private-sector exchanges. Many Taiwanese people felt alone in the face of the extraordinary emergency that the dungeons represented. I wanted to get rid of the dungeon as soon as possible in order to give them some relief and show that they were not all alone.

“Ezoe-shi, are you gonna use the Translation Jelly?”

“No. Materializing cards above ground requires a special permit from the government. If I were to suddenly use a card without going through the authorities, the people here would stop trusting us. Let’s just ask the employee of the Japan—Taiwan Exchange Association to translate for us,” I suggested.

Thus started my talk with the journalists at the airport. I had Akira and the rest go to the hotel ahead of me while I stayed behind to handle the media. Dungeon Busters was not an entertainment agency, so I didn’t care much about us being popular, but I decided to do the talking myself as we did have to avoid arousing doubts or suspicions over adventurers.

“Could you tell us how you feel about clearing this dungeon?” a journalist asked.

“It’s the first time Dungeon Busters is entering a dungeon abroad, and having the Republic of Sina as our first destination is very meaningful to me. I’ve never forgotten how much support Japan received from the people of Taiwan when disaster struck nine years ago with the Tohoku earthquake and tsunami. Every Japanese citizen, including me, is very thankful for the Taiwanese people’s help. I hope that, this time, I can do my part to repay the kindness you have shown us.”

“Do you believe you will succeed in clearing the dungeon?”

“I’m unable to answer this question until we’ve properly checked the dungeon...” I paused. “I received word that a Safety Zone has been found on Floor 1, however, which indicates the dungeon is unlikely to be a high-rank dungeon. As you know, dungeons come in several ranks, and at the moment, we are able to clear dungeons of Rank B at the most. Please rest assured that we’ll do our utmost to bring peace of mind to the people of Taipei.”

Although I got some amicable questions, others weren’t so nice. For instance,

one journalist wanted me to comment on the Japanese government asking Taiwan to relinquish its claim on the Senkaku Islands in exchange for accepting its request.

“I’m a civilian, so I’d like to refrain from commenting on government policies,” I said, trying to keep my answer as noncommittal as possible. “However, I’d like to ask you something. Are territorial disputes, disagreements over historical interpretation, and ideological quarrels issues that must be settled immediately? I believe that now is the time for the world to come together as one and face the dungeons. Can’t these issues wait to be discussed once again after the dungeons have been taken care of? Putting some issues on hold is the mature thing to do here.”

Depending on how you chose to understand my words, they could be taken as an attack on the critics of the current Taiwanese government or as an attack on Japan itself for trying to bring up a territorial dispute here. What I really meant was exactly what I had said, to be honest. I truly wished every country would just put their issues on hold for a few years.

“As you know, Joker, the self-proclaimed Demon King, has attacked Brezil and is currently clashing with the Brezilian army. Do you think you could win if Dungeon Busters was to cross paths with Joker’s Legion?”

“I do not have any data to base my answer on, so I’d like to refrain from giving an irresponsible estimation. I do have one thing to say to Joker, though. Please stop the ridiculous things you are doing...”

I was only talking to the media in front of the airport, so when I felt I’d had enough, I stopped answering. After that, I had to check into the hotel and then go pay a visit to the Army Command Headquarters to get detailed information on the dungeon. We were not here on behalf of the Japanese government, so there was no need for meetings or negotiations. I’d leave that to the Ministry of Dungeons and Ministry of Defense. Our only job was to clear the dungeon.

Well, it won’t be that easy, now, will it...?

As we exited the hotel, we came face-to-face with a crowd protesting our clearing the dungeon.



The Dungeon Crusaders, a force formed by the Three Great Chivalric Orders, had prioritized clearing dungeons across Europe that had appeared around historical landmarks and important roads and thus needed to be fully erased. European dungeons were being cleared one after the other at the hands of the Crusaders, reborn after centuries, but they had yet to touch any dungeon over Rank C. The members of the Crusaders themselves were still stuck at Rank B, which could explain this, but more than that, they respected the decisions of the Curia.

“Our situation is different from that of Dungeon Busters, which has been focusing on Japanese dungeons. There are forty-one countries in the EU. If we add the Rushian Federation, the Osmanian Republic, and the Britannia Kingdom despite them being Protestant, we go up to sixty countries. The Lord does not discriminate, and His trials are to be faced by everyone, even those who do not share our faith. We have to cooperate with each other, regardless of our beliefs.”

A new Dicastery (DRDC) had been created within the Curia to handle the dungeons and the activities of the Crusaders. The man at the head of this Dicastery was Cardinal Sakaguchi Stefano Hiroshi. He had been born and raised in Japan but had given up his Japanese citizenship to become a citizen of the Vatican State. Sakaguchi, as a former Japanese citizen, was diligent and flexible. He coordinated requests from every country and had managed to expand the Dungeon Crusaders’s field range, which now extended all the way to North Africa.

One could say that the request from Brezil, the South Gamerican country with the most Catholics, reaching the Vatican had been inevitable. Sakaguchi had immediately summoned the Crusaders.

“Rolf Schnabel, reporting for duty.”

“Thank you for joining me today,” Sakaguchi thanked the Crusaders.

In addition to the First Army led by Rolf Schnabel, additional candidates had been selected from the young members of the Chivalric Orders and Catholic believers, and boot camps were currently being held inside a dungeon located

in Rome. The members of the First Army had managed to reach Rank C in the blink of an eye. The candidates had not grown as fast, though, and only some of them had managed to get to Rank D. Sakaguchi had quickly informed the members of the First Army of this fact before getting into the true topic of the day before getting into the true topic of the day. Alberta Reigenbach shook her head, a forced smile plastered on her lips.

“Well, they may not prove to be as outstanding as you are,” the Cardinal said lightly.

“No, that’s probably normal. If anything, we—or rather, Dungeon Busters—are the strange ones. To be precise, Herr Ezoe, who’s in charge of Dungeon Busters, is insane. He told us we wouldn’t die if we did not shower and locked us inside a dungeon for two weeks straight. I thought I would go crazy...” Alberta recalled, a distant look in her eyes.

She let out a dry laugh. Sakaguchi also let out a little laugh and took a sip of his lukewarm espresso.

“Now, now. Let me tell you why I’ve gathered you here today. We have received a request from a certain South Gamerican country with a large Catholic community.”

The Crusaders’ expressions soured in an instant. In Europe, the terrorist who was making use of the greatest crisis to befall humanity—the appearance of the dungeons and the possibility of the Monster Stampede—also made the news almost every day.

“Did the Brezilian government send in a request?”

“Brezil is the largest South Gamerican country, and most of its inhabitants are Catholics. The number of believers in South Gamerica and Africa has been on the rise in recent years. There are almost 1.3 billion believers around the world, and out of them, 170 million are Brezilian. As the Roman Catholic Church, we cannot ignore the plight of the Brezilian people. I would like to task the Crusaders with the mission of defeating Joker.”

“Hang on!” Marco cut in, raising his hand.

He was sitting with his legs crossed, and although his manner of speech was

as casual as ever, his eyes showed how serious he was.

“If you’re asking us to go clear the Brezilian dungeons, we’re happy to oblige. However, I have a feeling that’s not it, is it? By ‘defeating Joker’ you mean ‘kill him,’ don’t you? He’s a person, not a monster,” Marco added.

Sakaguchi remained silent.

Marco was right. They would become murderers. The reason Dungeon Busters had yet to make a move was that Ezoë, a civilian, couldn’t kill Joker, another civilian. If he did, he’d be charged with manslaughter. It didn’t matter how evil Joker was. The law was clear: killing someone was murder, and it was a crime—unless it was under very specific circumstances.

“Brezil will have naturally reached out to Japan as well. A lot of people of Japanese descent are citizens, after all. Still, Monsieur Ezoë decided to prioritize Southeast Asian dungeons. Well, I’m guessing that he did not refuse to act but rather could not act, which is why we, who are technically an army recognized by the Vatican State, are being asked to make a move...” Léonard Chartres, the French priest, said, making the sign of the cross.

The other members also wore grim expressions. They had accepted joining the Crusaders in order to clear dungeons. If the enemies were monsters, they wouldn’t hesitate one second to join the fight, even above ground. If the enemy they had to slay was a human, however, it changed everything. Times had changed, even if they called themselves Crusaders. It wasn’t the Middle Ages anymore, an era in which people died without anyone batting an eye.

“This is nothing more than the mumbling of a seventy-year-old man, but...” the Cardinal started softly.

After seeing the faces of the young men and women in front of him, the older man, who had plenty of life experience, had decided to speak up.

“I sometimes wonder whether Joker truly intends to destroy our world. What do you think?” he asked.



[Brezil — State of Amazonas — Manaus Outskirts]

“FIRE!!!”

The mortars all expelled white smoke at the same time, and explosives rained down. The ground was hollowed out in several places as huge explosions sounded, filling the area. Steel fragments scattered in every direction. However, the thick shield held by monsters protected the Legion, and the Brazilian offensive did not succeed in dealing any damage.

Soon after, a tank gun aimed right at one of the shields. It wasn't strong enough to leave a dent in the shield though. Not even an armor-piercing shell could go through the Cyclops' Adamant Shield, an SR piece of equipment used by Joker's Legion.

“Goblins! Time to return the courtesy!”

All of the Rank B goblins threw hand grenades at the enemy at the same time. The speed of the projectile and the distance they covered were unbelievable. The grenades had been thrown from more than five hundred meters away, yet they exploded right over the heads of the Brazilian soldiers. To get all the way there in so little time before the explosion, these grenades must have traveled at several hundred kilometers per second.

Some white phosphorus smoke grenades had been mixed in with the ones the goblins threw, as the Brazilian troops fighting on the outskirts of Manaus were engulfed in a cloud of thick, white smoke.

“Next up are...the wyverns! TA DAAH!” Joker exclaimed, throwing ten cards up in the air.

Ten wyverns appeared and pounced on the Brazilian army. Fire rained down upon the soldiers, who ran in every direction, trying to escape it. Bullets fired from the Brazilian helicopters did nothing to stop the wyverns. Neither did the wire-guided missiles, as the wyverns dodged them, making use of their otherworldly aerial mobility.

“So that's the power of monsters... The power of the Legion...”

The Brazilian troops had been massed here to protect Manaus, a large city that flanked the Amazon River. General Jumpei Carlos Satou, the commander-in-chief of the Brazilian army and the Amazon Military Command, clenched his

fists as he heard the latest report at headquarters. He had heard about the estimations of the Legion's strength from the Gamericans, but their only point of reference for now was the one battle they had fought in Colombian. For that reason, the Amazon Military Command headquartered in Manaus had been tasked with gathering information and delaying the enemy. However, the data they had been able to gather defied common sense.

"It's like fighting fully autonomous robots that learn in real time. As soon as you think you've found something that works against them—the Carl Gustav for instance—they find a way to counter it. The same goes for the wyverns. They hover around like helicopters and suddenly start moving at jet speed the next second. They use their high mobility and that white smoke of theirs to blind us before finishing off our troops with blasts of fire. These monsters seem to be learning and evolving after each battle!"

As soon as the Brazilian army figured out an effective weapon, the monsters switched up their equipment and found a way to deal with it. The same went for strategies. The Brazilians' airborne attacks and night raids had managed to succeed, but the Legion had immediately adapted and counterattacked. On top of that, they seemed to learn new strategies and were able to replicate them after only seeing them once. Every single monster was both a weapon and a warrior at the same time.

"We have a report from the twelfth military district. The citizens will be fully evacuated in three hours."

"Got it. We're retreating to the third defense line. We need to hold on for three more hours!"

The Brazilians had far more soldiers and many more weapons than the Legion, but they kept getting pushed back. Saitou willed himself to remain calm and continued to issue orders.

"Heh heh heh! After today, everyone will know how the Legion fights! I'm sure Gamerican and NATO leaders are starting to freak out," Joker said, jumping for joy.

The blue-haired young girl just looked at him, her face betraying no expression whatsoever. Joker was dancing the cha-cha when one of his men

approached him.

“Boss, the Brezilian army is retreating and the city is coming into view. Will the battle evolve into urban warfare?”

“That’d be great. I was just thinking I’d like my troops to gain some urban warfare experience. Don’t rush for now. Chase the enemy slowly. Oh, and I want someone to get me a report on the monsters that died. I want to know how they died, what weapon killed them... Be as precise as possible.”

Joker listened to the current state of the battle while one of his underlings took notes. After hearing the full report, he discussed the situation with his men. He first checked if anyone had any questions before reviewing the way the battle had gone and whether some things could have been done differently.

“A doctor will always get a good look at the situation before starting an operation. They’ll decide how to approach the affected part, handle the procedure accurately and rapidly, and then stop to reflect on the way they’ve worked regardless of whether the operation was successful or not. That’s how they decide how to handle things the next time. War is the same.”

“What should we do if it does turn into urban warfare, boss?”

“Hmm... Should we try using the skeletons?” Joker pondered. “Modern soldiers are used to fighting with guns, but skeletons are only made of bones. Even if bullets reach them, there’s a high chance those bullets will ricochet. Fighting them with a sword is much more advantageous in close combat.”

“What do we do if there are still civilians left in the city?”

“Take good care of them. They’ll be good hostages we can use to gain leverage over the Brezilian government. Well, I expect most of the citizens will have been evacuated by now, so Manaus is probably a ghost town at the moment. Picking up what others threw away isn’t robbery, so feel free to take whatever you can find in empty houses and shops. Food, clothing, appliances... We’re gonna pick it all up.”

“YEAH!!!”

Joker’s underlings cheered. The Legion was constantly being kept in check by Joker. Killing, hurting, or stealing from civilians meant the death penalty in

Joker’s army. In the past, an ex-convict had gotten carried away and inappropriately touched a child in Colombian. Joker had made sure to chop him into small pieces while he was still alive. Though Joker controlled his men through fear, letting them have a breather from time to time was also needed. Today, they’d get to claim whatever they wanted in a city previously inhabited by several hundred thousand people. They’d most likely get their hands on plenty of household appliances to send back to Venisuela.

“Having fun is good and all, guys, but don’t you dare forget this. You’re free to handle soldiers and whoever points a gun at you however you like, but do not touch any unarmed civilian!” Simón Claudio, a man who had been following Joker since he’d visited the El Rodeo Prison, warned, face serious.

He had become used to dealing with freaks and criminals when he was in El Rodeo Prison and was extremely convincing.

“All right. Let’s get going, then.”

The Demon King and his men continued their advance.



[Vatican State — The Curia — DRDC]

“I sometimes wonder whether Joker truly intends to destroy our world. What do you think?”

Rolf and the others were confused by Sakaguchi’s—the head of the DRDC—question. Joker and his allies had materialized an army of monsters to march on foreign countries and were seizing the rights to several dungeons. He had fought armed forces head-on and was responsible for the deaths of dozens of people. His goal was to make use of the Monster Stampede set to happen in ten years to bring ruin to humanity. Or perhaps he was only using this as an excuse to get as much money as he possibly could out of advanced countries. Not only had Rolf and the rest of the Crusaders considered this, but so had several politicians and analysts.

“I know it may not seem like it, but I can’t help but wonder. If Joker were the only human in his army and had only surrounded himself with monsters, I would surely agree with everyone else. However, he has plenty of human

subordinates. I don't believe he's only using them to film and edit his videos. They must be entering the dungeons with him as well."

"What would that change? It just means that they're a group of terrorists, doesn't it?" Alberta asked.

Sakaguchi shook his head.

"I've lived a long life, and there is much I can see now. No one follows the desperate. They follow those who give them hope. These men decided to work under the Demon King and fight for the future he promised them because they've found hope there. If that future truly was about the downfall of humanity, would they hold such hope?"

"So what you mean to say is that these terrorists are only using the Monster Stampede as a threat and putting on a show to blackmail the rest of us? Sure, he has pretty words to throw around, but we're not pushovers!"

"Marco! You're being rude to His Eminence!" Alberta cut in.

Marco shrugged as Alberta picked up where he had left off.

"Still, Marco is right," she added. "If the Demon King's true aim is to coerce us by holding the Monster Stampede and the threat of the dungeons over our heads, shouldn't it be dealt with through diplomatic means? Our mission as God's vanguard is to stand up to the dungeons and accomplish the Reconquista. I don't believe murdering someone for the sake of politics is what we were meant to do."

Rolf and the others nodded in agreement. The Crusaders had been reborn under the direct order of the pope after hundreds of years, and their presence had given the people of Europe hope. Every time they succeeded in clearing a dungeon, the news outlets of that country reported on it extensively, which prompted thousands to gather in churches on weekends to offer prayers.

It would be unforgivable for these very Crusaders to commit murder, not on behalf of the Catholic faith, but on behalf of the European Union. If such an act was to take place, their very *raison d'être* would be threatened. As such, Rolf and his fellow Crusaders were very opposed to this mission.

"Brezil has only requested that we somehow find a way to stop the Legion's

invasion. They have not explicitly asked for Joker's head, so you needn't concern yourself with that."

"Wouldn't the end result be the same any—"

Sakaguchi raised his hand, stopping Alberta's argument.

"Please listen to what I have to tell you first. I do not think Joker is simply a terrorist. He may be hiding something. If he just wanted to shake the world by making use of the threat of the Monster Stampede, he would have no need to invade foreign countries. After orchestrating a coup in Venisuela, he could have used the new government to negotiate with the UN or another country. What need did he have to call himself the Demon King, put together an organization, and invade other countries? I want you to find out what his goal is."

