

LET'S BE AN ADVENTURER!

~DEFEATING DUNGEONS WITH A SKILL BOARD~

— Bouken-ka ni Narou! ~Skill Board de Dungeon Kouryaku~ —

- VOLUME 4 -

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CHAPTER 87

LET'S CHECK OUR GROWTH'S CONDITION!

Why, why, why...?

“They” were in anguish.

Why did that person, being as powerful as he was, not wish to become even stronger?

“They” had a single purpose.

They had tried everything in order to fulfill it.

Over thousands, tens of thousands of years...

The first time, they intervened too much, and mankind was eradicated.

The second time, their intervention was too scant, and mankind was forsaken.

This was the third time.

In this third time, they had finally seen the way ahead.

This was their first chance to turn things around.

There was a hero.

A hero of humanity who could break them free from this deadlock.

However, the Yukar they played was moving at a very slow pace.

Why?

That was because the actors they created on the stage were only moving individually.

(What is the cause?)

(I don't know.)

(Did we observe too much?)

(Perhaps.)

The summit of Babel, which extends underground, awaits the appearance of the hero.

But the hero was still going back and forth through the entrance.

That being the case, "they" would take the matter into their own hands.

This would be their second intervention in this world.

(What do we need?)

(A trial.)

(Something to make him want to become even more powerful.)

But it wouldn't be good to overdo it.

If they overdid it, they could end up crushing mankind again.

Therefore, they carefully selected the seed.

The perfect seed for the current hero.

May the hero on stage reach the top of Babel as soon as possible.

"They" were eagerly waiting for that day to come.

All while listening to the Yukar's melody...



The next day after receiving the packages sent by Masatsugu...

As usual, Haruki met with Karen in front of the garage dungeon and headed for the gate.

“I think I want to challenge the boss soon.”

Haruki said that as they descended through the gate all the way to the 15th floor.

Haruki had survived without serious injury (albeit with Kagemitsu’s help) against the rare species of deer and countless purple Werewolves.

Furthermore, when he defeated the deer, Haruki suffered a strong Level Up sickness that knocked him unconscious.

After such a severe Level Up sickness, his physical abilities had been improved dramatically.

Still, the monsters of the 15th floor were considerably powerful, and so challenging the Werewolf boss was something he couldn’t be reckless about.

“Is the boss a strong variant of Werewolf?”

“Maybe.”

After about a week of training, both Haruki and Karen had a pretty clear grasp of the Werewolves’ abilities.

Their belligerent, defiant, provocative, superior abilities.

Their battle sense was so high that they could easily turn the battle around just by taking advantage of the slightest mistake made by their opponent.

Werewolves were the most cunning monsters they had encountered in dungeons.

Was she getting anxious because Haruki had said that they would be fighting that boss? Karen’s face seemed to indicate as much.

“We’ve fought them many times and we’ve leveled up quite a lot, so we should be fine. Well, we can fight them some more on the way there, and then we can decide whether we feel ready to fight it or not.”

“Sounds good.”

There was no point throwing their lives away.

No matter how healthy they were, they shouldn't take their lives for granted.

Their lives took priority over the need to rush forward.

After arriving at the 15th floor, Haruki checked his equipment and took out his skill board.

There was a good chance he had earned a few skill points after his last battle.

Haruki took out his board in order to see if he had earned any points, or if any of his skills had increased, but...

"—Huh?"

As he scrolled down the board, he saw an unfamiliar text, which made him stop on his tracks.

Until recently, each individual's skill tree was displayed from top to bottom of the screen.

But now his skill tree was cut off after about two thirds into it.

Below that, there was now an unfamiliar text.

<<Requirement has been met. Demo Graph Update is now possible.>>

<<Updating Demo Graph... Update complete.>>

<<Some functions have become available.>>

<<The Log function can now be used.>>

"Ooh! I've unlocked a secret feature!!"

Haruki never thought the skill board he had been using so far had a hidden feature.

His eyes sparkled with joy.

First of all, the skill board's official name was "Demo Graph".

There was a “rank” in the Demo Graph, which increased when the conditions were met.

Was that hidden feature unlocked because its rank had increased?

The unlocked feature was called “Log function”.

“...I see.”

Haruki muttered that as he read through the log’s contents.

The log unraveled the mysteries from the skill board which had been kept as a secret so far.

Just a little, though.

The trigger that unlocked the Log function was probably defeating a rare species monster.

Other than that, he hadn’t done anything special that could have caused the skill board to change.

— But wait, that doesn’t add up...

If that were the case, then the function would have already been unlocked after defeating the Lizardman in Chikaho with Kagemitsu.

Could it be that he needed to defeat a certain number of rare species monsters in order to unlock the feature?

Or was it due to his body reaching a certain level, regardless of the rare species monsters defeated?

“...I have no clue.”

Haruki shook his head.

He didn’t have enough information.

More than one day had passed after his victory over the deer.

Despite that, the log hadn't changed at all after the moment it was unlocked.

If there were no entries about him eating curry soup rice or having received the package from Masatsugu, then the log probably didn't react to everyday-life things.

Did actions that affect the skill board appear in the log?

"What's wrong, Karaboshi?"

Karen seemed to be worried about seeing Haruki staring at the skill board for so long.

She had been ready for some time now and was frowning.

"Ah, there has been a small change in the skill board."

"A change?"

"Yeah. The Log function has been unlocked, but I don't understand it very well."

He had to go over the skill board many times in order to try to understand just what the Log function was.

He had to go over it many times...

The exhilarating feeling that Haruki felt when he first picked up the skill board reemerged in Haruki's chest.

He didn't know exactly how the Log function could be used.

Then again, if it was just a log, then it probably wouldn't be very useful.

Was the trigger to increase the board's rank just to defeat some rare species monsters, or was it something else?

Were there any other locked features, or was it just this Log function?

There was still a lot to learn about the skill board.

But Haruki was amazed by the fact he knew so little about it.

It stimulated his intellectual curiosity and got him worked up.

Haruki was the first to find out about something that no one knew yet. He was thrilled by this situation.

He put away the skill board and took his short sword in hand.

“For now, let’s get used to our bodies’ new levels while fighting some Werewolves.”

“Okay!”

Haruki expanded the range of his Detection skill, looking for Werewolves.

A Werewolf was instantly located.

He then silently gave some instructions to Rhea.

Rhea fired a warning shot at the Werewolf.

The potato stone flew with a bang.

Then it landed on the ground.

It didn’t hit the Werewolf.

But that was fine.

Haruki readied his short sword and moved forward.

Recognizing Rhea’s warning shot, the Werewolf wrinkled its snout as if laughing.

Then it ran towards Haruki.

A swift move.

Haruki stuck out his short sword as the Werewolf drew nearer.

In no time, Haruki got in front of the Werewolf.

The Werewolf raised its claw, then it swung.

Then...

Vrroooooomm!

A lightning bolt fell.

Making a tearing noise, the lightning bolt ran through its whole body.

Every single strand of fur on its body suddenly stood up due to the lightning strike.

The Werewolf was stunned by the lightning bolt.

Unable to move its feet, the momentum caused it to begin to fall forward.

There...

“-!?”

Haruki struck.

He maximized his attack power using the opponent’s own speed and weight.

Haruki’s short sword cut through the body of a werewolf –which couldn’t be pierced with ordinary weapons– very easily.

But the cut was shallow.

“-!?”

The attacking angle had been completely off from what Haruki had intended.

It was very different from the movements he had seen on those videos and what he had learned from Shigure.

After getting slashed at its torso, the Werewolf, no longer stunned, fell flat on its face.

It rolled on the ground, escaping from the dead zone.

Ratatatat!!

Rhea pursued the Werewolf as it rolled away.

A potato stone struck its back side, forcing it to slow down.

Then, a second lightning bolt hit it.

From that point, both Rhea and Karen kept on sandbagging the Werewolf.

The poor monster died without getting a chance to get back up.

“Leveling up is great...!”

Amazed, Karen looked at both her staff and the dead Werewolf.

She had never experienced leveling up to the point it would knock her unconscious.

She hadn’t fainted after the deer’s defeat.

However, she now seemed to be aware of the difference.

That’s how many experience points the rare species of deer had yielded.

Rhea had improved a lot as well. Her impressive growth could be understood by hearing the sound her shots made.

But their sound wasn’t the only thing that had changed.

Rhea’s throwing was now capable of piercing through Werewolf hide –which was the strongest one they had found on their way to the 15th floor– causing great damage to it.

She had become quite stronger.

Of course, those changes were related not only to the increase in physical level but also to the increase in their skill level.

Just like them, Haruki’s physical ability had also improved significantly.

And his skill level was higher than before.

He had improved a lot, and still...

“...”

— What the hell was that?

Haruki looked down at his hand and frowned.

Back when he attacked the Werewolf, a nerve-wracking pain shocked Haruki's entire body.

The severe pain overwhelmed Haruki's concentration and caused him to fail an attack that would have otherwise been a sure direct hit.

Then, right after the attack, the pain vanished as if it had never happened.

He closed and opened his fist. He moved his body a bit.

However, there were no signs of the pain he felt earlier anywhere in his body.

The pain was similar to the sciatica that Haruki felt when he ruined his lower back at work.

The muscles in his lower back would become stiff, and they would cause intense pain as they pressed against the nerves located in the lower back and thighs.

He had completely recovered from the sciatica that once plagued him.

It couldn't have been something like that.

Could it be that he had been affected by one of Karen's lightning bolts?

Haruki shook his head.

In that case, his body should have sustained some kind of damage as well.

But there was no damage. That wasn't the pain caused by a lightning strike.

It was as if his head wasn't attached to his newly leveled-up body.

He was sure something was wrong.

Convinced of that, he began taking the dead Werewolf apart.

Then he looked for his next target.

Once again, Rare threw another potato stone to lure a Werewolf, and a new battle started.

This time he'd be more careful.

Conscious of the situation with his body, Haruki played it safe so as to not overdo it.

He parried the Werewolf's attack, then cut its arm lightly.

Since he wasn't at his strongest, he only managed to make a small cut.

— I feel no pain now, though...

Haruki was able to attack with his usual moves, probably because he moved his body carefully.

After making sure his body was okay, Haruki put his strength into his limbs and approached the werewolf.

The next attack would be done at full strength...

“-Gahh!!”

Once again, severe pain ran over Haruki's body like a truck.

The werewolf's claw approached Haruki's neck, which was stiff in pain.

“-Ugh...”

He tried to dodge it, but the pain wouldn't let him.

During that time, the claws continued to get closer and closer.

Just before its claws pierced into Haruki's neck...

Esta jumped.

Spinning in mid-air, Esta repelled the Werewolf's claws.

Using the momentum from blocking the attack, Esta bounced back to Haruki's waist.

At the same time, Haruki stepped back.

Vrroooooom!!

Ratatatat!!

Matching Haruki's actions, Karen and Rhea attack the Werewolf at the same time.

The Werewolf, who was shattered by the onslaught unleashed by those two, let out a sad cry as it died.

"Is something wrong, Karaboshi?"

She seemed to have realized something was off.

After the battle was over, Karen hurriedly sprinted towards Haruki.

Frustrated that he couldn't move well, Haruki shook his head while looking down.

"Are you okay?"

"Ah..."

"Your movements seemed a bit strange, are you not feeling well?"

"...I don't know."

Did she think Haruki was injured?

Karen seemed worried as she held her staff close to her chest.

Behind Haruki's back, Rhea tapped his shoulder lightly.

Her gentle tapping seemed to be her trying to say "Don't overdo it."

“Nothing happens if I move lightly, but whenever I put all my strength into it, it hurts a lot.”

“Are you sick? We need to find a doctor!”

Karen went pale and was taken aback.

pat pat pat pat

Rhea seemed to be putting a bit more strength into her patting.

“But I don’t feel any pain if I do anything else. Even if I went to see a doctor, I wouldn’t be able to explain what’s wrong with me.”

Going to see a doctor was hard.

Whenever someone had a cold or something like that, they could get rid of it with a town doctor, but otherwise they would have to go to a big city.

And even when they did go to a big city, hospitals there wouldn’t have as much equipment as they did before the Stampede.

Hospitals in Tokyo may be able to get the same level of examination as before.

But just barely.

Unlike Tokyo, Sapporo was a suburban city.

There was no way he could get a proper examination done there.

To make things worse, Haruki’s symptoms were too unclear.

He didn’t know what the source of the pain was, and light movements would cause no pain at all.

The only thing he knew was that whenever he tried to do something with all his strength, the pain would appear and it would hit him like a jolt of electricity.

Haruki couldn’t tell if there had been any other changes in his body.

Medical care wasn't that perfect that it would be able to tell what kind of condition he had just with nothing more than a "somehow my body hurts sometimes".

It was easy for Haruki to imagine a future in which he would not understand anything even if he took an appointment, had a medical examination, and took the time needed for tests and getting diagnosed.

With that in mind, it would be faster and more effective to simply rely on the medicine used by adventurers to improve or alleviate Haruki's symptoms.

Though he was worried about unwanted side effects...

Having defeated a total of two Werewolves, Haruki decided to play it safe (or rather, Karen and Rhea made him do so), and left the dungeon.

Since Akane had been present in many adventures, she would probably have some idea about Haruki's illness.

Expecting that, Haruki went to Akane's shop.

Haruki told her symptoms to Akane, who was melting in the heat of the sun.

"Do you know of any medicine that can relieve these symptoms? If possible, I'd like something that improves my condition. But I don't care if I have to take the worst painkillers."

When Haruki started inquiring about medicine, Akane, who had been leaning sloppily against the counter listening, suddenly changed her complexion and stood up straight.

Contrary to the prefab's heat, Akane's expression was cold and somewhat serious.

"...Would you be willing to retire as an adventurer?"

CHAPTER 88

LET'S LEARN ABOUT THE TREATMENT METHOD!

“...Would you be willing to retire as an adventurer?”

“...What?”

Haruki failed to understand what Akane had said for a moment.

— Retire... as an adventurer?

— Me...?

When he finally understood the meaning of Akane's words, Haruki's blood began to rise to his head.

“What are you talking about? You're joking, right? There's no way I would quit being an adventurer!”

“I'm not joking.”

“Then why are you talking about that all of a sudden?”

“Because I've heard about this condition of yours.”

Akane was looking straight at him.

She didn't seem to be joking or asking him out of whim. She was serious about it.

However, no matter how serious she was, there was no room for consideration.

Haruki had just become an adventurer last spring.

Only three short months had passed since he had fulfilled his long-sought wish of

becoming an adventurer.

His level was rising steadily, and his skills were getting considerably stronger.

Without any information, he had tackled the garage dungeon and reached all the way down to the middle floors.

He had just gotten started being an adventurer.

There was still so much more he could do.

The endless road was completely clear to Haruki's eyes.

There was no way he could consider quitting at this point.

"I have absolutely no intention to quit."

"Even if you're no longer human?"

"...Huh?"

Akane's words fell on him like a splash of cold water.

The blood that had risen to his head cooled down and started to recede.

"What do you mean?"

"I only have a bit of information about it, but it seems to be a side effect of leveling up. If they keep on leveling up rapidly, normal creatures can turn into monsters."

"..."

Both Haruki and Karen's faces stiffened after hearing Akane's words.

The general public had a tendency to shirk adventurers, who could obtain physical abilities that are far beyond the average human being.

Some ordinary people who hate adventurers would even think that adventurers are nothing but some kind of wannabe army of mere criminals.

Five years had passed since the first Stampede.

Unfortunately, the world had yet to fully accept adventurers.

Leveling up could turn him into a monster.

Haruki could easily imagine that if this rumor were to be leaked to the outside, adventurers would be in a dangerous position.

Especially since so little is known about this condition.

Akane sighed and sat back on her chair. What did she think about Karen and Haruki's faces?

"If you defeat the monsters that appear in a dungeon, you will feel that your body is getting stronger, unlike defeating ordinary animals, right?. That's how much the monsters in the dungeon are capable of strengthening your body. I don't know what that is yet, but I think it's some kind of life energy.

Defeating a monster actually strengthens your body. Then, what if you defeat a lot of monsters and strengthen your body a lot? In animal experiments, there have been results when their bodies themselves had changed. Ordinary animals have become monsters. In other words--"

Akane made a short pause and furrowed her brow.

"It is very likely that the change in your body is the same phenomenon those animals experienced. The energy obtained by defeating monsters is accumulated without being taken into your body, so your body itself changes. And that's why your body hurts."

"I'm... going to turn into a monster?"

Haruki scraped those words together out of his dry throat.

It was a dreadfully shrill voice.

"That's possible. That's why I'd advise you to retire now, because the best way to avoid turning into a monster is to stop taking energy from monsters into your body altogether."

“Are there any other adventurers with this condition?”

“There are, but only a few. Maybe this only happens when the rate of energy getting accumulated exceeds the rate of its absorption into the body.”

Akane then shrugged her shoulders, saying “People who level up really fast like you are more likely to get this condition”.

“But why only Karaboshi...?”

“It may not be just him.”

“So could I have this condition as well?”

“If Air has it, then it’s possible you have it too.”

“I... I see...”

Akane and Karen exchanged a few words.

Haruki was dumbfounded by their conversation.

Haruki and Karen formed a team in order to tackle the dungeon.

They were almost the same level, but so far only Haruki had shown to have any symptoms.

— Damn it!

Haruki clicked his tongue and put his hand on his forehead.

There was no mistaking the reason why he was leveling up so fast. It was his Growth Acceleration skill.

He had never expected that skill to be such a pitfall.

“There’s no medicine to cure it, right?”

“No. And there’s no medicine that can alleviate the symptoms either.”

“I... I can’t believe this...”

— It can’t be cured?

He couldn’t find the words to finish what he was trying to say. The future before him seemed bleak.

“We adventurers have this universal medicine we could use, right? Wouldn’t that help somehow?”

“It won’t. This is not a disease.”

“...”

Karen put her hands together in front of her chest as if praying.

Just like Haruki, her face seemed as if she had just witnessed the end of the world.

“So, what are you going to do? I’d probably quit being an adventurer if I were in your shoes...”

“...If possible, I’d like to continue being an adventurer.”

However, if he were to continue, he could eventually become a monster.

No matter how strong he wanted his presence to be, Haruki didn’t want to become a burden to others.

To begin with, Haruki was already unable to fight properly.

Even if he decided to keep being an adventurer, there was a chance he would not be able to fight because of his intense pain.

With that in mind, Haruki couldn’t bring himself to say “I want to continue being an adventurer no matter what”.

Akane, who had been staring motionlessly at Haruki, suddenly relaxed her shoulders.

“...Oh well. I understand how you feel. I don’t recommend it very much, but there might be a way to get rid of this condition.”

“Eh!?”

“This doesn’t mean that it’s guaranteed to improve your situation, so don’t get your hopes up just yet.”

That said, Akane took out a map from under the counter.

She flipped through the pages, stopped at the page showing Asahikawa and pointed at it with her finger.

“There’s a hot spring here called ‘Kamui Springs’. The hot water of these springs comes from out of a dungeon.”

“Will I get better if I drink the water from those hot springs?”

“...Huh? W-Wait, I didn’t–”

“How many litres? How many litres should I drink!?”

“W-Wait! Calm down!!”

Akane desperately tried to calm the overly excited Haruki.

“All you need to do is soak in its waters! There were some cases where people got better from their ailments by soaking in the hot springs that come out of that dungeon. Drinking the hot water could be more effective, but there’s no need to gulp the whole thing down, you know!?”

Haruki tilted his head in confusion as if he hadn’t expected that answer from the flustered Akane.

“...Will that really help me get better?”

He was about to become a monster. It was hard to believe that such an abnormal condition could be alleviated just by soaking in a hot spring.

“I’m not talking about these Kamui Springs in particular, but I’ve heard that people have gotten better by soaking in the hot water that comes from the dungeon.

I don’t know if hot water will dissipate the energy that wasn’t absorbed into your body,

or if it will promote its absorption by improving your circulation.

This is information that our company has gathered, but there's a good chance it's all nonsense, so again, don't get your hopes up just yet. If anything bad happens, it'll be your responsibility."

"Ah... I see."

That made sense.

Haruki nodded humbly.

"By the way, how many days should I stay soaking in the hot spring?"

"Why are you assuming you have to stay in there for days? Just stay for a while and come out before you get all soggy!"

Akane raised her voice behind the counter.

Why was she making such a big deal out of this?

Haruki was confused.

"If it's Karaboshi, I wouldn't be surprised if he stayed inside the hot springs for a long time..."

Karen was staring down and smiling bitterly as she said that. She probably understood what Akane was feeling.

"What are you girls talking about? If I stay in for a long time, I should get better faster, right?"

"..."

Both Karen and Akane were staring at him with eyes so cold he could almost hear them say "Look here" and "I knew it".

"Karen. Do me a favor and do keep an eye on this guy..."

"Yes. Leave it to me..."

— Excuse me? You're saying I need to be taken care of, like some child?

Haruki, 28, was no longer at an age where he would have to be under anyone's care.

— Please don't treat me like a child...

With a sour face, Haruki folded his arms.

"Soaking in the hot springs for one hour a day should be enough. The effects should be starting to appear in anywhere between three days to a week. Since so few adventurers are known to have this condition, I don't know for certain exactly how long it will take."

"So if I just stay soaking in them the whole day, I should get better faster, right— ouch!?"

Rhea slapped Haruki on the back of his head.

Trembling, Haruki nodded at Rhea's intimidating pose, as if she was saying "Cut it out and listen to them."

"Well, you've been spending all these days inside of dungeons, right? Think of it as a break, soak in the hot springs and just relax."

"That's true, but..."

Akane's words made sense.

He had become an intermediate adventurer after the second Stampede. Then he fought against Chikaho's Monster Parade, and survived the fierce battle against the rare species of deer without any rest.

He wanted to look ahead sooner.

More than anything, he wanted to enjoy a scenery no one had experienced from a special seat.

That uncontrollable urge was still swirling inside Haruki's chest.

However, no matter how eager he was, Haruki couldn't fight at his best. He would just end up getting himself killed.

It could be a good idea to take a good rest and recharge his own batteries.

“...Never mind. I get it. I’ll go soak in the Kamui Springs for the time being. What are you-”

“I’ll go as well.”

Karen cut Haruki off before he could ask her.

Karen didn’t feel any pain during battle, unlike Haruki.

They had been leveling up together, but she didn’t have a Growth Acceleration skill like Haruki.

It didn’t seem necessary that Karen went to the hot springs as well.

Still, she shook her head.

“If I let you soak in the hot springs by yourself, you’ll just stay there until you melt. So I’ll go too, so you don’t do anything stupid.”

“Oof...”

Karen clenched her fist with determination.

She didn’t seem to trust Haruki in that regard.

“But I’ll be on the men’s side of the hot springs, how are you planning to stop me?”

“...Hehe.”

Karen tilted her head to the side with a big smile on her face.

She looked like an innocent little girl, embarrassed about something she didn’t know about.

But seeing her face sent a shiver down Haruki’s spine.

She had like this is a poisonous aura around her, as if she was some kind of torturer picking which method of torture she’d try this time.

“Y-You could stay and train by yourself in the garage dungeon!”

“No. I owe you a favor, Karaboshi. If you’re in trouble, I’m obligated to do everything in my power to help you!”

“But...”

“Whenever you purchase equipment for us both you secretly cover for some of my expenses, don’t you? You’ve always paid for me, so this time I’ll pay for your hot spring therapy!”

Haruki’s mouth dried under the pressure of not being able to say no.

He had never seen Karen make such a scary face.

Her overly polite voice only made her sound even scarier.

“No, but...”

“I’ll pay for you, okay?”

“Ah... Okay.”

Haruki’s resistance shattered against Karen’s pressure, which felt like a dagger pressed against his throat.

“So, how about doing a little job while you’re in Asahikawa?”

The seriousness was already completely gone from Akane’s face.

“What kind of job?”

“It’s a request to clean up after the last Stampede.”

“A clean up...”

“That’s right. They’ve found out that monsters who have escaped the dungeon after the Stampede were lurking in a nearby forest. They’re asking for someone who can deal with them.”

“I see.”

A Stampede is a phenomenon in which monsters start overflowing out of a dungeon.

The only ways to stop a Stampede are to either defeat the boss that commanded those monsters, or exterminating all of the monsters that had escaped.

Ideally, the best way to deal with a Stampede would be to defeat each monster as it comes out of the dungeon.

But it never works that well in reality.

Destroying the monsters that pop out of the dungeon one after another without missing any of them proved to be a very difficult thing to accomplish.

Even more so, since amateur members of the Self Defense Force also participate in defensive battles related to monster subjugation.

In fact, there were only a handful of dungeons in Japan that had managed to suppress a Stampede perfectly.

The garage dungeon was one of them, but it was only a matter of luck.

If monsters from the middle floors had joined the Stampede, it would have been impossible to suppress it.

Leaving that aside, the dungeon at Asahikawa was one of those where they weren't completely able to destroy all monsters that escaped it.

Apparently, the reason a clean up request was made was that the Self Defense Force in Asahikawa were having a difficult time dealing with the monsters.

The entrance to the Asahikawa dungeon was in Kamuikotan.

Haruki had never visited it, but he knew where Kamuikotan was.

It was a very secluded region.

To make things worse, the terrain there was rough, full of mountains, forest, rivers, and cliffs. That kind of terrain was rather disadvantageous for the Self Defense Forces

to handle monsters on their own.

“Umm, Akane? I thought I just talked about not being able to fight?”

Haruki asked himself if she perhaps hadn’t understood that part.

Akane puffed her lips and uttered a “Hmph~” as if she was asking him “who do you think you’re dealing with here?”

“The request start date is in two weeks. The monsters that escaped from the dungeon are all small fry, even for intermediate adventurers. They should be good enough for your rehabilitation, right?”

Akane puffed up her big chest. What do you think? I have everything covered! Hehe.

Seeing that, Karen squinted her eyes.

Shouldn’t he check his own physical condition after soaking in the hot springs?

Still...

“I’ve been very kind to think this through with such a level of detail! You must think I’m some kind of angel, right? Right!?”

Ehehe.

With that slightly dirty, self-praising aura she was giving off, there was no way Haruki would have wanted to say anything to compliment her.

Rather than words of gratitude, there was nothing he wanted to give her in return more than a punch.

But he held his fist in check.

“Hmph. Give me the details first.”

CHAPTER 89

LET'S GET HEALED IN ASAHIKAWA'S HOT SPRINGS!

“Hmph. Give me the details first.”

“The request is for intermediate adventurers. It’s an extermination request in which all adventurers who applied for it must participate. To complete the request, thirty of the monsters that lurk around the dungeon must be exterminated. There will be no reward for participating, and traveling fees will be at the participant’s expense.