"So what you are really asking us is to get in contact with Joker?"

Sakaguchi nodded. Rolf held his chin in his left hand as he reflected on the situation at hand.

"He deliberately gave himself the name Demon King. I think this must be linked to his goal," Sakaguchi continued. "Naturally, this is nothing more than my assumption. Joker is as strong as you are. No one but you can approach him and initiate talks."

"I understand," Rolf finally said after a pause. "If Joker really is an insane terrorist or is trying to coerce us for profit, we will do whatever we can to detain him. If it isn't possible, we will injure him until he cannot move anymore, but we won't kill him. The law shall deal with him after that. We still have one issue, however. If he is indeed hiding something, I'm afraid we won't be able to decide what to do."

"If that happens, please come back immediately. You do not need to worry about killing him or capturing him. Retreat at once, and report to the Vatican. To be honest, I am hoping that Joker truly is an insane terrorist or that he is doing this out of greed. If he has another goal... Well..."

Sakaguchi did not finish his sentence. The Crusaders looked at each other, waiting for him to continue. After a few moments of silence, Chloé Fontaine could not bear it anymore.

“If he does, then...?” she asked.

“I’m afraid the Book of Revelation will come to pass. Armageddon might be upon us,” Sakaguchi finally said.

The Crusaders did not dare to question him further after taking in his grave expression.



[United States of Gamera — White House]

President Ronald Howard’s spouse—in other words, the First Lady, Mireia Howard—was at the White House, discussing the future with the president’s aides and her family.

“We still have no idea when President Howard is going to wake up. According to the doctors, his brain suffered some damage, so even if he regains consciousness, he may have to deal with permanent aphasia. For him to fully recover, there is no choice but to use a dungeon item. If we have him drink a High Potion or an Extra Potion, he will be cured in no time.”

Units tasked with entering the dungeons had been formed within the Gamerican army, and dungeons were being investigated. During these activities, potions had been found, and it wouldn’t be impossible to get their hands on one to cure the president if they were to make use of his influence.

“Extra Potions allow the body to revert back to a fully healthy state. His blood pressure and cholesterol levels would also go back to normal, and he would be able to tell everyone he’s now perfectly healthy. If we can make this work, the election can still be won.”

“The president was always robust. If his health issues are resolved, he’ll be able to handle his duties for the next four years with no problem.”

The president’s aides were getting all fired up, but as soon as they asked the vice president to secure a potion, Mireia Howard stopped them. She was Ronald’s third wife and twenty-four years younger than him.

“We know close to nothing about the dungeon items. What if they have side effects? I’m against giving anything of the sort to my husband. To be honest, I

always thought that a second term would be too much for him, considering his age. We also have the Howard Organization to manage, and I want us to have some time to enjoy as a family,” she said.

Howard’s company—which his son currently oversaw—brought in almost ten billion dollars annually while Howard’s personal assets were worth over two billion dollars. Howard’s previous wives would obviously come to pester Mireia in the future when the time to read his will came. The family was sure to think of all of these little disagreements when making decisions.

None of the people present in the room were oblivious to the First Lady’s calculations. However, the aides just looked at each other wordlessly and decided to drop the matter at once.

Ronald Howard had not been an easy president to serve, but he’d had great leadership skills, worthy of a man who had built an empire in one generation. The issue was the way he’d made use of his leadership. The self-centered “Gamerica First” ideology that he had pushed would never work in the current context. After all, the issue at hand did not concern a single person, a single government, or even a single country; it was an issue that concerned the whole world.

“Contact Republican Party headquarters. And get ready to talk to Congress...”

Everyone stepped out of the room, ready to fulfill their tasks.



[Japan — Kantei]

Not long after the Olympics, Prime Minister Urabe Seiichirou was ready to enter a do-or-die battle in which he would risk his entire political career: the constitutional reform proposal.

“We only have nine years left before the Monster Stampede. We need to prepare for the crisis that will eventually befall humanity by clearly including the JSDF in the constitution. We will hold a national referendum next year on February 7 and aim to put the law into effect by May 3,” Urabe explained.

The cabinet ministers nodded. The current constitution stated that the Japanese people were “determined to preserve our security and existence,

trusting in the justice and faith of the peace-loving peoples of the world,” but it had not taken bloodthirsty monsters into consideration. It didn’t take terrorists like Joker into consideration either. The current constitution embodied the cruel divergence of reality from pacifist ideals. With seventy percent of the current Diet in favor of reform, depositing a reform proposal was possible. The Diet would approve it when the extraordinary Diet session ended in late November and set the rest of the plan into motion.

“Mr. Prime Minister, when do you plan to meet the man set to become the next president of the United States of Gamera, Peter Wozniak?” the Minister for Foreign Affairs asked.

Every minister wanted to hear the prime minister’s answer. The next Gamera president would officially take office after a two-month-long presidential transition, but the world was changing at an alarming pace. Waiting two months was too long.

“I had assumed Vice President Bates would attend the next G20 summit in the Kingdom of Saud Arab, but Wozniak will have been appointed president-elect by then. It will happen soon after the elections, but perhaps we could request that the president-elect also make an appearance at the summit. If need be, our government will get the approval of the other countries before the event. I’m sure the Oriental Republic of Sina will agree as well.”

The United States of Gamera and the Oriental Republic of Sina had basically been waging war on one another from either side of the Pacific Ocean before the dungeons’ appearance. A tariff war had broken out between the two countries, and the situation had escalated all the way to military tensions in the Sina Sea. In the past year, however, the Oriental Republic of Sina had made a full U-turn. Naturally, there were still issues, such as the human rights violations against the Uighur people and the Tibetan sovereignty debate, but if the leaders of Japan, Gamera, and Sina managed to come together, and united against the dungeons, it would send a positive message to the rest of the world —and a stronger one to the so-called Demon King.

“How is *that* experiment going?”

The prime minister changed the topic, now addressing the Minister of

Defense and checking on their progress. Strengthening the Japanese military was of the utmost importance in preparation for the Monster Stampede set to happen nine years from now.

“During our experiments on monsters, we have had Rank A wyverns fly from Kagoshima to Sapporo. They ended up rather exhausted, though, so we aren’t sure whether they can withstand an actual battle. The data we’ve compiled is still provisional, but their flying range appears to be around 1500 kilometers. If monsters appear in the Kingdom of Ko, our whole nation will be within range.”

“I’ve heard that a Dungeon Buster appeared in the Kingdom of Ko. Is this true?”

“Unfortunately, our current relationship with the Republic of Woori means that the information we’re able to gather on the Kingdom of Ko is very limited. We have no way to verify this.”

Several simultaneous sighs could be heard. Dungeon Busters were able to materialize monster cards aboveground, which made using monsters as a “weapon” possible. On top of that, it was possible to acquire new, low-cost “soldiers” indefinitely as long as the dungeons existed. Busters were incredibly dangerous and threatened the military balance of the world.

“As expected, we need to create a national system to supervise dungeon busters...” Deputy Prime Minister Souma muttered, armed crossed.

Some agreed with him, saying that there was no other choice at this point, while others opposed him. Prime Minister Urabe was rather unfavorable to the creation of such a system in Japan but couldn’t let his reluctance show on his face at the moment. As the president of the cabinet meeting, his job was to get everyone to state their opinions, not to meddle. The Minister of Health, Labour and Welfare and the Minister of Justice stated their opposition to Souma, perhaps having sensed Urabe’s predicament.

“I would like to remind you that Busters are still Japanese citizens. Infringing upon their freedom would be a violation of the constitution.”

“You know, I don’t *want* to do things like that either. I’ve never even heard anything remotely bad about the members of Dungeon Busters, but planning our national defense on the assumption that human nature is fundamentally

good would be irresponsible. I'm not suggesting we lock them up behind bars. We could ask them to wear GPS wristbands to keep track of their locations, or something like that. Or we could have them pledge not to materialize monsters aboveground without explicit permission using a dungeon item. I am aware that no conclusion has been reached yet on the legality of using dungeon items, so I'm not asking that we take action right now. It's just something that we should keep in mind going forward. Wouldn't you agree?"

No further argument was brought forward, and the room fell silent for a few moments.

"As the government, we are sometimes forced to put the needs of the many over the needs of the few," Prime Minister Urabe finally said. "However, we must remain extremely cautious in the way we handle dungeon Busters. Although they are few, they hold tremendous power. In fact, the fate of humanity rests upon the shoulders of these few individuals. It is indeed important to manage them properly, but we should be careful not to alienate them."



[Taipei City — In front of the Oriental Hyatt Hotel — Ezoe Kazuhiko]

"Dungeon Busters! Go back to Japan!"

"Our dungeon belongs to us!"

"We'll never forgive you, Japanese imperialists!"

The mob chanted and held up signs as soon as they spotted us. Police officers were trying to stop them while journalists filmed the scene. I couldn't help but tilt my head in confusion. They were speaking Cantonese. Or perhaps Taiwanese? I wasn't sure, and I didn't get anything they said either way. For a split second, I thought about using a dungeon item but didn't.

"What are they complaining about?" I asked.

"Who knows?" Akira answered, a strained smile plastered on his face.

We couldn't really ignore them. We had come at the request of the Republic of Sina's government and, although I didn't expect the Sinese government to be

thankful, I had no obligation to go clear their dungeon after a mob threw stones at me. We hadn't begged them to let us clear their dungeon, and I didn't really mind putting this whole trip on the back burner until their citizens calmed down.

"Wanna go home guys?" I asked after a little while.

"I'm so sorry!" the man from the Japan—Taiwan Exchange Association came running, apologizing. "These people are from the Sinese Unification Promotion Party. They used to be supported by the Oriental Republic of Sina, but ever since the Zhou administration changed its politics, they've been discarded. Recently, the anti-Taiwanese government factions have been becoming increasingly anti-Japanese instead."

"I see. So in short, they're a bunch of civil rights activists, huh?"

"Aniki, what do we do?" Akira asked.

"Well, it would be a shame to just go home like that. I think we should be clear about our intentions and show our stance as Dungeon Busters."

The government had called in foreign adventurers to clear a dungeon in their country. While some money may or may not change hands in the process, it wouldn't change the fact that a foreign Buster's name would be the one written on the Dungeon Core's window at the end of the day. And that person would control the dungeon. The Buster would be able to change the size of magic stones being mined, the strength of the monsters, and even the type of items being dropped on a whim. Naturally, some would oppose that.

Dungeon Busters was bound to work abroad more and more in the future. We needed to be able to handle people who brought objections to the table.

"First of all, let's get the permission of the hotel. I want to speak with their spokesperson. We'll have a live broadcast here and show this exchange to everyone in the Republic of Sina."

I took out a Translation Jelly card from my pocket.

* * *

"First, I'd like to ask you something. You are demonstrating and exercising

your democratic rights, and that's great. But what are you trying to say? And to whom?"

We had hurriedly rented out a large conference room inside the Oriental Hyatt Hotel and invited local television stations and journalists to film and report on my talk with the demonstrators' representatives. Strangely enough, the representatives had first shown some reserve, declining our request. They wanted to be heard but as soon as we gave them a platform to speak up, they hesitated.

Now that I think about it, I've seen that happen in Japan as well. A self-proclaimed, far-right activist did the same thing before throwing a torrent of insults at the mayor who offered to hear him out. I guess activists are all the same, regardless of their political beliefs.

"We believe that Taiwanese dungeons should be cleared and controlled by Taiwanese people. Relying on foreigners to handle that job is a mistake, and relying on Japanese people is even worse. You people used to occupy Taiwan! Isn't it obvious that we'd be worried about you trying to take over our country again?!"

The man who had just spoken seemed to be in his sixties. The leader of the Sinese Unification Promotion Party was an ex-gangster who was also linked to Okinawa independence movement groups. Several of their highest ranking members had already been arrested by the Taiwanese government for being spies for the Oriental Republic of Sina. It was crucial to keep these things in mind when talking with such people.

"Taiwanese dungeons should be cleared and controlled by Taiwanese people... I agree. If it was at all possible, that would be ideal. I'm not sure why you're asking that of us, however. We received a request from the Taiwanese government, a government that has been democratically elected by the Taiwanese people. Shouldn't you be directing your complaints to the government?"

I thought what I had just said was perfectly logical, but the man in front of me seemed to have more objections.

"Japan stole the Diaoyu Islands from us!" he yelled, expression sour. "If you

want us to let you have our dungeons, give back the land you stole! How dare you feign ignorance, colonizer!”

Hey, hey. This stuff was decided by our governments. What do you want me to do about it?

“Look, if that’s how you feel, you should find a candidate for the next election or discuss your issues with one of the current members of the opposition party. Dungeon Busters does not involve itself with politics. If the Taiwanese government were to change its mind and tell us they don’t want us to clear the dungeons here anymore, we’d be happy to go home. But you’re not the government, are you? There are twenty million inhabitants on this island, and I’m happy to listen to your opinion, but you only represent your own group, not the entire Taiwanese population. When you start a demonstration in front of a hotel—which, may I remind you, is a private business—you also bother all of the clients that have nothing to do with this. Demonstrating is your right, but you should also consider the trouble you cause for others.”

I was pretty sure that these people didn’t actually believe that their opinion would ever be shared by the majority of the Taiwanese nor did they truly think Japan was out to get their country. They were a group that received subsidies from the Oriental Republic of Sina, in the first place, and preached the “One Sina” ideology on their behalf. The appearance of the dungeons had forced the Oriental Republic of Sina to revise its foreign policies. The Zhou administration had decided to ignore territorial disputes and diplomatic issues with Taiwan and other such places, at least until the dungeons had been taken care of for good.

In other words, that meant they had been discarded by Sina. Groups of students that had been putting together rap performances to criticize Urabe had been forgotten in the blink of an eye after the elections in Japan too. No one paid any attention to these types of groupuscules unless they were actively demonstrating. That was the reality of current society.

Either way, this is their problem, not mine. Anyone is free to believe in something and want to advocate for it, but when advocating and demonstrating becomes your goal itself, you’re nothing more than a door-to-door salesman. At this point, they’d be better off starting a business, making money, and then advocating as a corporation...

The representatives were having a hard time articulating their ideas. Maybe the cameras made them nervous. We watched them walk away, shoulders slumped, before the reporters swarmed us. I was asked how I'd felt after they poured cold water on me, and I turned to face the camera, my face perfectly neutral. *Why do they care so much about other people's business?*

"To be honest, I think they're right to some extent. These dungeons did appear in your country, and the natural course of action would be to have a Taiwanese person clear them. I agree with that. We have been asked to handle one by the Taiwanese government, and we will deliver on that promise. I do hope that a Taiwanese citizen will be able to clear the other two dungeons remaining in Taiwan with their own hands though."

The reporters seemed surprised to hear me defend them. Still, I had only stated my true feelings. Most Japanese citizens also hoped that we, Dungeon Busters, would handle all of the Japanese dungeons. On the other hand, some people only saw the dungeons as some otherworldly existence that had nothing to do with them. That was called normalcy bias. I had heard that the same effect had been at work during the Great Earthquake. Some people had not fled when they heard the alarm, only realizing the urgency of the situation when they saw the tsunami with their own two eyes. If things continued as they were, many would surely not consider the dungeons to be their problem until the Monster Stampede actually occurred and monsters were chasing them.

"No one can ignore the dungeons. This affects every single person on this earth. I have said it in the past, and I will say it again. We need to act. It's do-or-die. If we don't get rid of every dungeon, we will die. We are at war with the dungeons."

Last time, I couldn't do anything but watch from behind my screen. *This time, I'll stop it, no matter what.*



[Ministry of Dungeons — Ishihara Yukie]

The Ministry of Dungeons had been established thanks to Urabe Seiichirou, the ninety-eighth prime minister of Japan. The dungeons were akin to a Sword of Damocles hanging over the world, but at the same time, they had the

potential to trigger an economic revival in Japan. Naturally, this meant that the minister in charge of the dungeons would be particularly influential during cabinet meetings. Most people thought that Urabe himself would serve as the head of this ministry, but he ended up appointing an unexpected individual.

“I just received word from the Taiwanese government. They would like to offer an informal apology to Dungeon Busters for the issues they faced due to the demonstrators. Ezoe, the leader of the Busters, also contacted us in order to inform us he did not wish for this to get blown out of proportion,” I explained.

“All right, then we won’t push this either. Did they enter the dungeon already?”

“They have. Taipei Dungeon seems to be Rank C.”

Minister Senba Masaru nodded. He remained silent as he picked up the little model of a wyvern that had been lying on his desk.

I didn’t know how to handle him. The man in front of me was not very well-liked by the rest of the ruling party, but he was a military fanatic and a total fan of subculture trends. For instance, I could see dozens of fantasy light novels and MAMORI magazines—magazines that were basically PR brochures for the JSDF—lined up on his bookshelves.

“In the future,” he began, “foreign military sales won’t focus on weapons anymore. We’ll buy and sell the services of adventurers. This will be the cheapest alternative when attempting to clear dungeons as well, and... Well, modern weapons are far from being very effective on monsters in the first place. Even the F-35, which is said to be the finest aircraft currently in existence, was built to fight in regular wars. Its stealth functions, for instance, would be completely useless against wyverns. We need to start producing weapons designed to fight monsters.”

“Our research center in Tsukuba has already started working on it with the Ministry of Defense,” I said.

Minister Senba acknowledged my answer before changing the topic to the new video that had been released two days ago. The footage showed the Brazilian army struggling against monsters, and Minister Senba thought it was

an extremely interesting study from a military standpoint.