The reward is 30,000 yen per subjugated monster. Request clear points for “Narou” will be paid according to the degree of contribution. The more you defeat, the more points you will get.

You will be free to keep the materials harvested from the monsters you defeat and do with them as you see fit. Ah, Ichibishi is planning to open a branch office on the day this request starts, so please sell your materials there ♪”

“Would anyone take on that request?”

According to Akane’s explanation, the request was full of disadvantages.

If there was one advantage to this request, apart from the materials one could obtain, was the reward of 30,000 yen per defeated monster.

Selling the material of a single Werewolf can yield up to 10,000 yen.

But to get 30,000 yen just by defeating a monster that is overwhelmingly weaker than a werewolf would be a good profit.

Add that to the money one could make by selling the materials obtained from each monster, and one could get quite a lot of money from this request.

However, if a lot of adventurers were to participate, there could be a lot of competition,

and it was possible some of them wouldn't be able to defeat a single monster.

Not being able to defeat a single monster meant you actually lose money for taking this request.

In addition, the request also awarded points for the "Narou" ranking depending on the number of monsters defeated.

The request wasn't that appealing to Haruki.

"You're saying you won't participate?"

"Why would I? I mean, of course, I have to go to Asahikawa either way, but with a request like that I think I'd be better off just jumping into the dungeon and defeating the monsters that are still inside."

Especially now, Haruki could get around 10,000 yen from defeating a single Werewolf.

It was more convenient for him in terms of both money and battle experience to get better and then continue to hunt in the garage dungeon, where the income was more reliable than to take on this request.

To make things worse, one could get more points for "Narou" by taking several material delivery jobs than with this request.

Unfortunately, the monster material delivery jobs that currently appeared in the garage dungeon had yet to be posted on the "Narou" request boards...

— Why isn't there any delivery request for Werewolf materials here in Hokkaido? That's strange...

"They couldn't make the request higher, could they?"

"They can't. The money for it comes from the local government."

"I see."

If the local government was the client, it made sense that they couldn't afford to pay a lot of money.

The local government gets its money from taxes.

And money to cover any expenses that would greatly exceed the budget set at the beginning of the year cannot be procured that quickly.

Large sums of money can be moved given proper time.

But this was a race against time.

There would be no time to wait for both the preparation of the supplementary budget and the diet's approval.

Stampedes were similar to natural disasters, but it was difficult to prepare a budget in advance for them because they did not always occur.

The state's budget wasn't infinite.

They needed to be prepared in an organized and limited way.

If there is a possibility that some of it would not be used, both the diet and the government would feel that the budget will be better placed where it was needed.

However, dealing with monsters was something that needed to be done immediately.

If the government knows that the monsters are on the loose and do nothing until they're financially prepared to deal with it, people would surely be hurt and they would be held accountable for it.

So they had to deal with these situations as fast as possible, but with as little money as possible...

That was why the reward for this request was so low.

"How about doing it as a contribution to society?"

"Yeah, but..."

Haruki didn't seem convinced.

Akane sighed deliberately.

“Team Aerial is in charge of this request.”

“Huh?”

“The lack of reward for simply participating in this request was Kagemitsu’s decision.”

Haruki owed Aerial a lot. And to Kagemitsu in particular.

Kagemitsu had helped him defeat the rare species monster in the garage dungeon.

(Though Kagemitsu did so in order to repay Haruki for his help during the Monster Parade in Chikaho).

If he were to sponsor an extermination battle, Haruki wouldn’t be too reluctant to join him...

“Ah, I’ve just remembered! It seems that the three adventurers and teams with the highest number of defeated monsters in this request will be posted on Kagemitsu’s blog later.”

Haruki’s ears twitched at those words Akane said with a nasty smile on her face.

“If you are the one who defeats the most monsters, it means that you are the best among the adventurers who have taken that request. That’s something very appealing to companies looking for adventurers to sponsor, you know? And it’s very noticeable...”

“Let’s go, Karen. I’ll do my best... I’ll do my best to get 1st place!!”



Haruki had distanced himself from the dungeons in order to get healed at a hot spring and accepted a request that wasn’t appealing for him, but he didn’t feel discouraged at all.

Rather than that, he was more motivated than ever.

The reason for that was that he had a good chance to get noticed if he were to get 1st place at that extermination battle.

The extent of his ability would be displayed in a ranking, and he would be commended

in Kagemitsu's blog, which had a lot of visitors.

This was a rare opportunity for him to increase his presence.

There was no way Haruki wouldn't be excited about this.

After preparing for their expedition, Haruki starts the car.

Karen was sitting on the passenger's seat, while Rhea and Esta were sitting on the back seats.

It seemed that Rhea and Karen stared fiercely at each other, fighting over who would get the passenger's seat, but Rhea had promised to look after Esta.

Reluctantly, Rhea surrendered the passenger's seat and went to the back seat with her leaves looking all droopy and sad.

"Karen, just making sure... But don't use any magic while we're in Asahikawa, okay?"

"Sure. Ah... But how about—"

"Not even secretly."

Maybe she was planning to try to use magic only when there was no one around.

Akane seemed sad after being warned against it before she could even ask about it.

It was okay to use magic when no one was watching. However, at that place, only "maybe" no one would be watching, so "maybe" someone could be watching as well.

No matter how hard you check, there's always the risk of overlooking someone.

Haruki, who had worked for a printing company, knew this very well.

First proofreading, second proofreading, sales, production, the customer, the editor... How many times would typographical errors be found after multiple checks and printing?

Human judgment is not absolute.

Even if you wrack your brain thinking “How could something like this ever happen?”, they could very well happen later on.

Using magic under unknown circumstances was a dangerous thing.

“But wouldn’t that make me a bit useless...?”

“Aw, come on, don’t say that. It’s not like that.”

Haruki denied the disappointed Karen’s words.

Until recently, Karen had been fighting on the 15th floor of the garage dungeon. She usually fought using magic, but her physical abilities were on par with the 15th floor of the dungeon, which was not a bad thing at all.

Besides...

— There’s something I’ve been wanting Karen to try, so this is a perfect chance.

If “that” were to work, then she definitely wouldn’t feel useless anymore.

Before the first Stampede, the travel distance between K-Town and Asahikawa was about 100 kilometers. By Hokkaido residents’ standards, it was “just around the corner”.

Asahikawa is the second-largest city in Hokkaido, and was considered a “core city”.

However, the population quickly declined after the first Stampede, by a mix of a declining birthrate and an increased population of senior citizens.

Now all one could feel were the remnants of a bygone prosperity.

Still, the number of people living in K-Town cannot be compared to that of that city.

Shops that sell materials brought back from the dungeon, restaurants, furniture stores, and so on are scattered all over the place.

After four hours of traveling on a rough road, Haruki found the inn he was looking for.

The inn was “Kamui Springs”, a hot spring resort that drew its hot water from the

dungeon.

While Karen procured their room at the counter, Haruki cried as he held the luggage.

— Even though I’m standing right here at the counter, nobody notices me...

The room was split in two, one side for men, and the other one for women.

Rhea and Esta weren’t included in the number of people, so they rented a single room for all four of them.

The interior seemed pretty basic, but it didn’t matter because their purpose wasn’t to do sightseeing or be extremely comfortable, but to get healed via their hot springs.

After taking their luggage into the room, Haruki immediately took his yukata and towel and headed for the hot springs.

It had been quite a while since he last visited a hot spring.

He was getting all excited about it.

There used to be a hot spring in K-Town.

However, after the first Stampede, it became difficult to maintain the pumping equipment, so the hot spring facilities in K-Town were closed at the moment.

There were many hot spring facilities across the country that had to be closed since they couldn’t be properly maintained.

However, since “Kamui Springs” drew its waters from the dungeon, it was still open as a hot spring facility.

A natural rock bath with a free-flowing water source.

Small sulphur flowers floated on the clear water.

A beautiful board hung from the wall of the open-air bath. The effects of the hot spring were written there: “Heals bruises, joint pains, muscle pains, low back pains, helps recover from fatigue and motor dysfunctions, and makes your skin more beautiful”.

— I wonder how effective this actually is.

In the past, in a more peaceful time, Haruki would have thought those effects listed there were kind of suspicious. Or at the very least he would have paid no mind to such a board.

But now, Haruki's eyes were fixed on the "motor dysfunction" written on the board.

"So these 'Kamui Springs' can actually heal such conditions, huh? Amazing!"

It was the complete opposite of what he would have thought otherwise.

At this point, Haruki could be talked into drinking detergent under the premise that it would make him feel better.

Desperate times called for desperate measures.

Haruki was by himself in the open-air bath. He had reserved it exclusively for himself.

It was really luxurious.

The spellbound Haruki soaked into the hot springs all the way up to his shoulders.

"Ahhhh..."

A blissful voice leaked from the back of his throat.

The hot water was at just the right temperature and permeated to the core of his body.

Haruki closed his eyes and entrusted himself to the comfortable hot water while listening to the sound of the hot springs flowing in.

After a while, he felt something was going around his body.

It was the feeling of blood flowing through recently opened vessels, warming a body that was as if it had been frozen solid.

"Could it be that the energy my body couldn't absorb had hardened up, and now it's being melted by the hot springs and starting to circulate...?"

Haruki scooped some water up and drank it.

The hot water had a slight acidity and a refreshing aftertaste. It entered Haruki's body and warmed his stomach from the inside.

Haruki once again focused his attention on the changes in his body, but he couldn't feel any further changes.

Even if he drank the hot water, there was no sign that his recovery would be accelerated.

If it had accelerated his recovery, he would have drunk the entire hot springs...

But it didn't make much sense to drink this water.

Haruki leant against the rocky wall of the bathtub and soaked his shoulders.

The long bathtub stretched in front of him.

“ ... ”

He could see a red thing in the bathtub –it was Esta.

With nothing but his little feet emerging from the water, he used them dexterously to swim about.

“...Hey.”

Esta was surprised as Haruki grabbed the side of the bathtub.

After realizing it was Haruki, he made a gesture and laughed as if he was embarrassed.

“What do you think you're doing?”

— Like, how did you get here?

Esta, who was flustered at Haruki's gaze, tried to make excuses using its tiny feet.

“I'm worried about you, you know? I mean... what are we going to do if someone sees you here?”

No matter how tame he was, Esta was still a monster. He would cause a great uproar in the eyes of the general public.

People could even try to hunt him down.

Even more so since they weren't in their hometown of K-Town, but in the completely unfamiliar Asahikawa. The worst was more likely to happen.

"Don't be doing as you please from now on."

Scolded by Haruki, Esta shrunk disheartenedly.

He looked a bit cute, but he couldn't make Haruki feel pity for him.

If he were to lose Esta here out of sympathy, he would never be able to forgive himself.

Perhaps Esta had been sent in to make sure Haruki didn't do anything rash.

Both Karen and Rhea were girls, so they couldn't get into the men's section. Esta would be the one to rely on for that purpose.

— So I can't just be here and do whatever I like...

Haruki let out a sigh.

However, Haruki didn't think badly of Esta, Karen, and Rhea for being worried about him.

No one would be worried about him if there was no one around him.

Even if they are worried or depressed...

Even if they are stripped of their free time...

Those feelings were hard to come by those days, and that's why they were precious.

CHAPTER 90

LET'S COME UP WITH A STRATEGY FOR THIS REQUEST!

Esta wiggled its feet, skillfully throwing hot water at Haruki.

It was as if he was telling Haruki that it was about time to get going.

Haruki obediently followed Esta's warning and got up from the hot spring.

By the time he returned to his room after cooling his body, it was already time for dinner.

He left the towels there and headed for the dining room.

"This looks yummy!"

After taking a bite, Haruki felt uneasy with the taste and stopped chewing for a second.

Karen, who had also stuffed her cheeks, dropped her eyebrows and looked disheartened.

Still, unlike Haruki, she kept on eating her food silently.

The food did look yummy. But the taste wasn't exactly there.

Its quality was at least one... no, make it two ranks worse than the food Haruki usually enjoyed.

The potatoes had no flavor or aroma. They were nothing but a dry... thing.

The soup had no stock in it, and simply tasted salty.

The best thing on the table was the bread. It was hard and dry, and it crumbled easily.

When he tried to chew, a mysterious sourness spread all over his mouth.

“This is terrible...”

Haruki’s voice trembled with surprise.

For Haruki, who was used to baking his own bread at home, the quality of the bread at this hotel came as a shock.

— How did they manage to end up making something like this...?

It was bad like the Kriegsbrot (War bread) the German soldiers used to eat during World War I.

Unlike Haruki, who was sitting there unable to move his chopsticks, Karen was still eating.

“Well, at least you can eat this, Karen.”

“Huh?”

“This food. It’s terrible, isn’t it?”

“...Well, yes. But this is pretty much the standard anyway.”

“The standard? This? I think the food that they served at that other hotel I stayed at before was much better than this.”

The bread served at the hotel Haruki stayed at in Sapporo was several times more delicious than this one.

For that reason, he had taken hotel food for granted, but it seemed that it wasn’t like he expected.

With a bitter smile, Karen shook her head.

“There’s really delicious food, and then there’s this. This used to be the standard in the past.”

“...I see.”

So that’s why Karen cried when she tried Haruki’s food.

There seemed to be a huge gap between Karen's standards and Haruki's standards.

Since the appearance of dungeons, the usual ways of production and distribution crumbled to pieces.

Companies with strong distribution lines that can obtain good ingredients could still work as they did in the past.