“The goblins were using A-47s. These guns are fairly easy to use, but some training is still required. The monsters we see in games and light novels have no relation to the ones we’re facing in real life. They’re intelligent, able to improve, and learn new skills. On top of this, they’re usually in card form, which means they barely cost anything. Acquiring the cards comes at almost no cost as well, since they can be found in the dungeons. I expect poor countries in the Middle East and Africa to switch to monster-based armies as soon as they’re able.”

“Will we also go down this path?”

“That’s impossible. Picture it. Five hundred one-meter-tall goblins armed with automatic rifles. Orcs wearing camouflage uniforms. Transporter erector launchers carrying wyverns... Do you think the Japanese people would accept such an army? Even if they tell themselves that it’s a necessary step to face monsters, they still wouldn’t be able to stomach such a sight.”

I honestly had no idea why we were even having this conversation in the first place. *We work at the Ministry of Dungeons, not the Ministry of Defense... The composition of the JSDF has nothing to do with us...* I suddenly understood what the minister was getting at.

“So... What you mean to say is that we need another deterrent force, one separate from the JSDF, right?”

“Can I ask you to gather data so we can decide what form this force should take? We also need to figure out the best way to manage it and get the citizens to accept it.”

At this point, having one of our unofficial research teams lay the foundations of the project would be best. This project would certainly remain in the shadows for a while. To be honest, I was having some trouble wrapping my head around it. National defense should be handled by the JSDF, yet at the same time, I had to admit that I did not believe the JSDF would be able to face the Monster Stampede on its own.



[Tsukuba City — Dungeon Research Center]

Inside a room with glass walls were some strange creatures. They looked like regular skeletons but wore armor and held swords. These monsters were, in fact, skeleton knights that had been obtained through the gacha system. A monster obtained this way could be materialized for as long as its master wished, and Dungeon Busters had materialized several inside this room before they'd left for Taiwan.

Isaac Roland, the most brilliant scientist in the world, entered the room and walked among the skeletons, observing them closely. He poked their arms and legs, pausing between each touch to think.

"Professor, please come back. It's dangerous," said Rebecca, her voice reaching Isaac through a speaker.

Isaac ignored her though, barely sparing a moment to dismiss her with a wave of his hand. The person who had materialized these monsters had ordered them not to retaliate, no matter what happened to them. Thanks to that, they didn't budge one bit.

Rebecca stared Isaac down when he finally stepped out of the room. "It's way too dangerous for you to stay in a room full of monsters alone, no matter what orders they received. At least take some guards with you."

"If they were gonna kill me, they would have done so already. No need to fret. Anyway, Rebecca, did you notice? These skeletons don't breathe."

"Why would they? They're a bunch of bones. They don't have lungs."

"How do these bones stay upright then?" Isaac asked, heading back to his laboratory.

Rebecca followed him. He entered the room and immediately took out a can of Dr. Pepsi from the fridge, sat down, and took a sip.

"Something on your mind, professor?"

"Rebecca," Isaac said after downing his can in one gulp and letting out a dramatic burp. "Have you ever watched *Resident Devil*?"

"Wasn't that movie adapted from a Japanese video game? It was about a virus made by the arms industry going out of control and turning people into

zombies or something...”

“Yeah. Well, after that movie, the zombie genre blew up. Countless movies and TV shows came out. Zombies attack humans in all of them, and anyone who’s bitten turns into a zombie too. That’s a fun premise for a movie, but it doesn’t make any sense if you think about it like a scientist.”

“What do you mean?” Rebecca asked. “Plenty of Gamericans actually believe the world will meet its end because of a zombie virus.”

Isaac snorted with laughter and opened a bag of chips. His current go-to was a Japanese brand.

“Listen up. We humans walk on two legs, right? Our brain sends electrical signals to the muscles in our legs, which, in turn, makes our muscles move and support our upright stature. As long as the laws of physics still apply to this world, we need an energy intake to move. We eat and digest food so that nutrients can go through our blood and reach every part of our bodies. Our oxygen intake allows us to produce energy, and, in turn, motion. The issue with zombie movies is simple: how would their energy stores and metabolism work?”

“Well... That’s because it’s a movie.”

“If anything like that happened in real life, I’d simply shut myself inside my house for 72 hours and focus on self-defense. After three days, the zombies will have run out of energy to fuel themselves, naturally, and just fall to the ground. They don’t have any means for energy intake, so there’s no way they’d be able to move about indefinitely. Everything works the same way in the end, whether they’re zombies or battle robots.”

Isaac continued.

“Now... How do gacha monsters that have been summoned above ground sustain themselves?”

“Ah!”

“That’s right. Monsters do not require any energy intake, yet they’re able to move. I wrote a paper on the energy contained within the dungeons a while back, but my research focused on the dungeons themselves, where the flow of

time is 144 times quicker. I may need to revise that paper a little. Perhaps the Monster Stampede will turn our whole planet into a dungeon.”

Rebecca pinched her arm, shivering at Isaac’s words.



[Nagatacho — Kantei]

“I would now like to start the voting process. Those who agree to submit the constitutional amendment proposal to the Diet after the upcoming G20 meeting, please raise your hand.”

All of the cabinet ministers raised their hands. Suganuma Yoshiaki, the Chief Cabinet Secretary, was filled with emotion. He had supported Prime Minister Urabe for almost eight years, and his dream—a dream that had been dear to the conservatives for seventy years now—was finally on the verge of coming true.

The meeting ended. and although the ministers were leaving their seats one after the other, Urabe hadn’t moved. He looked pale. Naturally, that much was to be expected. Being prime minister was a taxing job. Many before him had passed away while in office, unable to handle the constant workload and pressure. Urabe had to deal with the dungeon crisis on top of everything else. It was impossible to know when the issue would be resolved, and the world heavily relied on Japan for help. The amount of stress the man at the top of the country had to handle was beyond imagination.

“Mr. Prime Minister, are you all right?” Suganuma whispered.

Urabe was very ill. He could complete his exhausting work by carefully monitoring and managing his health condition, but everything had its limits. Suganuma had advised Urabe to drink an Extra Potion dozens of times, but he always refused. Extra Potions were precious. People all over the world with incurable diseases clung to the hope of receiving one someday. He couldn’t make use of his influence and snatch one away just for the sake of remaining in a position of power. He had decided he would not touch a potion before he retired from his position as prime minister.

“I am. The constitutional reform is in sight. I cannot afford to collapse before I

see it through.”

“Please let me speak with Ezoe-san, Mr. Prime Minister. I would be the one asking, not you...”

Urabe shook his head, stood up, and patted Suganuma’s shoulder. “We have a press conference to attend. Come on.”

Suganuma stared at the floor, shoulders shaking slightly.

That day, the press conference began five minutes later than planned.



[Taipei City — Rank C Dungeon — Ezoe Kazuhiko]

It was our first time entering a dungeon outside of Japan, but it turned out that the structure was exactly the same. The only differences were the monsters we encountered.

“These are zombies. If they bite you, you will be infected with a deadly poison. They won’t stop moving, even if their limbs are cut off. The only way to kill them is to destroy their heads.”

“I... You know, I get why there would be zombie monsters, but why do they look like humans? Couldn’t they have been zombie orcs or zombie goblins instead?”

The smell of rotten flesh was so horrendous that the very act of breathing became difficult. As soon as we reached the Safety Zone, I handed out gas masks to everyone. The masks didn’t only cover our mouths and noses but rather our full faces. We could switch out the chemical cartridge located near the mouth to block out different poisonous gases.

“Aniki, why did you think to bring these along?” Akira asked.

“I didn’t go out of my way to bring them this time. I always have masks on hand, you know. We dive inside dungeons. Who knows when we’ll encounter a poisonous gas trap or something similar? The chemical cartridges I got are the same ones NATO soldiers use, and the filters are very effective. They even work on viruses, radioactive particles, VX, and sarin. That said, our field of vision will be greatly reduced, so be careful.”

These multi-gas filter cartridges developed by an Italian arms manufacturer sold for twenty thousand yen each, but Dungeon Busters had purchased grosses of them and kept them in stock nonetheless. Most people probably pictured gas masks as making you breathe ominously, like the black-clad villain of some extremely famous sci-fi movie. In real life, however, breathing in a gas mask barely made any sound. Your voice would merely sound a little muffled at most.

“At any rate,” I said, changing the topic, “are zombies dead or alive? Some people call them the walking dead, so I would assume they’re dead, but—”

“Kazu-san!” Rinko suddenly cut me off. “They’re coming!”

She cut off their heads, one after the other. This was much faster than using fire magic to burn them to death. After all, the burning process did take some time.

“I don’t think I can stomach anything with this stench.”

We decided to have our meal in the Safety Zone of the floor where skeleton knights appeared instead. We lined up the dishes we had bought at the night market, which included a few xiaolongbaos, some lo bah png, and some ji pai, a kind of Taiwanese fried chicken breast. Once we were done clearing the dungeon, I wanted to take a walk and eat some street food.

“Aniki, have you ever had boba? It’s full of sugar, so it’s a good way to boost your energy levels fast.”

“Let me try...”

I had heard the name because the drink was incredibly popular in Japan too, but I had never tasted it myself. *If I remember correctly, there’s a boba place next to Koiwa Station. I don’t really like putting sugar in my tea though, and I’m not fond of sweet drinks in general.*

“That’s Assam tea, right?” I asked after taking a sip. “The leaves are such bad quality, though! On top of that, the milk has such a low fat content... That’s pretty cheap milk tea. Well, the tapioca itself doesn’t taste bad, I guess. Does it have brown sugar? It has a very peculiar aftertaste.”

I was very particular about tea, so I couldn’t say it was a great drink. In the end, I could taste the brown sugar more than the tea leaves. *Maybe this is how*

boba is supposed to taste.

“Anyway,” Akira said cheerfully as he drank a sip from his one-liter cup of milk tea. “Foreign dungeons are pretty much the same as Japanese ones. We should be able to make things work if we send separate teams to handle dungeons that are Rank C and under.”

He was right. The Crusaders had already informed us that dungeons were roughly the same regardless of the region, but I still wanted to check that out myself. The way we handled things before and after clearing the dungeon would be different when abroad, though. There was some equipment we couldn’t get when traveling out of the country, and we needed to find a better way to bring cards into foreign countries. Obviously, if the carry-on baggage inspection became too lax, the risk of terrorist attacks would increase as well. I intended to write a few lines on the issue in my future report.

“All right. Let’s get through this in one go,” I said.

Break time was over. It was now time to aim for the Final Floor.



[Taipei City — Rank C Dungeon Final Floor — Kusakabe Rinko]

Taipei’s dungeon had seven floors in total. We currently stood on the single path located on the Final Floor, taking in the reliefs on the ceiling, where I saw a person brandishing a card at a strange monster.

“Aniki, that card is...” Akira-san trailed off.

“It’s very likely an LR card. That’s not the issue, though.”

Kazu-san was right. The problem was something else—the looks of the person brandishing the card. The face that had been carved in the stone ceiling was not very detailed, but the general appearance of their body and hairstyle looked strikingly similar to those of *that* person.

“Why is Akane pictured here as a card user?” Kazu-san finally asked, a scary look on his face.

No matter how much we looked at it, the shape of the breast, the hairstyle, the clothes... It had to be Akane-san. But Akane-san was part of the Dungeon

System; she was a Legend Rare character card. Her mission was to aid the owner of her card in their quest to clear the dungeons. In other words, she was a supporting character. But here, she was pictured as a card user... A player. *What can it mean?*

Akane-san stared at her depiction on the relief and hugged herself, shaking. Kazu-san seemed to be lost in thought for a minute, but he eventually decided we would head back to the Safety Zone on Floor 6 to discuss the situation.



“Akane must have been a Dungeon Buster in a previous world... That’s my current theory, at least,” Kazu-san explained as we had a light snack in the Safety Zone.

“I...also think that might be the case,” Akane-san agreed.

“But then...” Akira-san hesitated. “Why would Anego become an LR card? The worlds where the Dungeon System was activated have all been destroyed, right? That means that even you weren’t able to stop the Monster Stampede, Anego.”

“There must have been people who fought to prevent the Monster Stampede, just like us, in previous worlds too. I assume some of them must have been turned into LR cards afterward,” I said, trying to answer Akira-san’s question with my own hypothesis.

This was nothing more than a theory at this point as I had no idea how the system decided who became an LR card. Just to be sure, Kazu-san asked Akane-san if she remembered anything, but she had no memory of this. Everyone discussed their thoughts, but Kazu-san remained silent.

“Being Limit Breaker...” he finally murmured after a while.

I had heard these words in the past from the Dungeon System. When someone reached Rank C—or in other words, when someone became a Species Limit Breaker—the voice would speak to them. After that, the Species Limit Breaker title had not changed, even when someone reached Rank B or A. That’s why Kazu-san and the rest of us had forgotten about it.

“I believe that the Dungeon System exists to make humanity evolve. We have already surpassed human limits. But then, how does one become a Being Limit Breaker? Is Akane’s existence as a card that limit?”

“No, that would be strange,” Akira-san said. “The voice said to strive toward becoming a Being Limit Breaker, didn’t it? I’m sorry if this hurts your feelings, Anego, but I don’t want to become a card.”

I nodded in agreement. Becoming stronger was a good thing, but I had no intention of giving up being a living person. I wanted to face the dungeons as a human and stop the Monster Stampede. Apparently, everyone else agreed.

After a while, Kazu-san shook his head and stood up.

“We just don’t have enough information. There’s no point overthinking this right now. Let’s finish things in this dungeon first. Can someone check whether the footage we got of the reliefs is good enough? And don’t worry, Akane. Regardless of your past, you’re a member of Dungeon Busters and one of our precious allies. We will stop the Monster Stampede in this world. Please lend me your strength,” Kazu-san said, his words softer and tone more relaxed.

Akane-san nodded happily.



[Edogawa City — Matsue High School — Kinouchi Mari]

The boys were playing soccer during PE. Matsue High School was especially famous for its rubber-ball baseball club, but we also had a number of other clubs, including track and field and handball clubs. The members of these clubs usually stood around a lot during PE classes, but...

“Damn! Again?!”

One of the boys was intercepting passes and dribbling with an incredible reaction speed. He did not belong to any clubs and had never stood out much at school until recently. However...

“Shingo-kun!!!”

The girls were watching his plays and squealing. On the other hand, the rest of the boys didn’t seem to be having much fun. He was so strong at every single sport that even club members didn’t hold a candle to him. His grades were also at the top of the class. On top of that, he came to school on a motorbike, had a very mature air, and was incredibly popular with girls not only the same age as he but also younger.

I was talking about Yamaoka Shingo, my boyfriend, of course.

“I’m not sure I should be the one saying this, but it may really not be the best idea to let high schoolers be adventurers.”

We didn’t do it every day, but Shingo-kun and I sometimes met up after school to go on dates. Today, we were headed to an all-you-can-eat hot pot

place on Keiyou Street. We had quite a lot of pocket money for high school students, but we still couldn't afford to eat at high-class restaurants all the time, like Kazu-san. We both ate a lot, and thus often ended up at all-you-can-eat places. We also both loved hot pot and could gobble up kilograms of meat on our own.

"Well, there also seems to be a lot of debate on whether to accept the achievements of an Olympic athlete who trained inside dungeons. He only participated in the Boot Camp once before the Tokyo Olympics, so it'll probably be accepted, but there will definitely be more restrictions next time."

Shingo and I were both D-Rankers, treading the line between normal people and Species Limit Breakers. If we ever decided to try, we probably could break a few world records here and there. The truth was that Shingo-kun had seemed to have been holding back the whole time during PE earlier today. I had mixed feelings about watching girls go crazy over him, but it was probably better than having a completely unpopular boyfriend.

"Oh, by the way," I started, "I received a message from Kazu-san earlier. They finished clearing the Taiwanese dungeon and are flying back tomorrow."

"Taiwan, huh? They'll probably end up going to Sina and Gamera in the future too. There may be no dungeons left in Japan by the time we become full-fledged adventurers. Maybe the first dungeon we clear will be abroad."

"Yeah. You really are thinking about your future, aren't you?"

"Well... I've been thinking of going to a Gamerican University. And, if possible, I want you to come with me, Mari," he said, his expression serious.

My heart skipped a beat.



[Acquisition, Technology & Logistics Agency — Flying Monsters Research Team]

At about the same time Ezo Kazuhiko and the team of busters he led finished clearing Taipei Dungeon, a heated debate was taking place at the Acquisition, Technology & Logistics Agency, a subordinate organization of the Ministry of Defense, regarding the scenario currently regarded as most likely in the event

of the Monster Stampede: an attack of flying monsters coming from Eurasia.

“I’ve said this a million times! Weapons designed to fight wyverns, dragons, or even a monster like Mot*ra don’t need supersonic speed or stealth functions! Hit-and-run tactics and missile-based distance attacks do not work on wyverns. Our enemies will not be aircraft. We’ll come face-to-face with tens of thousands—no, hundreds of thousands—of wyverns. We need a durable aircraft on par with their incredible mobility, able to handle close combat as well as powerful autocannons to get through their thick skin!”

“But the JASDF’s aircraft have all been designed with modern warfare in mind. Even the F-15J has only been equipped with rockets and missiles aside from its single twenty-millimeter Vulcan cannon. This would force us to design a completely new fighter from scratch. How much time and how many resources do you think such a project would take?!”

The fifth-generation fighters currently in use had all been created from the same basic concept. The idea was to make fighters difficult to detect, spotting the enemy and shooting it down with a missile first being their top priority. However, that strategy had been devised to face other human beings. No one had ever taken the possibility of having to face wyverns or dragons into account.

Experiments using wyverns had shown that explosive projectiles were somewhat effective, but air-to-air missiles such as the R-40 were barely able to shoot them down. Twenty-millimeter autocannons had not succeeded in killing them either. All in all, this meant the current arsenal used by the JASDF was no good when facing monsters in aerial battles.

“Wyverns are slow. There’s no need for jet engines to fight them. As long as the fighters can fly at more or less seven hundred kilometers per hour, that’s more than enough,” the young researcher continued to ardently explain.

You could feel a certain kind of passion from him. After the war, Japan had stopped developing new aircraft technology, and the JASDF had mostly relied on Gamerican imports to secure fighters. Still, fighting monsters did not require cutting-edge aircraft.

The young researcher put both of his palms on his desk and took a good look

at the people in the room before continuing.

“Didn’t our country succeed in developing fighters that combined overwhelming air mobility and heavy weaponry in the past? Let us bring back the aircraft that once left the world in awe!” he pushed for his idea—or rather, his dream. “Let this be the start of ‘Project Zero’!”

The picture of a graceful, aerodynamic aircraft most Japanese people had seen at least once in their lives appeared on the projector. It was a propeller plane. The young researcher’s superior brought a hand to his forehead before looking at the ceiling.

Chapter 6: Legion vs. Crusaders

[November 14, 2020 — Ginza 1-chome — Reich Restaurant Steinburg]

The Gamerican presidential election was a festival of sorts that took place every four years. Several hundred million dollars were spent in the span of a year as the candidates took on a battle royale under the guise of “debates” organized by large media outlets. This festival gave people an excuse to think about the country’s politics, allowing them to reinforce their identity as Gamerican citizens.

“Turning the elections into a show helps citizens connect with politics. The guy who thought of this must have been a genius. Well, Japan’s a parliamentary democracy, so it would be difficult to import this concept either way.”

“The outcome of this year’s election is already clear. It’s no fun. This might be a bit rude to President Howard, but I don’t see how he could beat Peter Wozniak at this point.”

Ishihara continued.

“Anyway, enough talk of the elections. We need to discuss the upcoming G20 meeting. It’ll take place in the Kingdom of Saud Arab at the end of the month. Up until a month ago, we expected the main topics to be potential sanctions against Venisuela and Joker as well as dungeon cooperation endeavors. However, a lot has changed in the past month.”

I was currently in Ginza, having a meal with Vice-Minister Ishihara at a restaurant specializing in Reich cuisine. Usually, vice-ministers frequented luxurious, traditional restaurants around Akasaka and Kagurazaka, but since she was a single woman who looked like she was in her thirties, I had put a little thought into choosing the restaurant. This kind of place would allow her to relax without standing out as much as if we had gone to some high-end French restaurant.

“So Joker is finally on the verge of completely taking over Brezil... I heard the

talks between the Woorian Foreign Minister and the Venisuelan President, Clyde, were a success, though,” I said.

“They were a complete failure... Or rather, Woori seems to have simply accepted everything Venisuela asked for without getting anything in return. President Park is getting desperate with the G20 meeting approaching. Woori’s economy is hanging on by a thread, and they’re keeping their distance from both Gamera and the Oriental Republic of Sina. They’ve finally introduced a civilian adventurer initiative, but some adventurers have already committed crimes, forcing them to backtrack. I’m guessing he really wanted to brag about being the first country of the G20 to enter negotiations with Venisuela. In the end, the only thing Venisuela agreed to in exchange for Woori dispatching experts to fix their oil plants and upgrade their agricultural technologies was to sit at the table and negotiate with Gamera and have Woori as their mediator. They’re trying to adorn the news with nice adjectives to make it sound good, but they didn’t achieve much, like usual.”

“President Clyde, huh? I thought he was Joker’s puppet, but he actually seems to be standing his ground. He doesn’t seem to be ruling the occupied areas of Brezil too forcefully either.”

Joker’s Legion had stopped advancing for a while after taking Manaus, the capital of the Brezilian State of Amazonas. Brezil was an enormous country with a large population. For a country the size of Venisuela to occupy Brezil’s full territory, which had roughly thirty million inhabitants, was impossible. Venisuela had had three demands: free access to every Brezilian dungeon, neutrality toward the Legion, and lastly, that Brezil donate one billion dollars worth of food to Venisuela every year for the next ten years.

“That’s a very well-thought-out plan, considering the ten-year limit,” Vice-Minister Ishihara explained. “Simply occupying the country won’t bring them many benefits. It was also smart to ask for a billion dollars’ worth of food. Since Brezil can donate the food directly instead of struggling to secure foreign currencies, it won’t put too big of a strain on their economy.”

“On the other hand,” she continued, “this amount will make a big impact on a country of thirty million inhabitants such as Venisuela. If they can rid themselves of hunger, public order will improve, and they’ll be able to restart

their economy. Getting investors to join them will be much easier after that. Middle Eastern countries in particular are not happy with the rise of hydrogen energy. The oil tycoons will happily invest there.”

Joker was not the kind of evil villain that appeared in stories. At the very least, that was the image he was trying to convey. Some left-wing scholars had already started praising him. “Joker is no Demon King. He’s a revolutionary, like Che Guevara,” they wrote.

How would the world change after the Gamerican presidential election? I could not predict how things would turn out at all.



[November 23, 2020 — Kingdom of Saud Arab — G20 Summit]

<Our great nation of Woori was able to meet the next president of the United States of Gamerica before Japan!>

The 2020 G20 Summit in the Kingdom of Saud Arab received unprecedented interest from the general public all over the world. Gamerican president Ronald Howard remained unconscious, and Democratic candidate Peter Wozniak had won the presidential election. His inauguration was set to take place in January 2021, but the state of the world did not allow for a political vacuum at this time. Michael Bates, the Vice President, had decided to forget about party divisions and invited Peter Wozniak to join him at the G20 Summit. He also organized talks between him and other heads of state.

Thus, the Republic of Woori succeeded in meeting President-elect Wozniak before Japan. The PR office of the Blue House made a show of singing the praises of Woori with slogans such as “We Beat Japan,” “Woori is the true leader in East Asia,” and “Woori has the best dungeon policies.” The true content of the words exchanged between Gamerican and Woorian leaders was far from deserving praise though. President-elect Wozniak clearly stated he had no intention to negotiate with Joker.

“I have indeed said that I wanted to include developing countries in our plans to fight dungeons in order to put together a global framework, President Park. However, I will not pander to terrorists nor will I turn a blind eye to our national interests. If Venisuela is ready to sit at the table and negotiate with us, I’ll be

happy to hear them out under the condition that the Legion is dismantled, naturally.”

“I believe we should first establish a dialogue. That first contact will greatly help reduce the hostile atmosphere and pave the way toward peace. Can you not consider opening talks without asking for any countermeasures for the time being?”

“We met with the Kingdom of Ko in 2019 in that exact fashion to calm the situation. Do you remember the result of those three meetings? I just cannot condone your way of pushing us to open talks without any guarantees any longer.”

The Gamerican and Woorian leaders did not manage to see eye to eye for the entire forty minutes their meeting lasted. Eventually, the meeting ended without them reaching any agreement. Afterward, President-Elect Wozniak was puzzled.

“That President...” he said to his future aide. “He’s kind of... No, he’s actually completely insane, isn’t he?”

On the other hand, the meeting between Urabe, the Japanese Prime Minister, and President-Elect Wozniak went on for more than an hour and a half, greatly exceeding the original time slot. Not only did they discuss the dungeons but they also touched upon other topics such as the economy and diplomatic relations. The only reason the Japanese leader met Wozniak later than the Woori President was because, during that time, Prime Minister Urabe was busy meeting with Bates. Prime Minister Urabe was intent on sending a few words to President Howard, with whom he had had an amicable relationship for the past four years. He wanted to wish him a prompt recovery, since he was still in the hospital.

“Prime Minister Urabe,” Wozniak said, “I believe that we Gamericans are going through the worst crisis since the foundation of our nation. This disaster will overshadow September 11, the Cuban Missile Crisis, or World War II. I believe it is time to put the two-party system aside and focus on national unity. Japan is our greatest ally, and I would like to request your help to devise dungeon policies.”

“I believe the crisis you speak of does not only concern the United States of Gamera but rather humanity... No. Our planet as a whole. We will spare no effort to assist you. However, we do hope that your country will join the IDAO...”

“I intend to do that as soon as I take office. I will also allow powerful foreign adventurers to clear Gamerican dungeons. I’m hoping to put together a proper adventurer initiative in Gamera, and Japan is known for its excellent adventurer-rearing know-how. Could I please get your counsel on this matter as well?”

Wozniak had a reputation for being a passionate idealist, but as a former management consultant at a famous firm, he was still able to make logical, realistic decisions. Wozniak appeared to have found a kindred spirit in Urabe Seiichirou, despite him being a conservative politician.

“As expected of the man who got that moody Howard to dance in the palm of his hand,” he said to his aide after the meeting concluded. “Japan is lucky to have him in these trying times.”



[Federative Republic of Brezil — Capital City, Brasília]

“After gaining control of Manaus, the Legion has been moving South. It went through the State of Amazonas and the State of Rondônia and seems to be marching toward the State of Mato Grosso. It will most likely head east after Cuiabá and aim for Brasília. Crusaders, I need you to stop it here, in the State of Rondônia.”

President Joaquín Borges, as well as the generals of the Land and Air armies and the Chief of the General Staff, were gathered at the Executive Office of the President in Brasília, the capital of the country.

Rolf Schnabel, the leader of the Dungeon Crusaders, stared at the aerial photograph he had been handed, his expression severe.

“From what I can see, most of these monsters are below Rank C. However, they were likely obtained through the Card Slot ability, which means there are no limits to how much they can grow. They could very well be Rank B. Or worse,

Rank A,” he said.

“It’s very unlikely that all of them will be Rank A, though. I heard the goblins could be killed with regular guns. Only the wyverns and a few other monsters must have ranked-up that much.”

“There’s also no need for us to go through the trouble of killing every single one of them, right? If we’re able to capture Joker, the person who materialized them, it’s game over. Let’s have a small group get close to him and end things in one go.”

The six elite members of the Crusaders were Rank B, and Rolf was extremely close to reaching Rank A. They also had experience fighting Rank A monsters. They should have been strong enough to defeat Joker as long as he was alone.

“Our line of defense is currently set up around Porto Velho, the capital of the State of Rondônia. We will arrange for a helicopter to transport you from Brasília to Porto Velho. Please help our troops defend this line. Our land force will try to handle the monsters for you. In the meantime, aim for Joker.”

More or less two hundred years after taking its independence in 1822, Brazil was forced to give up on attending the ongoing G20 Summit as they engaged in a life-or-death fight that would determine the fate of the country.



[State of Amazonas, Manaus — Joker]

The Legion had stopped moving after taking Manaus for several reasons. First, they were waiting for the result of the Gamerican presidential election. Second, they had obtained a large number of goods in the metropolis, and it was taking some time to ship everything back to Venisuela. Lastly—and this was the most crucial reason of them all—there was a B-Rank dungeon in Manaus.

“Aaaah... We’re finally done. B-Rank dungeons are no joke, huh?”

After finishing up with the B-Rank dungeon, Joker lit a cigarette as he narrowed his eyes. Some of his underlings had finally started reaching Rank B and Rank C. If nothing unexpected happened, they would be able to make Brazil fall in the next few days.

“We received a message from home, boss. The Vatican seems to be on the move.”

“And to think they could have kept this under wraps. Journalists sure are hardworking.”

Joker pulled a nearby chair toward him and straddled it, chin resting on the back of the chair. He started looking through the newspaper his subordinate had brought him as he stuffed his cheeks with jabuticaba. The sweet and sour taste, close to that of lychees, spread in his mouth.

The article detailed how the Brezilian government had reached out to the Vatican State for help and how they had decided to dispatch the Crusaders. There was even a picture of the Crusaders coming down in a military plane at a Brezilian base rather than on a commercial flight.

““Let the presence of God fill our hearts as we stand up to the dungeons.”” Joker paused. “Huh? They have no shot at defeating us if they’re fighting to please God. Right?” he asked, looking in the direction of the blue-haired girl.

She casually sipped her juice composed of several fruits, including cupuaçu. She finished her drink, not stopping until you could hear her noisily sucking air before nodding.

“Hmm... Maybe? I have no idea.”

“I’ll make sure to teach you carefully before I finish you off as well. Hya ha ha!”

Joker laughed and threw the newspaper to the ground. The blue-haired girl was a Legend Rare character but could barely fight. However, she had something none of the others possessed: memories.

“If they go around collecting pictures of the reliefs on the Final Floors, the others will eventually remember too. The reason the dungeons exist...” she said, face darkening.

Joker patted her on the head before walking off.



[State of Rondônia, Porto Velho — The Crusaders]

Hundreds of enthusiastically cheering Brezilian citizens awaited the Crusaders at the Oliveira International Airport. The Crusaders had accepted the direct order of His Holiness the Pope. To Catholics all over the world, they were a symbol of hope. It was only natural for the citizens of Porto Velho to see them as true heroes in these dire times with the Legion marching on them.

“We’re getting the welcome the hero’s party usually gets in stories, huh?”

“I think I heard girls’ voices. Should I go say hello?”

“Marco! We’re the Crusaders! How can you be thinking about hitting on girls after coming all the way here?! Are you trying to stain the Vatican’s reputation? Should I just castrate you myself?”

After exiting the airport, Rolf Schabel couldn’t help but feel somewhat restless and decided to direct his steps to the nearest Catholic Church. He wanted to put himself together before the fight and began by offering a prayer to the Lord.

“O God, please cast your mercy upon us and grant us strength as we cower in the face of your trial. Please give us the courage to stand up to evil,” he said, kneeling in front of the cross and hands brought together.



The strange uneasiness he felt slowly disappeared and was replaced by courage. The six of them were far from being pious Catholics, but after clearing so many dungeons and praying every time, their faith had been born anew. They now held their faith dear as they stood up to the dungeons. They had become true Crusaders, worthy of the title of the warriors who had preceded them more than a thousand years ago.

“O God, please watch over each of them. I believe You will become their strength in their fight against the Demon King. I can only pray as such, but please... Keep them safe,” the priest prayed before blessing them.

After nodding respectfully, the Dungeon Crusaders started their operation. Strangely enough, Joker left Manaus the very same day.



[A Certain Place in the State of Rondônia]

To reach the State of Rondônia from the State of Amazonas, you had to go south down the BR-319. Although it was a federal highway, the BR-319 was a narrow one-lane paved road. Most Japanese people would have trouble imagining just how large Brazil was. Gigantic trees filled the areas on both sides of the road as far as the eye could see, with that straight path continuing for hundreds of kilometers. A supermarket or a used tire shop popped into view every once in a while, but these stores were barely the size of a kiosk and didn't sell much besides beer and snacks. The virgin forest, farmland, and pasture areas were essentially empty despite the state capital being densely populated.

Naturally, the scale of any travel was also completely different in Brazil. Going from Manaus, in the State of Amazonas, to the neighboring state of Rondônia might sound similar to moving from one prefecture to the next in Japan, but the distance between Manaus and Porto Velho was no less than nine hundred kilometers. A close equivalent in Japan would be the distance between Sapporo and Tokyo. This is what going to the neighboring city meant in Brazil. Most large cities had an airport for this reason, and airlines worked on connecting cities by the shortest possible airway. This particular environment had played a role in Brazil becoming the third largest producer of passenger planes in the world.

Of course, the Legion could not very well use commercial flights. They made

their way down to Porto Velho in several old buses, casually listening to Latin Gamerican music as they rode.

<Don't judge me. I know that I was wrong. I can only ask you to trust me. Don't look at the monster hiding in my shadow. Oh, please, don't blame me. I know you're right, I know you're rich. Oh, what's a single meal to you?>

"HYA HA HA!"

Inside one of the buses, a man and a woman—a prostitute he'd hired in Manaus—sang, beer in hand. Lured by the appeal of cash and precious metals, she had decided to accompany him to Porto Velho. As long as the men of the Legion abided by Joker's rules, they were relatively free to do whatever they liked. Paying for the company of women was all right, and so was consuming drugs and alcohol. Most of his subordinates were former outlaws. Big dreams and ideals wouldn't move them. Hence, he used the carrot-and-stick method: keep them afraid and bestow great benefits upon them when they listened.

The two-day trip to Porto Velho was so calm and peaceful that no one could have guessed these men were headed to the battlefield. Although they had to camp, they could use dungeon items to bathe, and every tent was complete with comfortable beds. Joker's men slept soundly, a girl on each arm, while the monsters stood guard, patrolling the area. Joker made use of the night's calm to look over detailed maps of Porto Velho's surroundings and keep thinking about his next move.

"The Crusaders were most likely sent to kill me... The Brezilian army set up their line of defense at the intersection of the BR-319 and the BR-230. There's good visibility there, making it easier for them to deploy their men."

The BR-319, which continued on to Manaus, was surrounded by trees on both sides most of the time. There would be dense forest until the intersection with the BR-230, which meant the buses would suddenly go from a single-lane road with poor visibility to a very open intersection. They would set up heavy weapons all around the exit of the BR-319 and shoot at every monster that emerged. This was the only place where such a plan could work.