However, for companies with weak distribution lines such as Kamui Springs, the dungeons' influence was reflected in the taste of their food.

— If this is normal, then there's nothing I can do about it...

Haruki pushed the food into his mouth, thinking to himself "Come on, you can do this".

Even though he knew there was nothing he could do about it, he was still sad.

Haruki thought that there was nothing wrong with him being particular about his own food in this era.

"By the way, how was your hot spring bath, Karaboshi?"

The person who had set a limit on Haruki's blissful bathing time asked him that with a smile on her face.

Would that smile grow bigger if Haruki told her that he wanted to stay in there a little longer?

"Ah, it felt good, didn't it?"

He wanted to ask her "Could I stay a little longer next time?" but his unspoken question found itself rejected by a big smile.

Karen seemed to have also enjoyed the hot springs. She was wearing a yukata and the hair around her collar was slightly wet.

Her white neckline peeking through the yukata was dangerously alluring.

Many men would normally feel heartwarmed by Karen's smile.

But all Haruki could feel was a chill down his spine.

“You’ve come all the way here to get yourself healed by the hot springs, right?”

“Yes.”

“If your body gets worse even though you get soaked in the hot springs, it wouldn’t make much sense to have come here in the first place, right?”

“...Yes.”

“Then, let’s do the right amount of treatment needed to solve this problem!”

“...Yes.”

Being stared at by Karen, Haruki could hardly taste his food (for better or worse).

— Karen’s smile is SCARY.

Under Esta’s tight supervision, Haruki spent the next two weeks soaking in the hot springs.

Though he soaked in the hot springs every day, he wasn’t sure if he was feeling any better.

Perhaps he would be able to tell if he tried to move with all his strength as if he was in a battle. But it wasn’t hard for him to imagine what kind of mess he could cause if he did so while still inside the inn.

That was a risk he couldn’t afford to take.

It seemed that he would have no choice but to confirm whether he had recovered or not during the subjugation request.

Even though he was still relaxing, he still spent time studying about armor adjustments just to give his brain some exercise.

In just two weeks, he was able to make some adjustments to his armor.

He was also able to polish his swords and replace their handles by removing the rivets

on their hilts.

His Magic Sword, Werewolf Short Sword and Silver Wolf Short Sword all felt slightly more familiar in Haruki's hands after he had performed that maintenance on them.

Such careful adjustments on his weapons slowly poured the habits and taste of their user into them.

It was like with a fine leather product.

The adjustments were fine, like when modifying a mini 4WD.

But Haruki didn't exactly have good memories about modifying mini 4WDs.

That's because he would always feel there was more room for improvement, and he would end up overdoing it.

If you cut too much into them, you'll end up with nothing but a ruined frame.

How many times had he gone off course and ended up ruining a mini 4WDs' frame...

That had been a reminder that overdoing things was never good.

There had been no signs of him getting any better from his condition...

He had to be careful.

After entering the hot spring, Haruki poured hot water on her face.

— Okay.

The extermination battle "Monster Hunting Contest" held by Akane would be taking place the next day.

The monsters to defeat were those who escaped the dungeon after the second Stampede.

He didn't know what kind of monsters he would be facing.

"Kamuikotan", Asahikawa's dungeon, was a relatively shallow dungeon, with no more

than 10 floors.

Only the monsters from the upper floors would be appearing, so as long as he didn't get too careless, there would be no way for an intermediate adventurer like Haruki to fall behind.

Adventurers who defeated a lot of monsters would be publicly acknowledged on Kagemitsu's blog.

If his name were to appear on a popular Ranker's blog, he would begin to stand out.

And if he were to compete against other adventurers and win, there was no way some company would notice him.

If he were to stand at the top of Kagemitsu's list, the future where he gets a stronger presence would be much closer.

In other words, this was a battle where Haruki had to defeat more monsters than anyone else.

Haruki poured water over his head one more time.

He had to exterminate all the monsters he could with the determination to bet his own life.

"Hehe..."

Haruki was unable to fight at his fullest due to him leveling up at an exceedingly high speed.

But if he were to fully recover...

The other adventurers would be impressed with the powered-up and better-than-ever Karaboshi Haruki!

No one would be able to say he wasn't noticeable anymore!!

However, this request was announced to all adventurers of intermediate level and above.

He could expect his rivals to also be strong adventurers.

They could be as strong as Haruki, or even stronger than him. They would have more battle experience than him.

They wouldn't be outmaneuvered so easily.

He wouldn't be able to defeat them straightforwardly

In that case...

"Hehehe..."

Seeing the strong light of a presence that could be felt from a distance, Haruki laughed.

He had devised a strategy that would assure his victory in the upcoming battle while watching Esta swim playfully in the bathtub.



The next day, Haruki and the others went to Asahikawa's dungeon, "Kamuikotan".

It was the same name as the district in the mountains beyond the city of Asahikawa.

The origin of the name is "the place where the gods live".

It was designated as one of the eight scenic spots of Asahikawa because it was a beautiful scenic spot on both banks across the rapids of the Ishikari River.

Many adventurers seeking to participate in the request seemed to have already gathered in front of the former Kamuikotan Station building.

Their equipment was at least middle tier.

They all had a brilliance that showed off their strength.

"Some of them are using "Ichi" series..."

"Wow... that's amazing."

Haruki and Karen sighed as if they felt daunted to see those adventurers' Ichi series equipment.

It looked like they were in some kind of trade fair for adventurers representing Hokkaido.

In particular, the fact that some of them were using "Ichi" equipment, which was considered to be high-end, meant they were strong enough to reach a dungeon's lower section.

They weren't at the level of a "Monster Hunting Competition" request, where all they would have to do was to deal with some upper-section monsters.

However, they weren't just participating on a whim or out of a desire to show off.

They were in for the chance of becoming a Ranker for "Narou".

Even if someone had the ability to reach the lower and the deeper sections of a dungeon, they wouldn't be able to become a ranker unless they earned adventurer points.

They could earn points just by completing this request, but they would earn even more points by appearing at the top at the list on Kagemitsu's blog.

In other words, "Narou" would tell if someone is capable or not based more on how much they stand out from the crowd than on their actual strength.

After overcoming the wall that is the "Narou" Ranker system, what would be waiting for them would be a sponsored consultation from a company –the road to becoming a Pro Adventurer.

Haruki's face became stiff when he saw those adventurers and their high-end equipment.

He had to do even better than them if he wanted to get a stronger presence.

He became even more tense.

"Umm, Karaboshi."

Standing next to the nervous Haruki, Karen spoke with a voice that lacked self-

confidence.

“What am I supposed to do? I mean, how will I even fight...?”

Karen shook her shoulders uncomfortably.

Karen had the ability to fight monsters from the middle section of a dungeon.

However, that was only due to her magic.

This time around, Karen was surrounded by the public gaze, so she had to fight without using her magic.

That was why she was feeling so uneasy.

“I think we should be fine...”

Haruki had no doubts regarding her fighting ability.

The monsters that escaped this dungeon were from the upper section.

Of course, she needed to be on her toes, but still it was nothing she couldn't deal with.

Still, no matter what Haruki said, she wouldn't stop feeling uneasy.

It's always the experience, not words, that builds confidence.

“That's right. You can try something like this—”

Haruki secretly whispered into Karen's ear so that no one else could listen.

After hearing his words, Karen tilted her head in doubt.

“Do you really think it will work? I've never done something like that...”

“If it works, great. If it doesn't, we don't lose anything by trying. I think it's worth a try.”

“Well, you're right. If the chance arrives, I'll give it a try.”

“Great! Then you go with Rhea, and I'll go with Esta.”

“Huh!?”

Karen’s face went pale.

Ignoring her reaction, Haruki placed Rhea on the ground.

Was she unhappy to learn that they wouldn’t be working together?

Rhea patted on the back of Haruki’s hand.

“I thought we’d be doing this together...”

“I think we’d be better off splitting up like this for now.”

If possible, Haruki wanted to achieve an individual victory.

However, as long as the other adventurers had high-end equipment, it would be difficult to win by fighting individually.

But in that case...

Haruki thought of a strategy.

Haruki would take Esta with him and split from Rhea and Karen, and they would defeat monsters separately.

Rather than trying to gang up on the same monsters, it was more efficient to split and attack different monsters.

Haruki’s plan was to aim for a team victory rather than an individual victory.

Haruki and Rhea would be split apart.

Esta would go with Haruki, and Rhea would go with Karen.

They split into two teams to be able to search for monsters more quickly.

This was the strategy Haruki came up with while soaking in the hot springs the day before.

“So, Esta is going with you, Karaboshi...”

“Hmm? Is something the matter?”

Haruki tilted his head to the side.

Did you want us all to go together that much?

Karen shook her head after seeing Haruki’s reaction.

“No... I was wondering if Esta and Rhea could join forces and come with me as well...”

It made sense. Esta was like an automatic defense system.

Since Karen had a relatively low defensive power, Esta would be a valuable asset to her.

— But you didn’t have to use say it in such a convoluted way... join forces?

That thought settled on Haruki’s mind.

— Join... forces?

Tick tock, tick tock.

A certain vision built itself in Haruki’s mind.

Immediately, the blood in his entire body boiled excitedly.

“That’s it!!”

“Wait what!?”

Haruki got carried away by his own excitement and grabbed Karen by her shoulders.

She blushed, probably surprised by Haruki’s sudden outburst.

Rhea started to hit Haruki’s legs with her vines.

— Ow, it hurts!

A bit away from the other three, Esta was digging around for earthworms and slurping them like spaghetti.

— What do you think you're doing...?

Noticing Haruki's gaze upon him, Esta tilted his body to the side in a cute manner.

“(Do you want some?)”

— No, thanks.

CHAPTER 91

LET’S GET READY FOR THE MONSTER HUNTING CONTEST!

Two weeks had passed since they accepted the request from Asahikawa.

Kagemitsu and his friends had finished herding the monsters.

First, Becky would detect the presence of monsters with her wide-range detection ability “Clairvoyance”, identifying their whereabouts.

Then, Kagemitsu, Van, and Doraneko would chase after the monsters.

Yoshi set traps around the area where the monsters were being herded to.

His traps had the same detection ability as Becky.

None of those upper-section monsters would be able to escape the area.

In this way, Aerial succeeded in herding all of the monsters within a range of 1 kilometer from the center of Kamuikotan in two weeks.

The traps set up by Yoshi were preventing monsters from scattering outside of Kamuikotan.

Doraneko and Van were on guard duty.

If a conflict between adventurers were to arise during the event, they would be in charge of interceding and disqualifying those adventurers.

Becky was in charge of counting the monsters.

She would account for each of the monsters with her “Clairvoyance” to avoid overlooking any of them.

Kagemitsu would act as a moderator, managing things from the starting point, mainly to assist the Ichibishi Store, which was the sponsor for this event.

Rankers all over Japan were holding various events by taking advantage of their reputation.

The most famous event was Bacon's "Beginners' Training". Though it was aimed at beginner adventurers, even seniors would participate just to get a chance to see his muscles.

Adventurers who would otherwise wouldn't get involved with each other would get a chance to work together, the correct use of skills would be propagated, and everyone would obtain valuable information about dungeons.

Ranker-sponsored events like these had helped raise the level of adventurers in the area.

In fact, ever since Rankers started teaching the basics to new adventurers, the mortality rate at dungeons had plummeted.

It was unclear if the Ranker-sponsored events were the cause of the drop in the mortality rate, but at least they had contributed to that cause.

However, Kagemitsu had never hosted an event before.

Even though doing so would raise the level of adventurers in Hokkaido.

The reason for him not having hosted an event so far was simple.

Hosting an event caused the host to stand out, even if he didn't want to.

Kagemitsu wasn't good at standing out from the crowd.

He would get so scared of being stared at by others that it would turn his stomach.

For that reason, Kagemitsu had been avoiding hosting events.

The reason why he was in a prominent position as a "Narou" Ranker that allowed him to get support by companies was because of his companions.

Had he never made any companions, he would have probably led a quiet life away from everyone.

But this time, he wasn't allowing himself to stand out because of his companions.

The reason this time was a secret chat he had previously had with Masatsugu.

『It seems Mr. Masked Man has come across Shigure.』

『Shigure seemed to be very interested in him.』

『I may have to ask Mr. Masked Man to come to the capital in order to further improve his abilities.』

That's what Masatsugu said when Kagemitsu reported to him regarding the subjugation of the rare species of deer.

Kagemitsu wasn't so petty to be jealous of the success of others.

He was honestly pleased to know that Masatsugu had taken a liking to the man he trusted.

However...

『The level of the adventurers in Hokkaido is rather low, isn't it?』

『I don't know what have you been doing 』

『I was surprised to hear that the Self Defense Forces there were equipped with nothing but shovels. Is it really that terrible over there?』

『I think he will have a much better growth if he comes to the capital to train instead of training in a place with such low standards as Hokkaido.』

After chatting with Masatsugu, Kagemitsu found himself suffering from a severely sour stomach.

To have his own hometown disparaged as some "low level place"...

To say Hokkaido was a place with “such low standards” was the same as saying that Kagemitsu himself was weak as well...

And above all, Kagemitsu couldn't forgive his weak self for not being able to say anything to Masatsugu, who prioritized efficiency and ignored emotions.

— That's absurd!

That was why Kagemitsu had decided to take center stage this time.

Just as Masatsugu had said, Hokkaido's level was rather low.

That being said, Kagemitsu hadn't given up on Hokkaido so much that he could just keep quiet and do nothing about it.