"If I deploy the wyverns first, I'll be able to secure control of the air. Orcs will easily withstand tank guns if they're given some shields. The real pain is the

Crusaders. They'll likely hide in the forest. Should I get Chico to look for them with his Detection?"

The Crusaders were fine-tuning their plan at the same time. As fate had it, their strategy was exactly what Joker had predicted. Rolf Schabel, their leader, was about to explain the plan to his teammates in their tent.

"They were able to intercept Tomahawks before, meaning one of Joker's men must be able to use some sort of reconnaissance ability. If we try to hide and attack him by surprise, we'll get found out. However, there's an item we can use."

Name: Invisibility Cloak

Rarity: Rare

Description: A cloak that allows you to become invisible once you put it on. However, your presence will not disappear. Sharp people may just notice you. Who knows?

"This cloak would normally be seized, since it's a dangerous class 2 good, but we may have no choice but to use it this time."

"Depending on the enemy's skill level, there's a chance he'll notice us anyway, right? What do we do then?"

"That won't be a problem. To be honest, I'd just burn down the whole area if I were in Joker's shoes. Hiding is pointless. Instead, we'll track him down while keeping a good distance between him and us before surprising him from behind. Well, he will likely predict that too, so he'll probably leave a rear guard to handle us."

The BR-319 cut right through the Amazon jungle. Rolf had reached the conclusion that hiding and attacking from the rear was doable, considering the dense forest.

"The Legion's biggest weakness is that they don't have access to spy satellites. However, we can make use of Reich and Franze's satellites to keep track of the situation in real time."

Rolf continued. "He's currently camping in the Lago Jari National Park, which

is located roughly three hundred kilometers from here, and will reach the defense line by noon tomorrow. We'll start following him when he's twenty kilometers away from the intersection and set up our attack."

His five comrades nodded. They spent their last night before the battle in silence. Finally, morning came.

* * *

The Brezilian army had chosen Humaitá, a city on the banks of the Madeira River, as their front line location and positioned themselves in the west, at the intersection of the BR-230—also known as the Trans-Amazonian Highway—and the BR-319.

They had brought power shovels and bulldozers to dig trenches. After these were dug, barbed wire was set up in front of the defense line. Although the Brezilian army's weapons weren't the best available, they had plenty of supplies to go around. They hadn't received any support from Bolivar or Guayrani—both countries were going through political crises—but Argentine, the southernmost country of South Gamerica, had sent over arms and ammunition. Dungeons had appeared in Argentine as well, and they knew that if Brezil was to fall they'd face Joker next. Thus, they hadn't hesitated to send plenty of help.

"We can't lose to a few dozen civilians with this many supplies! We even have the Crusaders on our side. Let's rip these monsters apart!"

The soldiers clamored at the words of their commanding officer. The battle on the outskirts of Manaus had taught the Brezilian army a great deal about the Legion's methods. A single monster was powerful enough to face a platoon on its own. However, they weren't immune to machine guns and tank guns. If they just held out long enough, the Crusaders would deliver the final blow. In a few hours, everything would be settled.

"Reporting. Three buses have stopped three kilometers north. It seems to be the Legion."

"Good. Prepare the howitzers!"

The commanding officer's words marked the start of Brezil's fight for survival.

* * *

“We’re deploying the wyverns. Be ready to intercept missiles. Giovanni...” Joker ordered.

Giovanni immediately conjured a thick mud wall with his magic. The wyverns all flew off from behind the wall, and the sound of explosions soon joined the flapping of their wings. The Brazilian army’s howitzers had been fired.

“Wyverns, seize control of the air! Goblin artillery, advance! Follow the orcs!”

Monsters appeared one after the other.

Joker had spent some time in the dungeon of Manaus to obtain more cards and train his monsters. As long as he could find a dungeon, there would never be an end to his supply of soldiers, who would grow stronger after each fight. If Brazil fell, no army would be strong enough to challenge the Legion. Naturally, the Vatican was also well aware of that fact. That was the very reason the Crusaders had been sent.

“Boss, I can feel a presence behind us. It must be the Crusaders.”

“As expected. Leave several Rank B monsters to guard our rear. Let’s see how strong they are.”

Ten dark wolves materialized. Thanks to their sense of smell, these B-Rank monsters would be able to track down their prey even if it tried to conceal its presence. The dark wolves set out at once, noses twitching.

“Mifa,” Joker addressed the blue-haired girl who still sat on the bus. “Go back to your card form, just to be safe. If I die, you’re free to do whatever you like, whether that’s joining the Crusaders or returning to the dungeon...”

“Are you going to lose?” Mifa asked.

“Hya ha ha! I won’t! I just wanted to say something cool for once.”

Joker left the bus in a good mood, twirling and dancing as he threw monster cards around, one after the other. The cards rained down like confetti, fluttering in the air before turning into monsters.

“I’m sure they think they’re better equipped than we are...” Joker said, trailing off. “Their mistake. Two weeks above ground means five years in dungeon time. Do they have any idea how many cards you can get in such a

long time? We have hundreds of thousands of soldiers!”

If ten adventurers defeated one monster per minute, they’d kill 7200 of them in twelve hours. There was a five percent chance to obtain a card, which meant they’d gather around 360 cards. In half a year inside the dungeon, that would add up to over 65,000 cards. On top of that, adventurers were constantly taking turns inside the Venisuelan dungeon as well. The Legion was growing stronger every day.

“Don’t be stingy! Throw everything at them!”

A few thousand goblins were added to the troops. The way Joker called upon monsters, controlling them at will, was very befitting of a Demon King.

After dashing along the BR-319 at an inhuman speed, the rear of the Legion finally came into sight. Jet black wolves ran at them as soon as they closed in.

Rolf threw aside his Invisibility Cloak. “Dark wolves! Assume attack formation!” he warned.

“Got it! Leeeeeet’s goooo!” Chloe exclaimed, casting a magic spell.

A huge bolt of lightning struck the ground, covering a large area. The wolves fell one after the other. This wasn’t enough to kill B-Rank monsters, such as the dark wolves, though. However, Alberta Reigenbach and Marco Montale took advantage of their weakened state to finish them off with their blades.

“Boost! Magic Resistance! Toughness! Accelerate! Clear Mind!”

Léonard Chartres was able to use Holy Magic and cast buff upon buff on his comrades. Finally, Franca Bezzini stepped onto the path cleared by Alberta and Marco and fired an arrow at Joker, aiming right between the eyes.

FWOOSH.

The arrow was about to hit its target when a sturdy sword struck it down right in front of Joker’s face. A built man who looked about ten years older than Joker wielded the sword one-handedly.

Joker clapped.

“My, my! Good job! You cleaned up the weaklings with a zone attack and took down the B-Rank monsters in close combat. To think you’d try to finish me off

with a ranged attack before I could even focus my attention back on you. You all seem very used to fighting as a team!”

Joker spoke with confidence, as though nothing fazed him, but the person who had just fired the arrow wasn't as relaxed.

“My arrow was so easily blocked... It's an SR item! Still, that guy isn't an A-Ranker. He's either the same rank as us or lower!” she exclaimed.

“As expected, Joker isn't alone. Defense formation!” Rolf yelled, putting up his shield.

The other five circled back to stand behind him. The situation wasn't as good as they'd hoped, but it wasn't unexpected either. Franca, the scout, had very sharp intuition and could usually assess opponents fairly accurately. As long as the six members of the Crusaders worked together, they could even defeat Rank A monsters. They had honed their formations countless times inside the dungeons.

Right as Rolf tried to launch an offensive, however, Joker raised his hand as if to stop him.

“Ah! Wait. Hang on, okay? Why are you guys even trying to fight me? I'm human, you know.”

“What?!”

“Rolf!!!” Marco screamed from behind, stopping Rolf, who had answered reflexively.

This fight was kill-or-be-killed. It wasn't the time for casual chitchat with the enemy. Still, Joker was unarmed.

“You guys are the Crusaders, right?” Joker asked, calmly stepping forward. “The ones working in Europe? Why did you bother coming all the way here? I don't think I ever did anything to you or the Vatican, did I?”

“Stop messing with us! You're calling yourself the Demon King. You hurt and kill people just because you feel like it, and you're trying to destroy the world! Stopping you is our duty as God's vanguard!” yelled Alberta, lunging forward, blade at the ready.

Her attack was stopped by the swordsman who had countered Franca's arrow earlier. Joker ignored her and continued his speech.

"Look, I'm not even armed. Don't you think it's rude to suddenly jump on someone who's trying to talk to you? Aren't you the ones who are trying to hurt someone just because you feel like it?"

"That bastard... What the heck is he on about?" Marco muttered.

"Hey," Joker continued, undisturbed. "Just tell me. Why are you fighting me?"

"Alberta, fall back. We came at the request of the Brazilian government. The Vatican will not abandon faithful Catholics. We'll protect them from the Demon King... That's why we fight!" Rolf roared, his shield still up.

Alberta stepped back carefully, sword at the ready.

Joker snickered, shoulders heaving in laughter.

"Can I ask you a question, then? Would the Vatican have done the same if a request had come from a Protestant, Buddhist, Muslan, or Hindra country? Some West African countries have large Muslan populations. Would you have ignored them?"

"Don't listen to him, Rolf! The same happens in every RPG!!! The Demon King will always try to deceive the hero!"

Chloe's words were in vain, as Léonard, the former seminary student, walked forward, heading toward Joker. Léonard tightly clasped the cross that hung from his neck and kept walking until he stood in front of Joker.

"Léonard!"

"Shut up! This is an opportunity! We may be able to talk things out without fighting," Léonard started. "Demon King Joker, I have a question for you as well. Why do *you* fight?"

"Hya ha ha!"

Joker showed a sinister smile to the youngster who had bravely come to face him.



[Federative Republic of Brezil — State of Rondônia]

“Why do *you* fight?”

Joker smiled at French former seminary student Léonard Chartres’s question.

“I’m not the only one who fights,” he answered. “Everyone fights to survive. The fact that you don’t realize this shows how pampered you have been your whole life.”

“Still, we’re all people. We should be able to reach a mutual understanding through words. Whether someone is a Catholic or a Muslan doesn’t matter! I don’t know what your goal is, but can we not resolve this by talking?” Léonard asked.

“Impossible.”

Joker snickered again as he took one step forward.

“Let me tell you a few things,” he continued. “People are saying that the appearance of the dungeons is a huge turning point in human history. Do you understand what changed and how?”

The Crusaders exchanged looks. What surprised them the most was the way Joker spoke rather than the question itself. They had taken him for a much more violent person.

“When it all started—back when humans were still basically monkeys—being strong meant having brute strength. Eventually, humans settled together and society was born. Henceforth, the very meaning of strength shifted. Knowledge came to be needed along with physical strength, and both combined into productivity. For instance, you can think of people being good at hunting or gathering. After some time, currency appeared, and with that, the measure of strength became economic power. How much wealth you had defined how powerful you were. The wealthy influenced society, and that influence slowly turned into political power. Those in power created laws to protect their positions and social classes, castes, and statues were fixed... A few thousand years later states and countries appeared, and now, wealth remains unevenly distributed and humans are forced into invisible classes.”

“That’s not true. In front of the Lord, everyone is equal.”

“Do you think a person of color could become the pope? There are more Catholics in Africa than Europe, yet there’s not a single African cardinal in the Vatican. Does that sound equal to you, hypocrite? ”

“That...”

Léonard didn’t know how to answer.

Catholicism had spread from the Roman Empire, which had led to the current status quo. It was an unwritten rule that a white man would be chosen to become the pope. The Vatican was also conservative and patriarchal enough for satirical tales, such as the legend of Pope Joan, to float around. There was not a single woman among the two hundred cardinals. To sum it up, neither the system nor the culture of the Vatican advocated for racial or gender equality.

“I’m not saying the Vatican is in the wrong,” Joker explained. “That’s just how humanity is. In our thousands of years of history, people have always been defined by their social class. However, the dungeons are about to change this. Societies, countries, even democracy itself—all of these concepts came to be because there are limits to the powers of a single individual. It’s impossible for one person to control millions through brute strength. Only now, it will become possible. Gaining supernatural powers inside the dungeons will make it possible for a single person to destroy humanity itself, if they so wished. I could murder the entire population of South Gamera—four hundred million people—if I suddenly decided to do so. A single individual with no wealth, no status, and no political power can now topple nations. The appearance of the dungeons made strength regain its original meaning.”

Léonard and the rest of the Crusaders were at a loss. Naturally, they had watched every video Joker had uploaded. He always threw in vulgar jokes and verbally attacked more advanced countries, Gamera in particular, while urging poorer countries to unite and give him access to their dungeons. However, Joker seemed to be a completely different person now that they had met him and spoken to him in real life. Rather than a radical terrorist, he almost sounded like an intellectual, a philosopher.

This feeling... It’s like...

A man’s silhouette suddenly popped up in Rolf Schabel’s mind, but he shook

his head. What they said, how they acted... Everything was different.

The man in front of him asserted he would use strength to force his will on people. He was a terrorist. Rolf grabbed Léonard’s shoulder and forced him to step back.

“Enough, Léonard,” he said. “Joker, I understand your point. Then we’ll just have to use our own strength to force you to obey. It’s what you just said, so you shouldn’t have any issue with this, right?”

Thanks to Rolf’s words, the Crusaders all refocused. The same was true for the Legion. On each side, people with superpowers were ready to face each other, their weapons of choice in hand. Joker, the Demon King, was the only one who remained fully composed.

“Hya ha ha! Good by me! I’m a pretty busy man, though. I’ve prepared another opponent for you. Don’t worry.”

He took a card out of his pocket and threw it in the air. The card glowed dazzlingly for a moment.

“Is it your first time? Fighting an S-Rank monster, I mean,” Joker asked.

“What?! Everyone, fall back!!!”

A gigantic monster with dark green scales soon replaced the glowing card.

Name: Dragon
Title: None
Rank: S
Rarity: Ultra Rare
Skills: Breath, Slaughter, Flight

The gigantic monster—it was at least ten meters tall—roared. It looked exactly like the dragons told of in stories.

“All right. You guys have fun.”

The Demon King, who stood behind the dragon, waved at the Crusaders before walking away.

* * *

"I can't believe it... A dragon? Rank S?"

"Isn't this bad news, Rolf? Shouldn't we retreat?" Marco suggested as they fell back.

Rolf continued to hold his shield up. Before he could answer, the dragon's tail came flying at them. It was an attack from a Rank S monster. The Crusaders, who were only B-Rankers, were sent flying with that single blow.

"Urgh..."

Alberta painfully stood up, shivering. She had taken quite a bit of damage from that attack but had not died. The others also somehow found the strength to stand. If they were hit a second time, however, they might not be able to stand again.

Right as the Crusaders looked death in the eye, a strange voice resonated in their heads.

Hmm... All of you are Limit Breakers, are you not?

"What?!"

They frantically looked at one another before realizing where the voice was coming from.

"Did it...speak?"

Wherefore art thou so surprised? Any being of Rank S hast far more wondrous intellect than thee humans. Mastering thy language is an easy feat. Do not fear. Mine own master doth not seemeth to desire thy puny lives... Well, not all. Giveth me a sacrifice, and I shall alloweth the rest to go unscathed.

"Don't mess with us! We'd never abandon one of our comrades!"

"W-Wait!" Léonard stopped Rolf, who'd flown into a rage. "You can understand us, right? Then can't we discuss this and avoid fighting? We have no intention of fighting you."

What driveth. Hadst I been a weak monster, wouldst thou have not slain me without any debate? Thou knoweth thou cannot defeat me and so searcheth f'r

a way to flee.

“That’s not true! We came here as God’s vanguard. Our goal is to bring peace to this place. We never wanted to fight, if it could be avoided.”

God’s vanguard?

The dragon remained silent for a few instants as its humongous body shook.

HA HA HA HA! Thou speak of God! I see. I see now. Thou understand nothing. Thou doth not know wherefore the dungeons exist!

The dragon tramped forward. While Rolf and the others fell back immediately, Léonard did not budge, forcing his trembling body to stay in place. He clasped his cross tightly. The dragon brought its nose to Léonard’s face.



I shalt reward thy bravery. I shall tell thee. The goal of the Dungeon System is...

“What?”

That is wherefore thee wilt not defeat the dungeons. As long as thou calleth thyself God’s vanguard, tis impossible!

Then, the dragon opened its gigantic mouth and bit down on Léonard, head first.



[Japan — Ministry of Dungeons — Ezoë Kazuhiko]

“I’m sorry for suddenly asking you to come in so late...”

Japan’s central government ministries and agencies had an incredibly toxic work culture. Official announcements stated employees worked around thirty hours of overtime a month, but many actually went over one hundred fifty. It was considered fully normal to arrive at seven in the evening and leave at two in the morning the following day. Naturally, the newly established Ministry of Dungeons worked the same way. This was the drawback of a bureaucracy-led government. The Ministry of Dungeons, in particular, was often the target of questions from Diet members, and the young bureaucrats were forced to pull all-nighters, sometimes several days in a row. The most toxic company in Japan was undoubtedly the government itself.

“It reminded me of my twenties. It’s been a while since I was last woken up at such a time. Anyway, what happened?”

I currently sat in a meeting room of the Ministry of Dungeons. At slightly past four it was early morning rather than nighttime at this point, but every high-ranking bureaucrat, including Vice-Minister Ishihara, had gathered. I could only assume something big had happened.