The spot for Hokkaido's most famous adventurer was held by a nameless adventurer.

He would give that adventurer a chance to play an active role and stand out from the crowd.

The more chances he could create, the more adventurers that would try to take them.

They would strive to seize those chances.

And that effort will raise the level of the adventurers in Hokkaido as a whole.

He would show those adventurers in the capital the high potential of Hokkaido's adventurers, which he believed in.

That was the first step towards raising the standard for Hokkaido's adventurers.

At the same time, Kagemitsu worked hard in his own training.

The farthest Aerial had been able to reach in Chikaho was the 27th floor.

The plan was to reach the 30th floor in less than a month from then.

By reaching the 30th floor, they'd be cutting into the Top Rankers' level of influence.

Those low-grade rankers who couldn't reach the lower sections of the dungeon

wouldn't be able to look down on them for being serious about his goals.

『It's about time we announce that the rare species of deer has been defeated, don't you think?』

Masatsugu's judgement was frighteningly accurate.

It is true that the Air and others are about to reach the next stage.

Haruki himself may have already reached it.

『What kind of action will he take from now on? You should think about what to do in the worst case scenario.』

Masatsugu didn't have to say it.

To defeat monsters in the dungeon and level up. That is more powerful than such an increase in physical ability.

If that is used incorrectly, the situation of all the adventurers will be turned inside out in an instant...

That is why Masatsugu said he would invite Air to the capital.

To turn that power into human resources suitable for handling.

And possibly to be able to deal with it immediately if he used his power incorrectly...

Perhaps Masatsugu was already on the move.

Air might turn out to be Team Braver's greatest asset in the future.

Kagemitsu was convinced of it.

Masatsugu, whose number one goal is to defeat all of the dungeons, could not overlook someone like Air.

Masatsugu could already see talent in Air the moment they first met.

Shigure, who was only interested in improving her skills, suddenly became interested

in Air as well.

And Kagemitsu himself had seen Air's great potential, with his help in the extermination of the Monster Parade and his defeat of the rare species monster.

Three of the Rankers already had their eyes set on Air.

The three rankers, who have seen many adventurers and had an eye for their talents and abilities, have given Air something: the potential for a great future!

That in itself was already unusual.

If he were so minded, he could climb to the top of the adventurer right away.

That's how much potential he had.

Though unfortunately, no one knew his true face.

"But whenever he takes off his mask, he vanishes into thin air..."

His name almost even suited him.

His presence was so thin that it was possible he wouldn't have what it takes to even become a "Narou" Ranker.

There was only so much talent one could be born with.

Or could it be that the gods have taken away from him what they have given so much of to others...

"I'm so jealous!"

Kagemitsu couldn't help but envy Air's lack of presence.

"If only I had that thin of a presence...!"

The mere thought of it made his stomach hurt.

If only he had a weak presence, he would have been able to live as a real ninja, which he had longed for since he was a child.

Just what kind of ninja did Kagemitsu want to live as?

And how much thought did he have to give to it before giving up on the path of the ninja...

Kagemitsu's tears wouldn't stop falling because of those thoughts.

The outside of the station building had become quite lively.

It was about time to start the Monster Hunting Contest.

Kagemitsu shook his head.

This event is different from a normal adventure, here adventurers would fight together in order to defeat monsters.

For adventurers who usually dive in dungeons with their usual teammates, fighting alongside other adventurers was an invaluable experience.

Only by comparing with others can one notice those strengths and weaknesses they didn't know they had.

Self-control and self-reliance.

Never complain, never feel down, and never look down on others.

That was the kind of noble will needed for the path to greatness to be opened.

Though this wasn't a request that offered a reward just by participating, many adventurers had gathered for it.

Most of them were intermediate or above, and there were many talented people who knew Kagemitsu.

Among these, how many monsters would Air be able to defeat?

Five? Ten?

Kagemitsu was looking forward to Air's stunning results.

If he were to reach the top among all of these talented people, his worth would be proven both in name and essence.

Moreover, if it became known that Air, having risen to the top of these talented people, was someone who had just become an adventurer this year, no company would be able to overlook him.

Though...

“Will he be able to stand out even if I post his name on my blog?”

He had already posted about him on his blog, but he got no reaction at all...

Kagemitsu couldn't help but feel a little uneasy.



“Great, you guys are all here!”

When Kagemitsu –who had a brilliance that made him look as if possessed by the sun itself– appeared, multiple “Ooohhhh!”s were heard among the crowd.

They were so loud that Haruki involuntarily covered his ears.

Each of these adventurers had a sparkling respect and admiration for Kagemitsu.

However, not all adventurers had bright emotions. Some of them seemed to have a rebellious spirit reflected in their eyes.

However, that was nothing that their own desire for being at the top. It was a healthy rivalry, something like “One day, I'll surpass you”.

Becky appeared shortly after Kagemitsu. Even in the presence of Kagemitsu, many adventurers weren't able to take off their eyes from her.

After all, she also had a strong presence, being a member of the team that reigns at the top of Hokkaido.

— We'll be alright, right?

Haruki's body was nervously moving on its own after the appearance of those two members of Team Aerial.

— Can this really bring life to my presence?

“Okay, let's all calm down now.”

The area went completely silent in response to Kagemitsu's call.

No one was able to go against his instructions.

No wonder.

The Rankers were like a military force with a lot of experience.

They were the ones still fighting at the front lines with very little information.

And they have continued to gain democratic support.

To other adventurers, the Rankers were stars. They were heroes.

Every adventurer was familiar with the power they had gained. No one wanted to go against them.

They were all holding their breath, waiting for whatever he had to say next.

That dreadful feeling of tension made the very air they breathed hurt the skin.

Haruki had been on the same battlefield as Haruki twice.

Haruki would initially treat him with a certain degree of respect, but at Kagemitsu's request, he later became able to talk to him like he would with just about anyone.

That's why he hadn't noticed it until then.

But being there, in that situation, made him realize.

He realized how high off the ground Kagemitsu's seat was.

— He's far away, huh...

Aware of the actual distance between himself and Kagemitsu, Haruki felt a little lonely.

“This is a request I took to exterminate the monsters that had escaped during the second Stampede. But just killing monsters indiscriminately isn’t that fun. Besides, it doesn’t even pay that much.”

Many adventurers giggled at Kagemitsu’s joke.

Everyone there may have been dissatisfied with the low rewards. However, Kagemitsu’s joke turned that dissatisfaction into laughter, making it disappear.

“That’s why I’ve turned this into a competition, to make this job more interesting.

The rules are simple. The one who defeats more monsters than the rest wins. I’ll give a public commendation to the top three adventurers and post their names in my blog. Since my blog has about 200,000 visits a day, I think people are going to start noticing you more if you’re one of those top three.”

The excitement of every adventurer there could be heard as he uttered those last few words.

It was only natural.

For a vast majority of all those nameless adventurers, the thing they struggled the most with was advertising themselves.

No matter how many entries an adventurer posts on their own blog, no one will really notice them unless they somehow become famous.

But if that adventurer’s name were to be showcased on a Ranker’s blog, which is viewed by several thousands of people per day, they would be easily drawn to that adventurer’s own blog.

And that makes for a perfect opportunity for self-advertisement.

To be sponsored by a company, one needed to have a certain level of ability and an overwhelming popularity.

Most of the adventurers gathered for this event already met the first condition.

In other words, all that remains for them is to obtain the means to sell their name in order to be sponsored by a company.

There wouldn't be any adventurer who wouldn't be delighted with Kagemitsu's idea.

Those who weren't happy about it wouldn't have gathered for this event in the first place.

Haruki's body also trembled after hearing Kagemitsu's words. And he was thrilled.

— I'll become noticeable!

— I'll obtain a strong presence!!

— What should I do?

— What am I going to do if I get a stronger presence?

— First thing I'll do will be going to the general store without my mask on...

Haruki's dream expanded inside his brain.

"But be careful. If two adventurers target the same monster at the same time, it will only count towards the adventurer who first landed their attack. You may ask, 'but what if I just keep attacking every monster I see but not defeat them?'. Well, if you land a first attack on a monster, then you need to stick to it until you defeat it. Otherwise, it won't count.

If for some reason you can't determine who landed the first attack, you can use rock-paper-scissors to decide who keeps fighting the monster. I know that something like that may lead to arguments, but if you have the time to argue with each other, then you have the time to go find some other monster to defeat, right? If you're rational about it, it won't hurt your position on this competition that much.

Obviously, attacking each other is strictly prohibited. Don't try to sabotage others.

Only Becky will be here for now, but my other teammates are standing guard somewhere in the woods. They're there to make sure no monster escapes this area, but they will be also monitoring the adventurers. So don't try to fool us, okay?"

Those last words from Kagemitsu were very intimidating.

It was strong enough to render a weak person unable to move.

A chill went down most of the adventurers' spines.

"The time limit for this request is at sunset. The moment the sun is no longer visible under the horizon, that's when this will end. Don't worry if there are some leftover monsters after the time limit has elapsed, we'll take care of cleaning afterwards.

By the way, there's one monster in the field that we have marked as special. It's a little dangerous creature, but the one who defeats it will get three points! Though we did mark it as special, it doesn't actually have any particular marks on it. So think of it as a lottery of sorts. Now, regarding the purchase of materials..."

As Kagemitsu went on, Haruki kept on moving his hands.

This would be the last key to win this contest.

He made extra sure to tie the rope tightly so that there were no mistakes.

"Umm... Karaboshi? What are you doing?"

"What are you talking about? This was your idea, right?"

Haruki looks up at Karen and tilts his head to the side.

He had placed Rhea on top of Esta, and he seemed to be tying them together with a rope.

"No, wait. I never said you had to put Rhea on top of Esta!"

"But you did say they should 'join forces'."

Karen's words had inspired him to do this.

He dubbed the result "Mobile Turret Esta-Rhea."

Rhea's strong firepower, and Esta's nimble mobility.

The best shot at the fastest speed.

Esta-Rhea was packed with all the wildest dreams a young boy would have.

— This is what to ‘join forces’ should look like!

“But... Do you really think they like being tied up like this? I’m sure they’re hating it.”

“Ah, it’s not like that, right guys?”

The now independent Esta-Rhea rustled and moved about, turning its turret around in several directions.

Rhea was happily shaking her leaves, probably because she was now able to move faster than ever.

On the other hand, Esta seemed a bit miserable, like a younger brother being used like a toy by his older sister.

That being said, Esta didn’t completely dislike it.

It was just that Rhea’s older-sisterly love was a bit too much for him.

“Now Rhea and Esta can move about freely, but if I leave them be by themselves, other adventurers might try to hunt them down. Because of that, I’ll leave them in your care, Karen!”

“What do you mean, ‘because of that’?”

Karen dropped her shoulders.

But if Esta-Rhea were to lead the way, they might be attacked by other adventurers.

For that reason, and just to make sure, Haruki added a small twist to Esta-Rhea.

This “Mobile Turret Esta-Rhea” Haruki had invented, would certainly be the talk in the “Narou” forums.

Haruki had never imagined that Esta-Rhea would cause many adventurers to forfeit their self-confidence and fall into a spiral of horror.

CHAPTER 92

LET’S EXTERMINATE THE MONSTERS IN KAMUIKOTAN! – 1

“Well then, take care, everyone! Start!!”

Along with Kagemitsu’s encouraging shout, the participating adventurers stepped into Kamuikotan.

The name “Kamuikotan” meant “the place where the gods live”.

Many would agree that the name was appropriate as they set foot in a valley created by rivers that eroded the ground.

It looked like a place some deity would pick as its dwelling place.

alleys, which were surrounded by an eerie tranquility and mystery.

He teared through the wind’s resistance and pushed forward.

— My body feels light!

Haruki found that his body had become very light. It was as if he had taken off some heavy weights that had been attached to his limbs.

Was this how Haruki’s physical performance truly was after defeating that rare species of deer and raising his level?

He seemed to have achieved a good sense of balance after having soaked in the hot waters of Kamui Springs.

He couldn’t feel any of that pain that had been tormenting him.

However, this alone could not be considered a complete recovery.

But at least he felt that he was getting better.

With this, he felt he could dive into a dungeon without worries.

He could still go out on adventures!

“Ha... Haha!!”

Haruki spontaneously started laughing.

His chest felt hot.

In order to release that heat, Haruki dashed into the woods of Kamuikotan with all his strength.

While running through the woods, Haruki expanded his Detection as much as he could, just as if he was exploring a dungeon.

The wind danced, the leaves of the trees swayed, and the sunbeams filtering through the trees moved on the ground.

Small animals, insects...

The forest was full of life.

All of that came together and shook Haruki’s brain.

“Ugh...!”

Expanding his Detection, while simple within a dungeon, turned out to be quite the burden when done on the surface.

There were way too many reactions from living creatures above ground compared to the dungeons.

Still, Haruki grit his teeth and continued to expand his Detection range.

The activity of all those living creatures reverberated inside Haruki’s brain.

That roaring sound was mixed with noise.

He sensed a slight uncomfortable feeling.

Haruki's corner of the mouth was bent in discomfort.

Immediately, Haruki jumped at full strength.

The grass was at knee-length.

The footing was bad.

He jumped off a nearby tree's trunk, and landed on the ground.

Haruki found a rabbit monster ten meters away from where he was.

— A Killer Rabbit!

He immediately pulled out his short sword and performed a “shukuchi”.

Before the Killer Rabbit realized what was going on, Haruki quickly took its life.

“Alright, that's the first one!”

Haruki made a quick triumphant pose.