“I’ll get straight to the point,” she started. “The Vatican sent the Dungeon Crusaders to face Joker, but they lost. Their leader, Rolf, and four other members managed to retreat, but Léonard Chartres, the French clergyman, was killed. The Brazilian army was annihilated, and the federal government is ready

to surrender.”

The room was silent.

For the first time in my life, my brain refused to comprehend what I had been told. The Crusaders were only B-Rankers, but they were very well equipped. They also had plenty of combat experience and did not fall short compared to Dungeon Busters’s team leaders. I couldn’t believe they had been utterly defeated.

“I have footage from the reconnaissance satellite. Take a look.”

She projected a black-and-white picture, but there was no mistaking the monster in it.

“A dragon...”

“According to Rolf Schabel’s report, it’s an S-Rank monster. It killed Léonard Chartres with a single attack, then breathed fire on the Brezilian army, destroying their formation. Machine guns, rockets, anti-tank cannons... None of that had any effect on him. Tens of thousands of soldiers lost their lives in that battle. Brezil lost any means to continue the war. The mental damage must also be quite great. Either way, they decided to surrender. This is the latest report we’ve heard from the Brezilian government.”

“How are Rolf and the others?” I asked.

The Crusaders and the Busters were allies who fought against the dungeons. On top of that, I had trained Rolf and the other five myself. I was very worried about them, considering they had just lost a comrade.

“I can only tell you that they’re safe,” Ishihara stated. “Rolf Schabel made his report when they were still in Brezil, and they haven’t reached out since then. I’m guessing they’re being careful and avoiding communication until they reach their homeland. The Vatican contacted us first to let us know the situation. Do you understand why?”

“To make sure the Dungeon Busters are ready to join the Crusaders and fight Joker, if need be... Right?”

“Exactly. Still, we can’t make that decision at the Ministry of Dungeons. It’s a

crucial political issue. A large country with a population of two hundred million inhabitants that is also part of the G20 just lost a war against the Legion. This news will shake the world. Everyone will try to control their country's adventurers."

"Japan too?"

"Prime Minister Urabe is a cautious man, but the media will surely band together. We can expect to hear something along the lines of 'Dungeon adventurers are dangerous. We can't allow individuals to decide the fate of whole countries. We need to lock down every dungeon and restrain adventurers...'"

"If that happens, the world will simply succumb to the Legion... A good chunk of people won't see how dangerous he is until that danger comes knocking at their doors. That's normalcy bias for you. They'll surely worry more about adventurers in their own country rather than Joker's Legion, which is halfway across the world. Well..." I paused. "What are your plans?"

"Gamerica, the EU, the Oriental Republic of Sina, and Japan will stand together and stress the importance of dungeon adventurers. Aside from the Oriental Republic of Sina, however, we are democratic countries. We can't afford to ignore public opinion, no matter what. For now, we just need to refrain from making any strong statements. If journalists ask you what you think of Joker, just say that you feel indignation at what he's doing. If you receive any other inquiry, go through us before making a statement."

"You don't want me stirring up public opinion. I get it, but still..."

I looked at the picture once again. We had no way to know how many Rank S monsters Joker controlled. One single monster had been enough to annihilate a modern army. Our JGSDF would also lose against a dragon if they tried to fight one now. If nothing was done, the world *would* fall because of humans.

"I'll do something to sway the government and the public," said Ishihara. "You focus on clearing Japanese dungeons for the time being."

I nodded, thinking about Rolf. I'd give him a call when he returned.



<Breaking news. Yesterday afternoon, local time, the Brezilian army entered a fight against the Venisuelan terrorist association commonly known as Legion. The Brezilian army suffered major casualties and had no choice but to retreat.>

<The government of the Federative Republic of Brezil has announced that Brezil will accept Joker's terms. This is effectively an unconditional surrender. Joker's demands include control of every dungeon on Brezilian soil as well as total cooperation with the Legion inside the country. Joker also wants to resume diplomatic relations between Venisuela and Brezil as well as strengthen export controls of agricultural and animal products for the G20 countries. Finally, his fifth and final condition is that Brezil must send one billion Gamerican dollars worth of food to Venisuela over the next ten years.>

<After this announcement was made public, violent riots erupted in Rio de Janeiro, but were immediately quelled. The Legion's soldiers are currently staying at a hotel in Brasília, but we have received word that they have not occupied the hotel. Rather, they are paying for their stay. Many Brezilians spoke of their surprise upon hearing about this.>

<The Japanese government has issued a statement of condemnation at the highest level. The Japan-Gamerica-Europe-Sina Alliance is also planning to ask the UN to pass a resolution shortly.>

The news of Brezil's surrender was broadcast not only on Japanese TV but also on every news channel around the world. The media's handling of the incident was very different from that of the coup in Venisuela or the invasion of Colombian. The army of a large country with a population of two hundred million inhabitants had been single-handedly defeated by a small-scale organization led by a single man. This finally proved that the world's military balance had collapsed due to the dungeons.

The news that the Crusaders, sent by the Vatican, had been defeated by Joker was especially devastating for Europeans. In Rome, thousands shed tears, and the Pope himself expressed his condolences. Franze was indignant over the death of the pious clergyman Léonard, and some French citizens even called for the president to launch a nuclear attack on Venisuela, the Legion's stronghold.

The world was shocked. While many mourned Léonard, what Vice Minister Ishihara had feared started becoming reality. Voices started being heard, voices that questioned whether dungeon adventurers could really be left alone.

<This incident has proven how strong adventurers are and what they can do. One single person with superpowers can call upon hundreds of thousands of monsters and take down a country on their own. If we don't do anything, there will be more and more people who can do this in the future. They're too dangerous to ignore. Wouldn't you agree?>

<In the Republic of Woori, adventurers are forced to sign a contract using a dungeon item to make sure they hand over every card. Their position is also known at all times through a GPS tracking system. They managed to get rid of adventurer-related crimes, just like that. We should implement these methods in Japan too.>

"Commentators on TV just blurt out whatever they want without thinking of the consequences. You'd better not pay them any mind," General Manager Mukai told me as I watched TV in the cafeteria during lunch.

Today's lunch was kamo nanban, a soba noodle dish made with duck. Everything was handmade, starting with the broth, so it tasted even better than the dishes you could eat at regular soba places.

"Our neighbor is ignoring the human rights of adventurers and putting surveillance bracelets on them, for instance. The TV hosts don't know everything, but the Ministry of Dungeons was already well aware of their practices."

"Right. But Japan is a democratic country. If public opinion strays this way and demands adventurers be regulated, the authorities won't be able to ignore it. Some left-wing members of the opposition have already started asking for regulations to be tightened. I'm sorry, General Manager Mukai. Your job is about to become more difficult..." I apologized.

"It's no problem. Besides, some people also support us. It wasn't anything official, but the mayor of Edogawa City sent us his thanks. One way or another, our company has brought a lot of money to this city," General Manager Mukai said, commenting on our relations with the local community as he slurped his

noodles.

I got frequent reports from the general affairs department, but hearing things directly from the person in charge helped me gain new insight at times.

At the very least, it didn't seem like we adventurers were going to be regarded as monsters in Edogawa City. I found some comfort in that fact.



[2020 (Reiwa 2) — Extraordinary Diet Session — Ezoe Kazuhiko]

It was said the Extraordinary Diet Session, which opened in October 2020, would be one for history books. Urgent topics that could not be pushed back, such as the rise of the Legion, dungeon policies, and the issue of constitutional reform, had piled up. Even the members of the opposition, who were usually busy looking for scandals, were rumored to have prepared actual arguments to discuss the proposal for constitutional reform. However, when it came down to it, the issues being discussed by the Diet were miles away from the question that currently preoccupied most Japanese citizens.

“We will touch upon the dungeons and constitutional reform, but we'd also like to have some time to discuss the cherry blossom viewing party incident. If we have some extra time, there are other questions we'd like to ask as well.”

The statement of the Constitutional Democratic Party's deputy, which was the largest opposition party, earned him quite the backlash online. On the other hand, some other opposition parties had an open and dignified debate with current government members despite those parties being rather small. These two parties were the Democratic People's Party, which approved of Urabe's revision, and the Communist Party, which still opposed it.

“Dungeons are not countries. Even with the current constitution, there is no reason the JSDF would not be able to fight monsters. There is no need to go out of our way to change the constitution. Why not enact laws to give the JSDF the authority to fight monsters?”

“Fighting monsters is done at the peril of one's life. Are you demanding our forces fight against monsters and put their lives at stake for something that may backfire due to it not being clear enough in the constitution? We must provide

them with the right environment so that they may take pride in defending their country. Is this not our duty as politicians?”

Debates around constitutional reform were not limited to the Diet. The issue had been raised separately in each electoral district.

The constitution was the very framework that defined the state. People who didn't have an opinion on such a crucial matter had no place in the Diet. Prime Minister Urabe Seiichirou had said as much during the general meeting of the Conservative Party in June, right after the double election had concluded and every Diet member had held meetings in their district to discuss the issue. This had allowed the idea of constitutional reform to develop in people's minds. Prime Minister Urabe had decided to announce the proposal in November.

Constitutional reform was not the only important item on the agenda. Another was the question of the treatment of adventurers. Joker's Legion had garnered a lot of attention. Criminal adventurers other than them had appeared in Gamera, the EU, and Southeast Asia. Violent acts using magic skills, theft perpetrated with the help of dungeon items, and issues with contraband items had all occurred. If a criminal act was impossible to prove or remained undiscovered, it could not be judged. Thus, the incidents that had been uncovered were thought to merely be the tip of the iceberg. People feared even worse criminals were hiding in the shadows.

Japan also needed to put countermeasures in place before anything happened.

“Dungeon adventurers are dangerous. We ought to use dungeon items to restrict them.”

Strangely enough, no one wanted to ignore human rights and restrict the “dangerous” adventurers as much as left-wing politicians who usually prided themselves on being liberals. This apparent contradiction had sparked a lot of debate on the internet. One left-wing Diet member of the opposition had simply stated that “if adventurers didn't exist, this type of crime wouldn't either.” The conservatives regarded this the same way they regarded the supporters of the current Constitution whose primary beliefs could be summed up as “without weapons, there wouldn't be wars” and “as long as you say

you're anti-war, there won't be a war."

"Some citizens have requested the government hire civilian adventurers and give them special status as civil servants. What do you think of this?" an opposition Diet member asked me.

I had been called in as a witness and immediately offered a rebuttal.

"I don't see an issue in hiring those who wish to be hired," I said. "However, what salary do you plan to offer? This is only my personal opinion, but I think the bare minimum would be at least two times the salary of Diet members. Just to be clear, though, I must say that I'll refuse your offer, even if you try to offer me the whole national budget. I don't like taking orders."

"Some have suggested we should change the system as a whole. Those who refuse to become civil servants would not be allowed to enter dungeons."

"Does that mean you would withdraw from the IDAO? If the government makes that choice, there's nothing I can do about it. However, Dungeon Busters will have no choice but to relocate to Europe if that happens. Please handle the dungeons left in Japan with your civil servants."

Several opposition Diet members hooted. The way their brains worked was beyond me. The issue at hand was to find a way to prevent adventurers from committing crimes, but the opposition simply seemed to want the adventurer initiative to disappear.

"The current system forbids former convicts, members of illegal or contrary-to-public-order organizations, and members of organizations under the surveillance of the Public Security Intelligence Agency to become adventurers. On top of this, a covenant prevents people from using dungeon items on the surface. Some adventurers do possess powers that surpass human abilities, but most of them could barely defeat amateur martial artists. If you intend to put even more limits on them, will you also restrict boxers and karate practitioners? If you don't, I believe we have a case of discrimination."

I was not the representative of all adventurers in any way, shape, or form, but I was aware I had some degree of fame. I didn't want adventurers as a whole to suffer because of something I had said. More than anything, I didn't believe the Monster Stampede could be stopped if civilian adventurers were plagued with

even more restrictions.

Civil servants fighting in dungeons? Don't make me laugh. You can only say such nonsense because you've never been inside one.

There were some positive things to discuss regarding dungeons too, like the development of new energies and the increase in the number of civilian adventurers, for instance, but my mood was gloomier than ever.



[Federative Republic of Brazil — Capital City, Brasília]

Foreign leaders expressed their disappointment over Brazil's decision to surrender to Joker's Legion. The international community viewed Brazil as a victim, forced to yield under the invasion of Venisuela—or put differently, of Joker.

On the other hand, Joker's demands were rather easy for a country of over two hundred million inhabitants that was part of the G20 to shoulder. Even the one billion dollars worth of food Joker had requested over the next ten years only amounted to one hundred million dollars worth of food per year. If Brazil used domestically produced agricultural and animal products, the economic burden resulting from this demand would be insignificant.

Putting the dungeons under the Legion's authority meant that the Brazilian army would not need to manage them anymore. In fact, Joker had simply placed B-Rank goblins in the Floor 1 Safety Zone of the Colombian dungeon to act as guards. By making it clear that stepping inside a dungeon while not being part of the Legion meant instant death, Joker had effectively squashed the possibility of criminal adventurers even appearing. In terms of dungeon management, Joker's methods were pretty effective.

“But isn't the Legion's objective to let the Monster Stampede occur and wipe out humanity?”

“Do you really believe he wants to do this? This is nothing more than a show he put on to force Gamera and the EU to negotiate with him. He clearly wants to challenge the economic disparity our society seems to have set in stone. In ten years, the members of the G7 may have completely changed. Our country

even has a shot at becoming a permanent member of the UN Security Council,” the Brezilian president said, laughing in self-derision.

He couldn’t do anything else but laugh at this point. The man, nicknamed the South Gamerican Howard, was a right-wing politician elected by the Brezilian people, who had placed all their hopes in him. However, all he had done was let Brezil suffer a humiliation that would be forever recorded in history books. If he didn’t put on a brave face and dream about an ideal future, he wouldn’t have been able to go on.

The Quintuple Alliance had been born after the Napoleonic Wars, and the world order had been redefined after each World War. The countries that currently stood at the top were the permanent members of the UN Security Council, which all had nuclear weapons, and Japan and Reich, which had outstanding technical prowess and economic power. After them came regional powers and middle powers.

Large, populous countries such as Bharatas or Brezil, the largest South Gamerican country, had strengthened their economies in the last twenty years, but at the same time, the wealth gap had widened exponentially. The satellite cities that surrounded Brasília had turned into slums, and the crime rate was out of control. Controlling dungeons, which required order, had always been impossible here. The Legion now acted as a deterrent, scaring away potential offenders in the stead of the government. In the meantime, the government would be able to focus its efforts on restoring public order. This was the goal of the Brezilian president.

“The rich and the poor can fight over the dungeons. We have better things to do!”

Those few words the president spit out without thinking were his true feelings.



[Republic of Woori — Blue House]

The Woorian government was certain that its recent success at the G20 meeting in the Kingdom of Saud Arab—which had included securing a meeting with President-elect Wozniak before Japan—would help President Park’s

approval rating, even if only for a short while.

However, President Park's approval rating instead took a turn for the worse as soon as the content of the talks was released and it became apparent the Japan-Gamerica talks had touched upon more exciting topics. Even Park Jae-An's most devoted voter base was starting to disapprove of him. At this point, the Woorian government had no choice but to find some way to reverse public opinion.

There was a long-standing tradition in Woori of diverting the people's eyes from governmental issues by somehow making the situation about Japan. In the past few years—ever since Moon Soyun's presidency—Japan and Woori's relations had hit rock bottom, however. The Woorian government had created a Department of Dungeons and was working on dungeon-related policies, but there was basically no exchange of information with Japan. President Park Jae-An was even more anti-Japan than his predecessor, but everyone assumed there was no way for the two countries' relations to deteriorate even further.

"There is only one reason for Japan to revise its constitution and strengthen the JSDF. They intend to take over Asia once more. Woori will stand firmly against this! Considering Japan's long history of attacking its neighbors without ever showing an ounce of remorse, I am not surprised it has come to this. Truly, no one is as shameless as the Japanese!"

That statement reached Japan immediately, as it came directly from a high-ranking official of the Blue House. It was nothing more than the words of an individual, so the Japanese government did not react too strongly. The conservative media made a point to relay the story as much as possible though, causing outrage. Opinions raged online, some as extreme as to say Japan shouldn't lift a finger to help, even if Woori were overrun by monsters during the Monster Stampede.

Citizens were also outraged in Woori. People were fed up with the economic slump. On top of that, Woori's diplomatic relations were a mess. Woori's way of life, which had remained stable since the days of the previous government, was based on two factors: relying on Gamerica for military protection and dealing with Sina for economic matters. Between the appearance of the dungeons and the Legion's fight against the north-south divide, this balance had collapsed.

Stuck between the reality of things and its ideals, Woori was unable to make a decisive move.

“Mr. President, will you not issue a statement of condemnation? Gameraica, the EU, the Oriental Republic of Sina, and Japan have issued high-level complaints.”

“Foreign Minister Kang assured us Venisuela would not invade its neighbors! In the end, they marched on Brezil without hesitation! What is going on?!”

“According to the Venisuelan government, a group of civilians did this on its own. They claim Venisuela had no part in it and thus has not broken their promise to us. Rather, they’re pestering us, wanting to know when we’ll start sending the technical help we promised for their oil refineries.”

“A group of civilians?! What a clever way of putting it!”

“Naturally, the Department of Foreign Affairs complained as well. Venisuela apparently retorted we weren’t any better with our kneeling statue, the one that caused that incident with Japan...”