In order to get points for each defeated monster, they needed to be brought to the old Kamuikotan Station Building.

It was up to the adventurer to decide whether to take each defeated monster to the Station Building one by one or to take them all at once.

Taking them one by one meant that you would spend a lot of time walking there and back again, but on the other hand, carrying a lot of monsters on you to save trips will make you move much slower due to the increased weight.

Each option had their advantages and disadvantages.

Incidentally, the use of magic bags was prohibited.

The reason for that was that only a few people had a magic bag. Using one would put that adventurer at advantage.

Haruki threw the defeated monster into his backpack.

At that point, he could easily ignore the weight penalty to his movement speed.

He looked around him to check his current position.

Haruki was now descending to the bottom of the valley.

There was a river in front of him, which quietly flowed towards the Sea of Japan like a giant creature.

A thin column of steam was rising from a point in the river.

A part of the hot spring that springs from the Kamuikotan dungeon was flowing into the river.

“Well, what should I do now?”

Should he go up from here, or should he keep going down the valley?

Haruki’s thoughts were full of noise.

At the same time, the surface of the river burst.

Haruki’s first reaction was to get away from there.

He rolled on the ground.

A silver-colored thing wiggled as it passed in front of Haruki.

— This...

Haruki stood up and carefully observed the flying object, and trembled with joy when he saw that...

“It’s a salmon!!”

The flying thing that had appeared before Haruki was a salmon monster.

It was about 30 centimeters long and it had limbs, probably because it was a monster.

Its limbs were slender, thin and fair, and very beautiful.

If he were to just cut those limbs out, no one would think they came from a salmon or even a monster.

With an intense flame in his eyes, Haruki approached the salmon as it leapt and bounced out of the river.

As he reached for his dismantling knife...

“W-Wait! Please, wait!”

“Y-You can speak!?”

— Is it a demi-human?

Haruki became even more alert.

After some more bouncing, the salmon finally set foot on the ground.

Trembling, its round eyes were looking straight at Haruki.

“I’m the best salmon princess. My name is Chep. I’m a spirit mermaid!”

“...Ah, wait a second.”

Haruki had so many problems with it.

He squeezed his temples to control his headache.

First of all, the only river fish who could call herself a princess was the trout.

This one was no trout.

And what did “best salmon princess” even mean?

More than a mermaid, it looked like a fish with arms and legs. And the fact that it had called itself a “spirit” did nothing to add any kind of mysticism to itself.

This was nothing more than a self-proclaimed mermaid.

Everytime it breathed in, its chest moved.

So it has pulmonary respiration.

It wasn't breathing through its gills.

But back to the main topic...

"A... salmon, huh?"

Haruki slowly approached the salmon with a gloomy-looking face.

Foil-roasted, Ishikari soup, fried, grilled...

And since this is a "princess"...salted salmon roe!

"...slurp"

"Eeek! You brute!!"

The salmon was startled by Haruki's approach.

Trembling, it wrapped its thin arms around itself.

It looked like a young woman being harassed by a lecherous man wearing nothing but underpants.

"Y-You mean to defile me and do all sorts of things to me here in order to satisfy your vile desires, don't you!?"

"Like I would do something like that!"

The fascination for salmon was something very special.

Many fishermen might experience a fervent desire at the sight of salmon.

Of course, that's by no means related to anything sexual.

— Please. I don't want to find any more problems in you.

Haruki's headache worsened.

"That's okay. I understand you can do nothing other than staring at me with those eyes of an animal against my overflowing charm. If you want to do such dirty things with my body, I'll give it to you!"

"No thanks, there's no need for that..."

"But!! There's something I absolutely must do before I fall into your clutches!"

"No, really... Huh?"

What kind of future was that salmon imagining?

Haruki tilted his head at the words of the crying Chep.

"Something you absolutely must do?"

"Yes. I'm the best salmon princess, so I have to go to Kamui Rock no matter what."

Kamui Rock.

Upon hearing those words, Haruki looked up.

The rocky mountain that loomed over the Kamuikotan River was commonly called "Kamui Rock".

— What's in that place...?

Chep, while being able to speak like a human, was still a monster.

What reason could a monster have to absolutely have to go to Kamui Rock?

However, Haruki had come here as an adventurer, and he had the duty to clean up after the second Stampede.

In other words, he had to defeat this monster.

"Should I cook you up?"

“Eeeeeek!!”

The moment Haruki pulled out his dismantling knife, Chep hugged herself like a woman about to be assaulted, and backed off.

“At least... At least let me get to Kamui Rock...”

Chep acted flirtatiously.

Seeing its despair, Haruki let out a big sigh and put away his knife.

He was completely discouraged.

Even if he were to cook this salmon up, he didn’t feel like eating it.

To make things worse, the road to a noticeable presence was escaping him with every second that went by!

He didn’t have time to waste with this fish.

— I have to move quickly and defeat the monsters so I can be on Kagemitsu’s blog...

“Snif.”

“...”

“Ohoho!”

A vein on Haruki’s forehead was about to pop.

A fish with crocodile tears.

— Guess I’ll cook it after all.

Noticing Haruki’s murderous intent, Chep began to tremble.

Paying no mind to that Haruki grabbed hold of Chep.



At the same time...

Two adventurers who were active in the middle section rushed through the woods.

For them, being featured in a Ranker's blog wasn't something trivial.

If all went well, they might be able to catch the interest of companies such as Ichibishi, Kawamae, and Banma, and even associate with one of them!

Though the actual reward for this request was rather low, they had no reason not to be enthusiastic.

"Hey, I heard something over there!"

"Roger!"

One of them pulled out his greatsword, and the other one readied his bow.

Just as they held their breath, silence surrounded them.

Kamuikotan was in the middle of a great outdoors.

The complete silence was almost painful to the ears of those two urban-raised adventurers.

"...?"

Eventually, the men realized.

Now matter how big this area was, such complete silence was strange.

There would usually be many creatures in the forest.

None of their sounds, not a single chirp could be heard.

— Why?

It was unnatural that they couldn't even hear the cry of the cicadas, who had been

incredibly noisy by back when the contest started.

Slowly, a cold sweat started to run over the men's backs.

Something was off.

As their intuition sensed that something was wrong, they heard something that sounded like steps on the grass coming from somewhere.

Was it a monster?

The two men began to worry.

The sound seemed to be gradually increasing its speed.

*swish... swish... *

swish, swish, swish, swish

swishswishswishswish!!

“~~~~~”

Unable to bear it any longer, the man with a bow stood up and nocked an arrow.

Then, he froze.

It was as if his soul had escaped from his body.

His pale face, deprived of sunlight due to him spending a lot of time inside the dungeons, had lost even more of its color.

“W... What's wrong...?”

The man with the greatsword stood up and called out to his companion.

But there was no response.

“Hey... Hey!”

When he shook his shoulders as hard as he could, the man with the bow finally reacted.

His unfired arrow dropped to the ground, his lips were trembling as if he was panting, and he was pointing forward with his trembling fingers.

Was he scared of a monster?

Though still taken aback by what had just happened with his companion, the man with the greatsword encouraged himself and turned around.

— If there's a monster in front of us, I'll cut it down on the spot!

Both that resolve and the blood on his cheeks disappeared in an instant.

Countless feet crawling on the ground.

A plant that swayed unnaturally.

And in the center of it all, a creepy white face.

It looked like a Noh mask used in traditional Japanese theater plays, and it turned to the two adventurers as it cried "GI GI GI".

— FOUND YOU.

""Gyaaaaaaaaaahhh!!""

Screaming, the two men ran away at full speed.

With all their strength, they ran away from the woods and headed for the starting point.

No way.

Not that thing.

No way we're fighting that thing.

That was their instincts' warning.

“That thing wasn’t from the upper section of the dungeon, no waaaaay!!”

“That thing was bad news, bad news!!”

It was probably from the lower, or even the deeper section.

What a terrible monster was roaming those woods!

The men desperately returned to the starting point and immediately appealed to the Ranker Kagemitsu, who was waiting there.

But unfortunately for them, Kagemitsu didn’t believe a word they said.

“Really, it was a really dangerous-looking monster!”

“That thing was definitely from the lower or the deeper sections!”

“So tell me, how come you two are still alive, then?”

The two men tilted their heads, puzzled by Kagemitsu’s question.

If it had been a monster from the lower or deeper sections of the dungeon, it would have definitely killed them the moment they turned their backs at it.

But why were they able to escape unharmed?

No one could answer that question.

CHAPTER 93

LET'S EXTERMINATE THE MONSTERS IN KAMUIKOTAN! – 2

She seemed overjoyed to be able to move quickly and at will while riding on Esta.

Behind Rhea, who was cheerfully moving her leaves about while searching for monsters, Karen was holding the bodies of two Killer Rabbits under her arms.

Her heart seemed to have been almost crushed by worry.

Though she wasn't worried about monsters.

So far, Esta-Rhea had taken care of two Killer Rabbits.

Both were an insta-kill.

So she wasn't afraid of getting hurt by a monster's ambush.

It was other adventurers that Karen was worried about.

The adventurers who had seen Esta-Rhea at the starting point were no problem.

They would surely assume it was a monster that Haruki had tamed.

The issue was with those who didn't.

— Why is Karaboshi always like this...?

Karen complained about Haruki, who had done something ridiculous.

This wasn't the first time Haruki had displayed such an unexpected behavior.

Tying Esta and Rhea together was just the beginning.

For the sake of argument, up to that point, Karen could even consent to it with a smile.

Though other adventurers would have a hard time understanding what was going through Haruki's head...

However, Haruki had come up with a plan to protect Rhea and Esta from adventurers' attacks.

That was the worst part of it all.

— How could Karaboshi equip that thing in such a terrifying place!?

To protect Esta and Rhea, Haruki had equipped a mask on them.

It was the Noh mask that Masatsugu had given to him, “the strongest one”, with the ability to hide the wearer's presence.

The appearance of the Noh mask changed between a crying face, a laughing face, or an angry face, depending on the angle it was looked at.

Rhea held that simple but eerie mask with great care.

From a distance, Esta-Rhea looked like a Noh mask running on the ground with countless insect legs growing under its chin.

Furthermore, the legs were overshadowed by the mask due to its ability.

Quite frankly, it was overkill.

What troubled Karen the most was that neither Haruki, Esta, nor Rhea were doing it out of an ill will.

Because of that, it had been very hard for her to say anything against the idea.

But if an adventurer who hadn't seen Esta-Rhea at the starting point suddenly saw it in the woods...

— I hope it doesn't give anyone a heart attack...

Aside from that, there was something else troubling Karen.

At this rate, she would be known by others as a member of “Karaboshi Haruki and His

Creepy Friends!”

That was something she had to avoid at all costs...

Feeling a strong sense of impending crisis, Karen chased after Esta-Rhea.

At that moment...

“Gwaah!!”

A bear suddenly came out of a bush.

It wasn’t a monster. It was a regular brown bear that lived in those woods.

The brown bear stood up in front of Karen, threatening her by raising both of its front paws.

Even though it had been so sudden, Karen wasn’t surprised at all.

After all, she had felt the presence of a nearby bear with her Detection skill.

— Are you very hungry?

She hadn’t expected a regular brown bear, sensitive to human noise and odor, to approach her so straightly.

The bear was tingling its nose, and was staring at Karen with sharp eyes.

His eyes would go from her to the Killer Rabbits. Apparently, his goal wasn’t Karen, but the Killer Rabbits she was holding.

“Ah...”

Karen put the Killer Rabbits down and took out her staff.

She couldn’t use magic in this place, where she didn’t know who would be hearing or watching her.

Esta-Rhea shifted their attention to Karen for a fleeting moment.

Then, their eyes were back on the bear, and they quickly moved towards it.

She seemed as if she couldn't do anything.

But Karen wasn't anxious. She wasn't scared.

With all her strength, she raised her staff.

The next moment, the bear swiped at Karen with its sharp claws.

Karen dodged the bear's attack to the side.

Then, just before getting past the bear, Karen brought her staff down.

It was a menacing counter blow.

— I hope this attack helps me escape.

With a "BAM!" the staff literally smashed the bear's head.

"Huuh!?"

Karen was stunned by that unexpected result.

Having lost its head, the bear collapsed, causing the ground to shake a bit under its weight.

Karen didn't have the physical strength needed to crush the bear's head like that. She didn't even swing her staff down with all her strength.

The cause for that impressive attack power capable of crushing a bear's head in one swing was the power that had been charged into the staff.

Karen had charged the staff with the power necessary to use magic.

When it came in contact with the bear's head, that energy exploded silently.

Its explosive power was tremendous, probably because it had a very small range.

Even when charging the staff with the same amount of power, normal magic didn't

reach this level of power.

Attacking like that had been Haruki's idea.

He had thought that if Karen were to hit the monster with her staff fully charged with magical power, her attack power would increase a little.

Karen had been worried after Haruki told her that she couldn't use magic during the contest, and so Haruki told her to try attacking like that instead.

Karen thought it was worth a shot.

That's why she tried it against the bear, but the results were far beyond her expectations.

"I need to get used to this..."

She had charged her staff with enough non-elemental magical power for a single spell, but it seemed to be a bit too much for a brown bear to handle.

Karen believed that she needed to be more careful if something like this were to happen again.

"Well, then..."

Karen picked up her two Killer Rabbits, and looked at the dead brown bear. At that moment...

"Congratulations!"

"Hyaaaah?"

A girl suddenly appeared behind Karen.

Karen was surprised by her carefree-sounding voice, but soon realized something.

— I never noticed any signs of this person's presence...

Karen's was able to feel the bear's presence, but never noticed this girl was getting closer to her.

She probably had some kind of skill that helped her hide her presence.

“Ah, sorry! I didn’t mean to surprise you. I’m Doraneko!”

“Huh... Ah! The one from Team Aerial!”

“That’s right. As a matter of fact, this bear was a creature that yields special points! Ding-ding-ding! If you take this one to the starting point, you will get a lot of points!”

“Ah, I see... But why this bear? This isn’t a monster...”

“This bear seems to have defeated a monster and remembered the smell of their blood.”

A chill ran down Karen’s spine after hearing Doraneko’s explanation.

For some reason, there was something unfathomable in her tone of voice.

“Anyway, that’s all from me! Ah, make sure you take this bear to the starting point, otherwise you won’t get the points for it!”

After saying her goodbyes, Doraneko hopped and skipped away, disappearing into the forest.

“...”

— What on earth was that?

Karen’s eyes were darting about.

That Doraneko was like a storm.

For the time being, it seemed that Karen would make a lot of points out of that bear.

Of course, that was as long as she was able to carry it all the way back to the starting point.

She could carry the bear. But by doing so, her hands would be completely occupied.

Karen tilted her head to the side, wondering what to do...

“...Ok. Fine, I guess.”

Then she stopped thinking.

As long as Esta-Rhea was able to move, they should be able to carry luggage for her.

Having reached that conclusion, Karen grabbed the bear by one of its legs, and started dragging it around with her.



Two bow-wielding adventurers were hiding in the woods.

As they became one with the forest, they were extremely sensitive to the presence of monsters.

Being one with the forest made it easier for them to discover monsters, as they didn't belong in the forest.

Their approach was to quickly discover monsters and kill them before entering close quarters.

These two bow users, who had an amazing ability to search for enemies, were holding their breaths and trembling.

The reason for that was that they had seen a certain monster.

A plant wearing a white Noh mask that squirmed its flame-colored feet.

Overgrown plants came out of the Noh mask's eyes and mouth as the creature crawled in a zig-zag pattern, searching for prey.

It looked as if a human had been infested by a plant. The fact that it seemed to be laughing when seen from certain angles made it even more terrifying.

The mysterious creature suddenly appeared in front of them.

It had sneaked through the enemy-detection abilities that they were so proud of.

It had been the first time in their adventurer careers not realizing that a monster was

there until it was at such close quarters.

That was enough for them to understand how strong this creature was.

The monster was probably already aware of their presence.

Having noticed them, it decided to ignore them altogether!

What would they do if it decided to fight them?

Perhaps they would be dead in less than a second.

That monster was so intimidating that it made them think so.

That's why they were holding their breaths and trembling in fear.

"Do you have any idea what on earth that is?"

"...I do."

One of them had already seen a mysterious life form before.

There was a strange-looking masked man at the starting point before the contest started.

That masked man, whose presence is weak and whose fighting style was killing from the shadows, was the only adventurer who had been secretly rumored to have actually tamed a monster.

"It seems that man lets the monsters he tames parasitize his own body."

"Pa... Parasitize!?"

"It appears they're acting separately this time. Or maybe he's controlling both bodies at the same time..."

The ability to take tamed monsters into his own body...

And the ability to send those tamed monsters off and control them from a distance...

It wasn't odd at all to think that one could obtain such abilities inside a dungeon.

They were adventurers.

They explored dungeons searching for the unknown.

Their boiling adventurer's blood was loudly asking them to delve deeper into the mysteries of that masked man's powers.

And one of those mysteries was standing right in front of them.

If they could reveal that masked man's abilities, their own dungeon explorations would make a great progress.

As they were thinking about that, a lone young woman appeared.

It was a calm-looking girl who didn't seem too good at exercising.

Since she was there, she had to be an adventurer. But she didn't seem to be a particularly strong one.

"That girl... Wasn't she with that masked man?"

"You don't think that girl is that masked man's... sacrifice?"

"A sacrifice... to what kind of entity...?"

The appearance of that peaceful-looking girl eased their tension somewhat.

At that moment...

"Ah-!"

Suddenly, a brown bear emerged from a bush and attacked the girl.

— Watch out!

— We have to help her!

Both of them readied their bows.

During that time, the bear swiped at the girl.

— Dodge it!!

Before those words could emerge from their mouths, the girl swung her staff down at the bear.

“BAM!!”

The bear’s head exploded as the staff collided with it.

“Fa!?”

“Nu!?”

Their astonishment leaked out of their mouth as nothing more than a meaningless sound.

The girl’s attack had been far from sophisticated.

Nonetheless, her staff shattered the brown bear’s head.

A girl whose attack was this powerful, even though the attack itself seemed unpolished and half-hearted...

Such a result had far exceeded their imagination and expectations.

“I need to get used to this...”

Having heard the girl’s voice from a distance almost caused the men to black out.

— What does she mean, that she needs to “get used to this”...?

Was she restraining herself?

And still she managed to completely destroy that bear’s head!?

They became even more confused.

It didn’t look like the threads of their confusion would be unraveled anytime soon.

Shortly after that, the girl was easily dragging the brown bear's body, which didn't weigh less than a hundred kilograms, using only one of her hands.

Seeing that display of power, the men nodded at each other.

A mysterious life form.

The power of that masked man.

And this girl, who boasted an absurd amount of firepower.

They were intrigued. How on earth did they manage to obtain such power?

However, they didn't find a snake after curiously poking around this bush.

They had found something much more devilish.

There were beings in this world who had delved into a realm where ordinary humans should never reach out to, no matter how curious they were.

A mysterious life form...

Having witnessed the girl's battle with the brown bear, the two men continued to be one with the forest, still trembling until sunset.



"Uhhh... I've been sullied... I've been sullied..."

"Haah..."

Haruki sighed, completely fed up with Chep's whining, which he had been subject to for quite some time now.

She said she had been sullied, but of course, not because Haruki had assaulted her or anything like that.

This was only the result of her feelings as she had to go to Kamui Rock no matter what.

Chep was packed into Haruki's backpack.

He originally wanted to carry her in his arms, but he didn't want to deal with any of her complaints about her "being touched by a man" or "being looked at with such lewd eyes".

That being said, with her slow walking speed, there was no way she would make it to Kamui Rock before sunset.

When Haruki put her in his backpack, Chep ended up stepping on the Killer Rabbit corpse he had there.

To be exact, she hadn't been "sullied", but rather, she had gotten herself dirty.

But just because Chep was getting dirty didn't mean Haruki would throw away the Killer Rabbit's corpse.

This was essential for Haruki to be able to stand out!

No matter what, and even if it cost him his life, he wasn't going to let go of that Killer Rabbit until the moment he died.

— I have to get Chep's "important matter" over with quickly so I can return to earning points for the contest!

Carrying Chep on his back, Haruki expanded his Detection range as he continued to run.

He had to keep on looking for more monsters, even while on the move.

An adventurer was someone who killed monsters for a living.

It was by no means someone who cared for a monster's will.

Even if Chep could speak like a human, she was still a monster. What Haruki had to do with her was to defeat her, not to talk with her or help her out.

However, Haruki didn't kill Chep.

But it wasn't out of sympathy or compassion.

He had a feeling that was what he had to do for now.

A special salmon and Kamui Rock.

Haruki was very intrigued by those two things.

Adventurers were curious beings, always in pursuit of the unknown.

Their own curiosity constantly led them into unknown territory.

And they would put their own lives on the line in order to satisfy their curiosity.

Haruki was acting purely in order to satisfy his own curiosity as an adventurer.

However, at that point, Haruki's guess was highly likely to be wrong.

But even so, he obeyed the urge of his own curiosity.

Something good could happen.

Haruki's body was satisfied just by that feeling of expectation.

He wanted to move forward as fast as possible, but the footing was so bad it was difficult to go any faster.

The trees in front of him were blocking the way, and the roots of the trees were rising from the ground.

He wanted to go faster, but couldn't.

It was tantalizingly irritating.

In this case, which would be the best way to move around...?

A certain way swooped down upon Haruki's mind.

"...Should I give it a try?"

Haruki took a deep breath and touched a nearby tree.

"Okay, let's go!"

“W-What are you going to—”

Haruki stepped on the tree.

He put all his strength into the sole of his feet, and jumped.

“...Dooooooooooo!!”

Chep’s screaming echoed throughout the Kamuikotan forest.

Haruki was soaring through the air.

The wind roars across his ears, making a roaring noise.

In the blink of an eye, he reached the trunk he was aiming for.

As soon as he touched that trunk, he jumped off it and moved on to the next trunk.

— It works!

Haruki had a broad smile on his face.

Like a ninja, Haruki jumped from tree to tree, moving incredibly fast towards Kamui Rock.

All while ignoring Chep’s cries for help...

CHAPTER 94

LET'S EXTERMINATE THE MONSTERS IN KAMUIKOTAN! – 3

Having reached the base of Kamui Rock, Haruki looked inside his backpack.

Inside, an empty-eyed Chep was frothing at the mouth.

Her gills weren't moving.

Did she die?

Just in case, Haruki gently slapped her cheeks.

Then, as if her soul had returned to her body, Chep started breathing again with a "Haaah!"

"A... Are you trying to kill me!?"

Haruki's new way of moving around seemed to have been a bit too radical for Chep.

Her round eyes were completely bloodshot.

Of course, Haruki had no intention to kill Chep for the time being.

He simply had thought of a way to quickly move around and wanted to try it out.

That new way of moving around was similar to that of the stereotypical ninja.

Jumping from tree to tree by kicking their trunks as one would jump off a wall.

Having leveled up in the dungeon and improved his skills, jumping from trunk to trunk was not such a difficult thing for Haruki.

It was more difficult to control the direction of travel than the actual jumping.

The angle of each jump limited the direction in which he would move next.

— That part needs improvement...

“Ugh... That was an awful experience...”

Haruki looked up, ignoring Chep’s grumbling and complaining.

Kamui Rock was a steep precipice all the way to its summit, and it had no walking route.

So he had no choice but to climb his way up.

He put his hands on the rocks to check their stability.

After making sure the rock was sturdy, he would move on to the next foothold.

Analyzing a rock’s shape, checking it by hand, and memorizing the results.

By the time he had climbed ten meters, he was already able to identify footholds just by looking at them.

After that point, he continued to ascend without hesitating.

“Waaaahhh...”

— Did she look down?

Chep was trembling inside the backpack.

But Haruki didn’t care about it at all.

He had no time to care.

This was Haruki’s first experience with rock climbing.

He was doing so well so far because he was pushing hard through his own physical strength.

If he were to lose focus, he would instantly make a mistake and end up falling head

first.

Haruki continued to climb Kamui Rock while ignoring Chep's noise through sheer force of concentration.

"Wow..."

Haruki voiced his admiration at the scenery he could see from the top of Kamui Rock.

A natural landscape where mountains, rivers, and the blue sky were in complete harmony.

The sight of Kamuikotan made Haruki's chest tremble.

"Amazing. So beautiful."

"Don't try to praise me! You won't get anything from me, you know?"

"I wasn't talking about you!"

Haruki dropped his shoulders in response to hearing Chep's voice.

She had just ruined a perfect moment.

Having reached the top of Kamui Rock, Haruki took Chep out of his backpack.

Chep had spent the whole trip there speaking ill of Haruki, saying he was going to take advantage of her, but now there was a slight hint of tension in her face, probably because she had arrived at Kamui Rock.

— Well then.

Haruki braced himself.

What would happen from here on...?

Contrary to his fast-beating chest, his body was completely relaxed.

There were no monsters other than Chep within Haruki's Detection range.

There was little chance a monster would attack him all of a sudden.

But still, he couldn't allow himself to lose focus.

There were monsters roaming on the outskirts of Kamuikotan who couldn't be subjugated during the Stampede.

Besides, there was this situation too.

What was going to happen there?

What was Chep planning to do?

The nervous Haruki could already imagine what this all was about.

Haruki, who had a habit of collecting myths, could not be unaware of what Chep was trying to do at the top of Kamui Rock.

That's why he had gone all the way up to that place, despite him being in the middle of a very important mission to increase his own presence.

Kamuikotan was the place where the evil god Ninne Kamui fought against the hero Samaikuru.

And Kamui Rock was believed to be a vestige of Samaikuru's attack, created as a result of Samaikuru's attack on Ninne Kamui.

And now, the "best salmon offering to the gods" had come to this place...

"-!?"

As Chep made her way to the center of Kamui Rock, an intense chill went down Haruki's entire body.

— What was that?

Haruki expanded his Detection range and reached for his short sword.

Nothing had changed according to both his eyes and his Detection skill.

He was simply feeling the chills and there was nothing he could do about them.

But that was a big problem.

Because such chills were similar to the ones he felt when the rare species of deer appeared in the garage dungeon.

Haruki took a single breath and focused, trying to put his disturbed conscience back together.

In the center of Kamui Rock, a kneeling Chep looked up to the sky as if praying.

At that moment, darkness came flying from the sky.

It fell on the center of Kamui Rock, just above Chep.

As it fell, it created a tremor and caused a windstorm to scatter.

“-!”

With his arms crossed, Haruki bit his back teeth.

The thing that came flying from the sky was black.

A pitch-black thing.

Its large eyeballs glaringly shifted towards Haruki.

A clear murderous intent.

An intense malice.

Haruki got goosebumps all across his back.