“Still no word from the Kingdom of Ko?”

“Besides First Secretary Kim Si-A’s comment? Nothing. He said an opportunistic country should be kept at bay and watched even more than outright enemies. We can’t antagonize Gameraica and the Oriental Republic of Sina any longer. Let’s break our relationship with Venisuela. The international community won’t allow a country as powerful as ours to stay neutral.”

Should they choose Venisuela and Joker and pursue the dream of reconciliation of the Woorian people, reuniting the north and south? Or should they choose Gameraica and Japan, and join the fight against the Legion...? President Park Jae-An could not make up his mind.

As every country plunged into deeper turmoil, it was time to welcome the very last month of 2020.



[December 2020 — Ezoe Kazuhiko]

A whole year had gone by since the creation of Dungeon Busters. A lot had

happened during that year: the full activation of the Dungeon System, the training of the Crusaders, the birth of the Ministry of Dungeons, the rise of Joker's Legion... I had never gone through such hectic times in my life before.

The year 2020—and its endless twists and turns—was finally nearing its end. There was only one more month to go. Dungeon Busters was now a rather large company with over sixty employees, including adventurers and support staff. We were doing pretty... No. We were actually doing so well that it was almost criminal at this point. As the manager, I had to somehow give back to my employees and my local community.

“And so, that's why I decided to organize a fancy year-end party to thank everyone for their hard work.”

“Ezoe-san... You planned a budget of two hundred thousand yen per person? Do you think we're back in the middle of the bubble economy era?!”

I pretended not to hear General Manager Mukai's complaints.

We were planning a buffet-style party at a high-class teppanyaki restaurant called Anzai Grill located a few minutes away from Koiwa Station on foot. Koiwa, which was in Edogawa City, was far from being known for its classy restaurants and bars. However, this particular place was so fancy it wouldn't have looked out of place in Aoyama or Azabu—two of Tokyo's most luxurious neighborhoods. Their meat was also top class. If we gathered a bunch of adventurers who each ate several kilograms of meat in one sitting at such a place, the bill would rack up fast, naturally. To be honest, two hundred thousand yen per person was the bare minimum.

* * *

“A lot has changed this year. The Legion has started clearing the Brezilian dungeons, and the Crusaders are being fully reorganized. We won't stop pushing forward either. Next year, it will finally be time for us to challenge Rank A and Rank S dungeons. Tonight, however, please forget about the dungeons and their hardships. Enjoy all the delicious food and alcohol we have prepared. Let's toast to our past and future successes... Cheers!”

The sixty people in the room cheered, raising their glasses of champagne. Naturally, Mari and Shingo had glasses of non-alcoholic olive cider, since they

were still minors. I personally thought letting them have one glass of champagne wasn't a big deal, but as adventurers, we couldn't break the law so casually.

“Dang! These Wagyu beef-wrapped sea urchins are to die for!”

“Hey! Look! That guy's downing a five-hundred gram chateaubriand steak in one go!”

Hmm... Maybe I should have just taken them to a regular izakaya, huh?

Watching the youngsters devour incredibly high-quality A5 wagyu beef made me want to yell at them to slow down and enjoy the taste. Perhaps I only thought this way because I was already a forty-year-old geezer. A year ago, I had still been eating rubber-like meat at cheap yakiniku restaurants, but now I could enjoy A5 grade wagyu without worrying about the cost. In Japan, these kinds of delicacies were readily available, as long as you could pay for them.

I guess it makes sense that the people living in slums support Joker. I can't imagine they would like us very much if they saw us right now, at the very least.

I couldn't say any of that aloud, but it didn't mean I didn't think about it.

I suddenly felt my phone vibrating in my pocket. I set down my plate on the table and took out my cell phone to check the e-mail I'd just received.

“Whoa...” I let out, surprised at the subject of the mail.

It read: “Regarding the Clearing of Nagoya Dungeon.”



[2020 — Nagoya Dungeon]

Let us go back in time. In January 2020, the predecessor to the Ministry of Dungeons—the Dungeon Adventurer Administrative Bureau, which had been under the Ministry of Defense at the time—organized a gathering and invited civilian adventurers. Back then, an adventurer named Satou Souta refused to join Dungeon Busters. He was the son of the officer who had lost his life in the S-Rank Dungeon that had appeared in Umeda, Osaka.

After that, he trained in Yokohama Dungeon for a while, and after reaching Rank D, decided to enter Nagoya Dungeon. Part of the reason he chose to

relocate was that Nagoya Dungeon was close to his hometown of Osaka, but his true motivation lay in the fact that Nagoya Dungeon had yet to be cleared.

“If I want a shot at destroying Osaka Dungeon, I need to become a Buster first. I’ll clear Nagoya Dungeon and go after Osaka Dungeon next!”

Satou Souta originally operated alone. However, the IDAO eventually decided that the names of C-Rank adventurers and above had to be made public. As of December 2020, there were only a few dozen C-Ranker adventurers in the countries who were part of the IDAO, and a majority of them belonged to organizations such as Dungeon Busters and the Dungeon Crusaders. Naturally, a solo adventurer who had reached Rank C on his own was bound to stand out, and countless journalists came to Souta for an interview.

“My goal is to clear Osaka Dungeon. If anyone lives in the Osaka-Kobe region and holds the same objective, you’re welcome to join me.”

The first person who answered Souta’s call was former officer Aikawa Shouichi, the man his father, Satou Kouji, had saved at the cost of his own life. As soon as he had learned that the place he had entered was a dungeon and realized the coworker he admired, Satou Kouji, had passed away while inside it, becoming the only Japanese individual to lose their life to the dungeons, Aikawa immediately left the police force to become an adventurer. Once he learned that Souta was Satou Kouji’s son, Aikawa hurried to his side.

Others who lived in the region decided to join them, and Rising Sun, Souta’s very own team, was born. They had taken inspiration from the Order of the Rising Sun, a decoration of honor. Their logo, five red lines radiating from a red dot, was also modeled after the order’s decoration.

Name: Satou Souta
Title: Species Limit Breaker
Rank: B
Possession Limit: 32/32
Skills: Card Gacha (3), Sword Mastery (Lvl. 9), Unarmed Mastery (Lvl. 9), Tenacity

Name: Aikawa Shouichi

Title: Species Limit Breaker

Rank: C

Possession Limit: 23/25

Skills: Card Gacha (2), Enemy Detection (Lvl. 4), Dagger Mastery (Lvl. 3)

Name: Manabe Rumi

Title: None

Rank: D

Possession Limit: 25/28

Skills: Card Gacha (2), Flame Magic (Lvl. 5), Wind Magic (Lvl. 4)

Name: Endou Yuriko

Title: None

Rank: D

Possession Limit: 20/23

Skills: Card Gacha (2), Bow Mastery (Lvl. 5), Kunai Mastery (Lvl. 4)

Name: Goroumaru Seiji

Title: Species Limit Breaker

Rank: C

Possession Limit: 25/29

Skills: Card Gacha (2), Shield Bash (Lvl. 5), Goutaijutsu (Lvl. 5)

“All right. We’re finally on the last floor. At the end of this path, we’ll run into the last boss, this dungeon’s guardian.”

Souta and his four teammates walked along the single, straight path.

Souta had already surpassed human limits, reached Rank B, and had grown even further. Very few people were able to achieve this, and what had kept

Souta motivated was his obsession with clearing Osaka Dungeon. As for his teammates, three had already become Species Limit Breakers, following him and watching his back. The other two were D-Rankers. This made them one of the best adventurer teams not only in Japan but in the world.

“There. So that’s what the reliefs look like...”

Halfway down the path, the five members of Rising Sun paused to look at the ceiling. A man with a cane walked toward the right of the image with several people following after him. At the right edge of the relief was a large face in profile, facing the crowd. Its lips were puckered, and it seemed to blow air at the walking figures.

“Is this some sort of metaphor?”

“Souta, let’s record this.”

After taking several pictures, they moved forward.

They always made sure to check the information published by Dungeon Busters. Since Nagoya Dungeon was estimated to be Rank C, they were aware that the guardian could end up being a Rank B monster. This didn’t faze them, however. After all, they had prepared a plan to handle the guardian.

“That’s a magical beast, right? If only we had an LR card... We’d probably have an easier time figuring this out.”

“No point crying over something we don’t have. Ready?”

“Argh... Just do it!” said Souta, reluctantly.

Endou Yuriko, who had been staying in the rear, took out a handful of monster cards and materialized them.

Name: Devil Vulpes

Title: None

Rank: D

Rarity: Uncommon

Skills: Stone Bullet (Lvl. 3), Sand Wall (Lvl. 1), _____

D-Rank monsters right out of Yokohama Dungeon materialized one after the other. They were nothing more than Rank D monsters and could never defeat the guardian. However, they could draw its attention. The small fennec fox-like monsters shot stone bullets at the pitch-black beast. It easily evaded them, lunging at the fennec foxes and ripping them apart with its sharp claws.

However, numbers made all the difference. Endou Yuriko had materialized twenty devil vulpes. Goroumaru Seiji skillfully attracted the beast, leading it to a spot where the devil vulpes could surround it, putting it under concentrated fire. Finally, the stone bullets reached their target.

The beast's movements slowed. Souta did not miss that chance, jumping out immediately.

"Take that!"

As a B-Ranker, he could muster herculean strength and sent the monster flying several meters with one blow. The rain of stone bullets finally stopped.

As the beast painfully got back on its feet, Souta brought down his sword, cutting off its head.

* * *

The five adventurers breathed heavily. Perhaps the stress of fighting a guardian for the first time had tired them out more than usual.

Endou turned the devil vulpes back into cards.

"It came out. It's the Dungeon Core!" she said, pointing at it. "And..."

A single card, emitting a bright glow, floated next to a black octahedron—the Dungeon Core. It was an LR card. These cards were sometimes gained from triggering events inside dungeons, but they could also be found lying around for no apparent reason. Either way, they were incredibly rare and powerful.

"Guys, can I?" asked Souta.

"Sure. You're our leader."

Satou Souta was the youngest member of Rising Sun. However, he was also the most passionate about dungeons and was a true team leader, both in name and essence.

The figure of a rather voluptuous redheaded woman appeared on the card when Souta picked it up.

Name: Diané

Title: Vivid Witch

Rank: F

Rarity: Legend Rare

Skills: Black Magic (Lvl. 1), Demonic Sword Mastery (Lvl. 1), Absorption (Lvl. 1)

“A legendary witch who has lived since the Ancient Days. Her mastery of the dark arts makes her a powerful fighter at every distance, as she can use Black Magic and infuse her sword with it. True to her own desires, she’s belligerent and cruel. She takes pleasure in knocking the strong down from their pedestals, making them her prey. She’s 170 centimeters tall and her measurements are 95-58-88...”

“Oh my... Are you my master?” a feminine voice asked as the card transformed.

A beautiful woman appeared, stretching out her long slim legs. Her eyes, as blue as the ocean, contrasted with her deep crimson hair. She was a few centimeters shorter than Souta. Her clothes left little to the imagination, and only a small corset that did not hide much more than what a swimsuit would have covered her ample chest.

“I’m Satou Souta. We just cleared this dungeon. Your name is Diané, right? I want you to help me clear a Rank S dungeon.”

“Interesting...”

The witch Diané brought her face so close to Souta’s that her nose basically brushed his and gazed into his eyes. The woman’s floral scent was extremely pleasant.

“No fear... But I can see resentment... Or rather, a strong obsession? Doubt and impatience too. You’re also brimming with a strange confidence, and... Oh? Yearning? Well, that shall do. How very human,” Diané said.

“I’m a Species Limit Breaker though,” Satou said.

“That doesn’t matter. Weak, brittle, and unsightly...” Diané paused before continuing, “And yet, you lot sometimes show unbelievable strength. That is how you humans are, and you are undoubtedly human.”

“Oh yeah?” Souta answered before asking, “And? Are you going to help me out or not?”

“Oh. Did you mean that? Do you have any idea what you’re talking about? S-Rank is the realm of legends. Busters who achieve success there obtain strength on par with that of the gods and rule over the world...or destroy it. Everything is possible for someone who holds such powers. What do you aim to achieve with the power of the gods?”

A threatening shadow was cast upon the witch’s face. Her blue eyes were provocative, and her mouth had curled into an icy smile. Her expression was exactly what you’d expect from a witch who loved to fight, steal, and kill.

However, Souta’s expression didn’t shift.

“Nothing in particular,” he answered.

Diané stared at him dazedly.

“My old man was killed in Osaka Dungeon,” Souta started telling her his story. “At first, I was overcome by rage. I couldn’t stop asking myself why my father had to die. I hated the dungeons. After staying inside the dungeon and fighting monsters for a while, though, something changed in me. Now, I just want to clear Osaka Dungeon, no matter what. I just have this need inside of me that I have to satisfy. As for what to do after that... I’ll think about it when the time comes.”

The witch simply whispered, “Hmm...” After a few moments, she suddenly started cackling.

Souta’s teammates looked at their leader, their faces full of worry.

Unbeknownst to Souta, the other four held a common fear. Just like Ezoe Kazuhiko, Satou Souta had gradually changed as he spent more and more time fighting underground. Aikawa and the others had long been worried about him.

Everything would probably be fine as long as he could pursue his goal of clearing Osaka Dungeon. But what would happen once that goal had been achieved? Only a tremendous yet unstable strength would remain. Would that witch lead him down the wrong path then?

“Very well. S-Rank... Osaka Dungeon, was it? I shall become yours until you clear that dungeon. Use my powers however you wish. Feel free to use my body as well, if you so desire,” the beautiful witch said, teasing him.

Any regular guy would have gladly taken her up on that immediately. Souta, however, only ordered her to return to her card form.

He picked up the LR card from the ground and put it inside his pocket before reaching out for the Dungeon Core.



[Kasumigaseki — Ministry of Dungeons — Ishihara Yukie]

Several countries had implemented a civilian adventurer initiative, including Japan, the countries of the EU, the Oriental Republic of Sina, Australis, Muangtai, Malaysha, the Kingdom of Saud Arab, and the Osmanian Republic. Indonesios, a country of over two hundred and sixty million inhabitants and over thirteen thousand islands, was still in the midst of setting up their initiative, due to logistical difficulties. Most other countries, including the ASEAN countries, were finally on track and set to launch their respective initiatives in 2021.

Japan was the only country that had managed to make its adventurer initiative profitable from an economic standpoint, however. The cyclical hydrogen energy power plant, which had started operating in August in the prefecture of Chiba, produced cheap and clean energy in spite of its one-million-kilowatt capacity. Second and third plants were already being built, and experts estimated that Japan would be able to rely exclusively on hydrogen energy by 2030.

It seemed like smooth sailing from the outside, but Japan also had issues to tackle, the main one being the mining rate of magic stones. It simply couldn't keep up with the demand. Theoretically speaking, there would be no issue with the supply in the domestic market if three thousand adventurers each mined

around fifteen tons of magic stones a year. However, reality didn't quite work that way. For an adventurer to mine fifteen tons of magic stones in a year, they would need to constantly fight in the dungeons. Naturally, anyone who was that diligent would rank up to Rank D and, eventually, Rank C.

To put it bluntly, achieving something like that required extraordinary motivation, and those who only were after money did not have that. As such, the average adventurer only brought up two to three tons of magic stones a year.

"Then, wouldn't increasing the number of adventurers be an easy fix?" you may ask.

Well, no. Let's assume for a minute that the number of adventurers suddenly increased five times its current value—fifteen thousand. The next step would be to divide them between the dungeons located on Japanese soil, which would mean around twelve hundred people per dungeon. Even if twenty of them were allowed to enter at a time, that would still amount to over sixty groups, exceeding the current capacity. Expanding the facilities surrounding the dungeons was also next to impossible, as there was no free land available.

All in all, the Ministry of Dungeons concluded that the current situation would not allow Japan to reach its goal of gathering forty-five thousand tons of magic stones a year.

"Nagoya Dungeon being cleared right now, when the supply simply cannot meet the demand, is great news. It also means we can finally welcome a new buster group besides your own. Hopefully, the people who were criticizing us and warning us not to let Dungeon Busters monopolize all the Japanese dungeons will calm down a little."

I was currently on the phone with Ezoe Kazuhiko, the leader of Dungeon Busters. I had made use of a few spare moments in between my evening meetings to video call him.

The man on the screen whispered how much he wished he could have been the one to go to Nagoya. I wondered whether he was unhappy at the birth of a new buster group for a second, but I soon found I was completely mistaken.

"The dungeon is in Imaiike, right? They have Misen-style Taiwanese ramen, pig

uterus, green vegetables... Oh, and I wanted to try the tonkatsu meal set from Yabakatsu... Their chicken wings are famous too..."

"I'm going to hang up if you keep messing with me," I warned him.

I can't believe this guy. Does he think going to clear a dungeon is a fun field trip? I still remember how he fooled around in Sapporo at the beginning of the year... Guess it's my turn to tease him a little.

"It's the first time a Japanese buster has reached Rank B outside of your group. As the Vice-Minister of the Ministry of Dungeons, I'm very interested in him. I think I'll go to Nagoya this weekend and pay him a visit. Thank you for recommending some nice things to try."

Heh heh heh. Nice frustrated face you've got there.



[December 2020 — Nagoya — Ishihara Yukie]

Among the adventurers who were currently registered with the IDAO, only twelve people had reached Rank B or above. Six of them belonged to Dungeon Busters, and five were members of the First Army of the Dungeon Crusaders, which answered to the Vatican. The First Army had originally been made up of six members, but Léonard Chartres had lost his life fighting Joker, and only five of them remained.

Both of these organizations were incredibly famous worldwide. However, one other person had reached Rank B and did not belong to either: Satou Souta, the leader of Rising Sun, a party based in Nagoya.

I was currently at a coffee shop close to Nagoya Station to meet the members of Rising Sun for the first time. I had been curious about the man sitting in front of me, Satou Souta, for the longest time, but since he resided in Nagoya, I hadn't had many opportunities to see him.

"Congratulations on clearing the dungeon located in Imaike. As a member of the Ministry of Dungeons, I would like to say we'll be paying close attention to your future endeavors. I'll cut to the chase. We hope to dispatch researchers to Nagoya Dungeon, and—"

“I’m sorry,” Souta immediately cut me off. “But please ask Dungeon Busters for this kind of stuff. We’ll be entering Osaka Dungeon as soon as possible.”

I wanted to ask them to help our research team access the Final Floor, but he shot me down on the spot. Instead, he asked me to open up the Rank S dungeon located in Umeda, Osaka—which was completely closed off currently—in exchange for handing over the rights to Nagoya Dungeon. I assumed he wouldn’t mess around in Osaka Dungeon, since he had cleared a C-Rank dungeon already, and decided to accept his request on behalf of the Ministry of Dungeons.

“I see. That’s too bad. Well, I heard that the members of Dungeon Busters were also interested in Nagoya Dungeon, so we’ll ask them to escort our researchers,” I said before looking around the café.

I focused my gaze on him once more.

They’re both busters, but he’s very different from Ezo Kazuhiko. I guess that’s youth for you.

Ezo Kazuhiko was already a middle-aged man in his forties. He had also been in the workforce for quite some time. Although the way he handled things wasn’t always perfect, he definitely put some thought into choosing a place to meet with a Vice-Minister. He wouldn’t have picked a regular coffee shop at the very least, even if it did have private rooms. The place didn’t quite adhere to formalities, and more than anything, it was the perfect place for information to leak.

This lack of awareness was also apparent in their choice of lodging. Dungeon Busters would have picked one of the high-end hotels in the area for their stay, thinking of the morale of their members. On the other hand, the members of Rising Sun stayed at a regular business hotel. It wasn’t the cheapest option around, but it was far from luxurious. It didn’t make any sense for them to not have the means to afford better. After all, the quantity of magic stones they’d brought out meant they must all be quite well-off.

“There’s something I want to ask you,” I said. “Why didn’t you join Dungeon Busters? Their goal is to clear every dungeon. Osaka Dungeon is included on that list, of course. Their funds, information network, facilities, connections...

Everything is top-class. Only the Crusaders, who are managed by the Vatican, can compare. I would think joining Dungeon Busters would bring you closer to your goal. Wouldn't it be a shortcut of sorts?"

"That's no good. I don't want Dungeon Busters to clear it for us. We have to clear it by ourselves. Dungeon Busters—or rather, Ezoe Kazuhiko—is trying to clear every single dungeon. Osaka Dungeon is just one dungeon among others to him. To me, Osaka Dungeon is the absolute priority. I don't care about the rest. I won't listen to Ezoe's orders. I only move according to my own will."

In the end, what he means is that he wants to focus solely on Osaka Dungeon, huh? If I remember right, this kid is barely over twenty. This may end up being a little dangerous. I'm worried about his mental state. I should try to stop him from hyperfocusing for his own good.

"Let me tell you something. You won't be able to clear Osaka Dungeon as you are now. Even if you train for a hundred years and defeat ten billion monsters, you'll still fail."

Satou Souta's expression turned grim. As I thought, he was so obsessed with Osaka Dungeon that he couldn't see anything else. Ezoe Kazuhiko had also gone through a similar phase. This boy clearly needed a holiday. I decided to inform him of *that*.

"Look, what I'm about to tell you is only known by a handful of busters and their parties. To become an A-Ranker, one must first clear a Rank B dungeon," I said.

Their faces betrayed their shock.

Ah, youth... I'd better keep the fact that I already had this room checked for bugs yesterday to myself.



[Edogawa City, Shishibone — Dungeon Busters Headquarters — Ezoe Kazuhiko]

For Dungeon Busters Inc., December 2020 ended up becoming a break of sorts. The company had matched the start of its activities with the appearance of Yokohama Dungeon, and its fiscal year effectively started in August. This

meant the account's closing month was July. However, we had taken the chance to settle the accounts once in December. Going forward, the company's fiscal year would run from January to December. This choice had been mostly prompted by the fact that most employees at Dungeon Busters were freelancers required to file their income tax returns. Having all of them handle their tax returns would be needlessly long and complicated, so the general affairs department had offered to act as a proxy and file them on their behalf. Most had gladly accepted.

If the company had chosen to follow the regular Japanese financial year—with accounts opening in April and closing in March—they would have had next to no time to handle all of these tax returns, putting a lot of pressure on the general affairs department. As soon as the decision to modify the calendar was made, everyone had agreed that the sooner, the better, and it had been set for the end of 2020.

“Ezoe-san, I found a receipt for a club called Rose Lips. Is it from the time you guys went out to have fun in Susukino back in January?”

“No, this was part of our information-gathering efforts. We went there to see how the citizens of Sapporo were being affected by the dungeons...”

“Do you think the tax office will buy this? Shishido-san was with you, right? Let's just write it off as entertainment expenses for guests. Just so you know, we won't foot the bill as a company for the places you went to alone! You're not a one-man business anymore! Try to remember that Dungeon Busters Inc. is renowned all over the world! The tax office will be keeping a close eye on us now, so I'll be strict when checking our expenses.”

Even the ever-calm General Manager Mukai looked ready to kill someone. *All right, all right... Time to let sleeping dogs lie. I'll get out of his hair and go smoke a cigarette.*

Good grief. A year ago, I could still pass all of my club spendings off as business expenses, but my expenditures were now being controlled like those of an office worker with an overbearing boss. Well, if I used company funds however I pleased, the other members would eventually come under fire too. Letting General Manager Mukai handle this was probably for the best.



[Tokyo, Chiyoda City, Kasumigaseki — National Police Agency]

New busters had finally appeared. For the people in charge of maintaining security in the country, that meant another source of worry had arisen. Busters could materialize cards above ground. If the card being materialized was a monster, the solution was rather straightforward, as killing it would be enough. However, there was no way to deal with dungeon items being materialized.

“We currently have every adventurer sign a Jointly Sealed Covenant to ensure they will not bring items acquired inside the dungeons above ground, but there’s still a risk of dungeon items being used to commit crimes.”

As soon as the National Police Agency had gotten wind that Satou Souta, the leader of Rising Sun, had become a Buster, discussions on the way to handle potential criminal adventurers had started up again.

“First of all, we need to decide who is supposed to deal with criminal adventurers. Is it the job of the National Police Agency or the Ministry of Dungeons? That’s the first point we need to settle. If the responsibility falls on the police and a Third Investigation Division is established, I have to wonder whether regular investigation methods would even work in the first place. I also doubt investigators will be able to apprehend superhumans.”

“I see... Kirihara-san, what is your opinion on the matter?”

Kirihara Amane, one of the members of Dungeon Busters, had received a referral from the Ministry of Dungeons and been invited to this meeting. She was a former career policewoman and, if a Third Investigation Division was created to handle this task, Kirihara would become its leader. To do that, she would need to be promoted to senior superintendent at the very least. However, the police force’s general rule was that this rank was only to be awarded to officers who had worked at the National Police Agency for at least ten years. A twenty-eight-year-old senior superintendent was bound to receive harsh criticism. Naturally, Kirihara herself was well aware of this risk.

“The Ministry of Dungeons is responsible for the management of adventurers and information gathering. However, criminals who break the law are for the police force to handle, even if these criminals also happen to have superhuman

powers. They're still Japanese citizens and should be dealt with by the police in the same way every other citizen is dealt with."



Everyone nodded. Although the National Police Agency was a place for backhanded competition based on who went to which school or who achieved what, everyone present was still a police official. They all agreed that handling criminals was under their jurisdiction.

“However...” Amane continued. “The most likely offenses are above ground use of dungeon items and minor offenses committed by low-rank adventurers. When it comes to magic abilities in particular, a lot is still unknown. This means gathering information on adventurers will become crucial. We will need to stay in constant communication with the Ministry of Dungeons.”

“Why do you assume that only low-rank adventurers will commit crimes? Species Limit Breakers—that’s what they’re called, right?—have tremendous powers. Don’t you think they’d try to use them for their personal gain?”

“I could never affirm that no high-rank adventurer will commit crimes. But still, do you know how much gruesome fighting one needs to do to become a Species Limit Breaker—or in other words, a Rank C adventurer?”

Everyone looked puzzled by Kirihara’s question. Outside of the strong-looking beauty, only middle-aged men were participating in this meeting.

“All of you have graduated from prestigious universities and have succeeded in passing the civil service examination... If we say the effort you’ve put in to get there is worth ten points, then becoming a Species Limit Breaker should be worth at least a hundred points. In Gamera and the Oriental Republic of Sina some people have lost their minds trying to get there. What I’m trying to say is that becoming a Species Limit Breaker requires a lot of effort and a strong mind. Do you think the people who achieve this would turn to crime for petty reasons, such as making a bit of cash or screwing with someone they don’t like?”

It was said that people who suddenly got their hands on a big sum of money tended to self-destruct. Hence, it wouldn’t be all that strange for people who suddenly got their hands on incredible powers to turn to crime. However, someone didn’t just become a Rank C adventurer. To get from Rank D to Rank C, at least two hundred thousand Rank D monsters had to be killed in a row. If one monster took around one minute to defeat, it would take more than 3,300 hours. All this time was not spent studying in the comfort of one’s home, but

rather fighting gruesome monsters at the peril of one's life. Anyone who could devote themselves to a cause to that extent was trustworthy.

“Adventurers of D-Rank and under can be apprehended by regular policemen. We just need to dig up all the items and skills that are likely to be used for criminal activities. After that, we'll be able to establish a list of crimes that can be committed with these skills and items. That's a good first step, don't you think?”

Skills and items related-information were an absolute necessity, which meant the National Police Agency could not handle everything on its own. As such, some thought that even if a Third Investigation Division was created, it would be smarter to establish it directly under the Ministry of Dungeons while making it a branch office of the National Police Agency. This was the last idea to be discussed before the end of the meeting.



[2020 End-of-Year — Tokyo TV — Ezoe Kazuhiko]

Just as they had in 2019, Tokyo TV brought back its year-end Dungeon Special variety program. Oosuga Fumika, the star caster of World Business News, presented the show.

The main difference from last year was that this time, another person had been invited as well. I wasn't sure why he was here, but Isaac Roland, a Gamerican researcher who had recently come to Japan, sat next to me and was speaking perfect Japanese.

I'm guessing the Gamerican government will see this. Are you going to be okay, Isaac?!

Oosuga Fumika, perfect newscaster that she was, immediately raised that issue as well.

“Why can't I be here? I'm a civilian. Why couldn't I be? I can't tell you about anything I did at the Pentagon because of confidentiality, but I'm free to speak about my personal views and opinions on the dungeons. I've always wanted to have a chat with Kazuhiko-san, so I'm happy to be here.”

“I see, I see. Well then, without further ado, let's get started. A year ago,

Ezoe-san told us about the possibility of the Monster Stampede on this show. In the following months, Dungeon Busters cleared several dungeons and was able to prove that this theory was indeed correct. If nothing is done, the world will be overrun by monsters. Every government in the world is currently busy planning anti-dungeon policies. Professor, could you share your thoughts on the Monster Stampede with us?”

She went for a direct question from the get-go. The young professor did not let it faze him.

“If the current status quo is maintained, humanity is heading toward its ruin,” he replied in an even tone, shrugging. “However, the culprit won’t be the Monster Stampede. Our stupidity will be our downfall. I’ll be blunt. Stopping the Monster Stampede isn’t that hard. If every country accepted cooperation with Dungeon Busters, they could simply go around clearing all the dungeons one after another. Considering the speed at which they’ve been clearing dungeons up until now, Kazuhiko and his teammates would only need a few years to clear every single one. This is nothing but an impossible ideal, naturally. I expect only seventy percent of the dungeons will be cleared before the ten-year mark.”

“Why...? I mean... What makes you think that? Are you referring to Joker?”

“Yes and no. Half of the issues are his fault. The other half is on you. It’s also on me and on everyone who is currently watching this show. People always prioritize immediate profit over long-term needs. Dungeon items are already circulating on the black market. There are collars that can turn someone into a slave and drugs that don’t develop addictive behaviors, you see. These items sell for high sums and help fatten the pockets of mafia lords and dictators. Then they use this money to buy weapons, high-end cards, and other cool things. Anyway, it’s making the economy move. Joker is right. Our current world order is built on income inequality. As long as this gap exists, people will try to use the dungeons for their personal interests.”

“Humanity evolved thanks to its greed and will fall because of that very same greed... Is that right?”

“That and fear.”

I couldn't help but nod along with Isaac's every word. The history of humanity was pretty much the history of conquering fears. We pursued science to get over our fear of nature and our fear of epidemics. But there's one fear we've never conquered: our fear of other people.

"Professor Roland, could you elaborate on fear?"

"Ms. Oosuga, you have a man who has far surpassed the bounds of humanity in front of you. If he so decided, both you and I would be dead in an instant. Hell, if he so wished, he could topple Japan in a day. The police and the JSDF wouldn't be able to stop him. No one would. Doesn't that scare you?"

"Well... I trust Dungeon Busters and Ezo-san. He has proven his trustworthiness countless times through his actions. Dungeon Busters's activities have led to many ill patients being saved and solving our country's energy crisis. They do wield great power, but I don't think they would use it to hurt people."

Isaac laughed and nodded.

"I agree," he said. "But sadly, I don't think everyone would agree with us. I especially doubt politicians would easily accept the existence of powerful beings they can't rule over. After all, the very *raison d'être* of nations is to rule over and control strength. A nation is a system that aims to regulate the strength of each of its inhabitants and help them head toward progress. The members of Dungeon Busters are currently part of this Japanese state system and make use of their powers to help the nation. That's why Japanese society accepts them. But there is still a fundamental truth to keep in mind. Ezo-san is not truly being controlled by the system. He lets the system control him. If he decided that he didn't like the system anymore, he could easily destroy it. Isn't it what happened in South America?"

"You're...not wrong, but—" Oosuga Fumika tried to object, but Isaac raised his hand, stopping her in her tracks.

"I only meant to explain the way some people think. It's merely an example. My point is that adventurers aren't the only ones facing the dungeons. You, me, your viewers, and every single person on this planet is being put to the test to find out whether we can get over our fear of other human beings."

The studio fell completely silent. Dumb genius! He just couldn't stop himself from blabbering, could he? What was the point of scaring the viewers even more? At least find some sort of conclusion to make them feel better afterward. *Dang. I guess I have no choice but to handle his mess for him like a proper, responsible adult.*

"When I was young I had a horrible breakup with a girl," I started, in the lightest tone I could possibly muster. "And I haven't been very good with women since then... Honestly, I wish I could get over that fear first."

Oosuga probably understood my intention and laughed at my joke. Hopefully, that was enough to change the mood a little. Eventually, the end of the program approached. It was time for Isaac and me to answer questions from the viewers.

"Why did the dungeons appear? There's a scientist who said it was an alien invasion. Is that true?" someone asked.

"What nonsense! I'm sorry for every sci-fi writer and moviemaker, but there's a next to zero percent chance aliens will ever invade us. No, actually, I can vouch for it! There's absolutely no way!"

"To be honest, I'd much rather it'd been an alien invasion. If the dungeons were made by alien scientists, it'd mean we would eventually find a proper explanation," I said.

"Our infamous neighbor is trying to clear dungeons without joining the IDAO. Do you think it's cause for concern?"

"Information exchange might become an issue. If this keeps up, we may see the birth of Busters in countries that aren't part of the IDAO. It may become necessary to watch the borders a bit more carefully."

"The IDAO regulations stipulate that the names of adventurers who are Rank C and above must be made public. I can only recommend that this country joins the IDAO as soon as possible to ensure smooth communication with everyone else."

We answered the viewers' questions one after the other. After a while, the last question came.

“I’m worried about the Legion. One of the Dungeon Crusaders even lost his life! Ezo-san, do you think you can defeat Joker?”

I looked at Oosuga. This question had finally come. It would be easy for me to confidently say I could beat him, but I had something I needed that person, and everyone else, to know. I needed to be clear about what it meant to “defeat” Joker. *All right. Let’s drop a bomb and end this.*

“I personally knew Léonard Chartres, the late member of the Crusaders. He was a kind and strong young man. My heart dropped when I heard he had been killed. This is why, although this may be a controversial statement, I think I should be clear...”

I paused and looked straight at the camera.

“I will kill Joker myself.”

I noticed the cameraman trembling. *I may have made my determination to kill him a bit too apparent.*

DUNGEON BUSTERS

Vol. 4

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SenriGAN

message

Akane is seducing me.



message

??? appeared.

"Fuck!
Get out
of the
way!"

name **Ezoe Kazuhiko**
CEO of Dungeon
Busters, Inc.





"Ni hi hi hi!
The deal
is done, so
let's get
chatting."

name **Rita**
Peddler

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Dungeon Busters: Volume 4

by Toma Shinozaki

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