The cloud of dust that had been rolled up was cleared away by the wind.

Then, the full picture of the pitch-black thing was revealed.

Its skin was covered by black scales, and it had sharp talons.

Its neck was as thick as a grown man's thigh.

Its round eyes had cat-like elongated pupils.

The pitch-black thing was a demihuman fish with arms and legs –a Fishman monster.

“–!”

The Fishman lunged at Haruki with its talons before he could put himself on guard.

Haruki hurriedly pulled out his short sword.

The talons made contact at the same time he raised his short sword.

Haruki's posture was immediately broken due to his imperfect defense.

The Fishman attacked once again with his talons.

Desperately moving his arms and legs, Haruki put all of his efforts in dodging the attack.

The talons barely grazed at Haruki's coat.

If Haruki had tried to dodge a fraction of a second later, the Fishman's talons would already have been dug deep into his neck.

After avoiding the Fishman's deadly blow, Haruki quickly regains his posture.

Back in the 15th floor of the garage dungeon, Haruki, no longer afraid of losing to any of the werewolves there, was able to hold them back even when he was in a disadvantageous posture.

Haruki was harboring a strong sense of caution this time around.

This seemed to be a monster that he wouldn't be able to defeat on his own.

Of course, Haruki had never been really alone in his fights thus far.

Rhea would be in his backpack, and Karen would be right behind him.

Esta also proved to be a great asset during the battle against the rare species of deer.

If the opponent was at his level or below, he should be able to take it on solo.

However, from Haruki's battle experience so far, the enemies that have been appearing seemed to be far superior to him.

He wanted to have an adventure.

He wanted to test his own abilities.

However, there was always the risk of dying when going on an adventure...

Images of a terrible future assaulted Haruki's brain.

Should he try to escape with all his might, and ask Kagemitsu for help?

Haruki staggered.

At that time, behind the black Fishman...

Thin white legs jumped out of the cracks in Kamui Rock, entering Haruki's field of vision.

At that moment, Haruki prepared himself for the worst.

There was nothing an adventurer had to protect there.

Even if Haruki were to escape, no one would be left to their fate.

If he were to quickly go and report to Kagemitsu, they should be able to surround and defeat the black Fishman before they could pose a threat to the neighboring towns.

That was the safest way for Asahikawa and the most viable route for Haruki.

However, Haruki didn't choose that route.

He had kicked that option off the top of the cliff.

Haruki was an adventurer.

And there was a monster in front of him.

There was only one thing he could do in such a scenario.

To defeat the monster.

That's it.

Haruki mustered his willpower and focused it on his core.

He had to keep an eye on his opponent's movements and begin his analysis.

Snikt!

He parried the Fishman's talons and went around it.

The Fishman swung its arm while turning around.

Haruki imprinted those movements on each of his muscle fibers.

Analyze the gathered data, guess, and assume.

Perform an attack.

Find the errors in it, correct them, and retry.

The accuracy of Haruki's assumptions rose in a twinkle.

At the same time, the barrage of continuous attacks became faster and faster.

Being able to fight normally was the happiest thing that happened to Haruki that day.

Haruki could almost taste the happiness of being able to move normally as well.

"Ha... Haha!"

He could go anywhere.

He could run anywhere.

— More, more...!

The excitement that warmed his chest, and the agitation that made his body sweaty and numb, made Haruki move even faster.

As Haruki sped up, the Fishman's reactions became gradually slower.

Haruki's speed exceeded the Fishman's.

— I can put pressure on it like this!

Just as he convinced himself of it, the Fishman stepped back.

As Haruki tried to chase after the Fisherman, the nape of his neck went numb as if shocked by electricity.

The foot that Haruki had put in front of him stopped suddenly.

He sidestepped immediately.

Before Haruki's eyes...

“Gyaaaaa!!”

A transparent mass that had come from the Fishman's mouth flew past where Haruki had been not a second ago.

Haruki was familiar with that kind of attack.

It was magic.

Haruki hadn't expected the black Fishman to use magic.

If he hadn't jumped away after feeling that warning from the nape of his neck, he would have certainly been hit by that attack.

A cold sweat ran down Haruki's forehead.

The attack unleashed by the Fishman looked like the concentrated white magic Karen used.

Judging from how concentrated it was, it must have been as powerful as Karen's magic.

If that had hit him...

"-!"

Having imagined its power, Haruki got slightly frightened.

Perhaps because it had noticed Haruki's fear, the Fisherman grinned.

It was the smile of someone who looked down at his opponent, thinking they would never be able to defeat him.

It was really irritating.

But that's exactly why Haruki was itching to put his skills to use.

He also laughed behind his mask.

His opponent was nothing but a strong monster that he had to defeat.

There was no need for respect towards a "strong person".

He would fight dirty and cunningly in order to defeat it.

Haruki reached for his mask and took it off.

Immediately, the Fishman's eyes start to look for him.

Completely invisible to his opponent, Haruki jumped with all his strength.

He held his breath as he got closer.

He got around the monster, and saw a flash of light.

Weakness Exploit.

Haruki's attack headed for the light.

But before that...

Clink!!

The Fishman's talons narrowly blocked Haruki's attack.

However, intercepting Haruki's fully-powered attack with such an imperfect stance took a great toll on it.

The Fishman's posture had been considerably broken.

Using that chance, Haruki made a second attack with his other short sword.

Swoosh!

However, that attack was also avoided.

The Fishman took advantage of his broken stance to roll on the ground, avoiding Haruki's deadly blow.

It dodged the attack like it wasn't a big deal.

No ordinary monster would have been able to avoid such blows.

And this monster had avoided both of them. But Haruki, far from disappointed, kept on laughing.

— This is good.

— It's wonderful!

Perhaps his opponent felt Haruki's killing intent and was able to avoid his attack accurately with its own intuition.

Haruki was honestly impressed with the Fishman's sharp senses.

If he had those reactions, it was very likely that he would be able to dodge avoid getting hit even by surprise attacks.

Also, that monster seemed to be fully aware of Haruki even though he had removed his mask!!

“Impressive...”

Haruki laughed.

And still laughing, he continued to launch a series of stealth attacks using his Weakness Exploit.

The black Fishman seemed a little confused.

He seemed to be wondering what on earth had just happened.

When he landed atop of Kamui Rock, the Fishman was full of omnipotence.

It felt like it could exert its dominance over everything he could lay its eyes upon...

It even felt he could easily crush that masked man standing before its eyes.

That’s what it thought.

In fact, the Fishman had been overwhelmingly superior until shortly after shooting its magical attack.

Its opponent had a high physical ability, but the Fishman had magic under its sleeve.

There was no way it could lose to its opponent.

But now, the Fishman was completely under pressure.

There was something in his opponent’s aura that made him feel pressured.

The air around him had suddenly taken a 180 degrees turn ever since he took off his mask.

It felt the faint sign of an overwhelming amount of “nothing”.

A spectacular emptiness that swallowed and erased all violence and atrocity.

To accept and rule over everything precisely because there was nothing... the sign of the gods.

He was an entirely different person.

The Fishman was now fighting out of fear in these vicious circumstances.

Why, why, why...?

While barely dodging its opponent's attack, the Fishman was trapped in its own bafflement.

Why did a human bear such a sign?

Why couldn't it notice its opponent's true ability from the beginning?

Why did it end up having to fight such a monster!?

Anxiety and panic swirled around him, fueling its fear of death.

With bloodshot eyes, the Fishman confronted the pressure that would normally be enough to crush one's heart.

The Fishman did not win the battle against that pressure.

Being swallowed by that pressure, the creature's strongest impulse was revealed. To survive.

A sign that couldn't be felt.

An attack that came from an invisible angle.

The God of Death Himself had come to reap its life away.

— Scary, scary, scary!!

Like a cornered mouse, the Fishman fearfully confronted an invisible Grim Reaper.

All so that it could live another day...

CHAPTER 95

LET'S EXTERMINATE THE MONSTERS IN KAMUIKOTAN! – 4

Haruki was impressed with the Fishman's ability to constantly block his attacks.

The Fishman had managed to avoid being hit by Haruki's insta-kills, which were powered by Weakness Exploit.

Its high physical ability and intuition would be unbelievable for any other adventurer.

No beginner adventurer would stand a chance against it.

How many surprise attacks would it be able to avoid, even from intermediate adventurers?

That's why this was so valuable.

That's why this was so useful.

Haruki realized the value of this battle every time his attacks were blocked, even when coming from various angles.

This battle experience was definitely hard to come by.

Haruki's throat resounded with a stifled laughter.

Concentrate, focus your consciousness.

Assume, execute, retry.

No matter how much he analyzed the opponent and tried to be ahead of it, his opponent's god-like evasion thwarted Haruki every time.

It felt like walking on a tightrope.

Sometimes, a magical counterattack would fly towards Haruki.

He would dodge them by a hair's breadth.

The wind pressure from the avoided magical attack would gently brush his body.

His spine froze due to the Fishman's unabated hostility.

The Fishman's eyes still hadn't been able to catch a glimpse of Haruki.

Still, each of the Fishman's magical attacks were fired off with such a precision that Haruki wouldn't be able to avoid them without putting all of his efforts on it.

Haruki was almost purring like a cat.

He couldn't resist the fun he was having, and how happy he was.

Because now, at this very moment...

This Fishman was recognizing Haruki's existence, even without his mask on!

What a wonderful thing!

Every time the Fishman fought back, Haruki was filled with a desire to thank the gods.

He was finally able to find someone who would notice his presence!

What a miracle!

— I'm so glad to be alive.

— I'm so happy I haven't given up!

— Can we become friends?

Such a thought crossed Haruki's mind, but he quickly denied it.

The animosity felt from the Fishman wasn't so feeble that he could turn friendly.

So there was only one thing Haruki could do.

To express his respect toward the Fishman with his body and soul.

And to respectfully defeat it with all his strength.

Another magic attack by the Fishman.

After dodging it, Haruki took to the sky.

After jumping, Haruki adjusted his stance in mid-air.

After ascending to about four meters, he turned around.

Both the Fishman and Kamui Rock were under him.

Both of them shone with light almost as if they were waiting for him.

“Gyaaa!!”

However, the Fisherman fired his magic attack upwards so as to prevent Haruki’s actions.

It seemed to have realized that this was a decisive moment. The attack seemed more powerful than ever.

Haruki was in the middle of a free fall.

He was unable to dodge anything in this situation.

However, Haruki wasn’t worried.

He closed his eyes for a fraction of a second, and Shigure’s figure appeared in his mind.

Her sword seemed to be alive all the way to the tip of its blade.

Her Bloody Sakura was so soft it almost didn’t look like a sword.

He had to imitate those movements.

Haruki pushed out his Werewolf Short Sword.

The magic attack hit the tip of the blade.

At that very moment...

He twisted his wrist ever so slightly.

The ball of concentrated magic power slid over the short sword's blade with its own momentum.

Then it changed its course as it followed the short sword's soft movement.

Thanks to that, the attack barely passed right next to Haruki.

— I did it!

Haruki's whole body was excited after having been able to replicate Shigure's move.

But he had no time to be happy about it.

Haruki was already two meters away from the ground.

Without hesitation, Haruki gathered all of his determination at the tip of his Magic Sword.

He was literally devoting his body and soul to a single attack.

His opponent was right in front of him.

It stood there rigidly, and had no means to avoid Haruki's blow.

The light of his Weakness Exploit shone stronger than ever.

“—!”

Releasing a silent fighting spirit, Haruki slid his Magic Sword all the way down from the Fishman's head.

The Magic Sword made no noise on its path until it reached Kamui Rock.

Haruki didn't feel any resistance on the blade either. It had been as if he had cut

through butter with a hot knife.

Finally lowering his guard, Haruki put away both of his short swords.

Click

At the same time, a large fissure traveled all the way down from the Fishman's head to its groin.

The black Fishman collapsed on Kamui Rock.

As the Fishman reached the end of its life, a hot fever rose on Haruki's body.

It was a considerably strong case of Level Up sickness.

But it wasn't enough to knock him unconscious.

When he defeated the rare species of deer, who was as strong as this Fishman, he completely lost his consciousness. The reason why he didn't faint this time probably was because Haruki's level had already raised a lot after defeating the deer.

"That was a dangerous battle..."

Haruki exhaled a hot breath and put on his mask again.

Actually, Haruki had done his best.

He even had to take off his mask as a last resort.

Even so, his opponent had been more than worth the effort.

Esta, Rhea, and Karen weren't there to help him.

No one was there to cover for his mistakes.

A single misstep could have caused him to be the one laying dead instead.

That possibility gave Haruki the shivers.

The blood running through his veins had become incredibly cold.

Suddenly, a small white and black orb emerged from the Fishman's body and began to float in a spiral.

When it reached the same height as Haruki's standpoint, it stopped rising.

"W-What's that?"

The orb fired itself towards the dumbfounded Haruki.

— A magic attack!?

Hurriedly, Haruki crossed his arms over his chest in an attempt to block it.

The orb ignored Haruki's arms, and touched Haruki's chest.

There was no impact.

After coming in contact with Haruki's chest, the orb burst open.

A small piece of the bursted orb was sucked into Haruki's chest, like foam being sucked into a drain.

"What on earth was that...?"

Haruki stood in shock, confused by what had just happened.

It had been an unusual phenomenon.

— It's like when I first picked up the Skill Board... No way!?

As he took a deep breath, Haruki noticed that his body was trembling.

"...?"

His body wasn't the only thing that was trembling.

"Kamui Rock is shaking!?"

Was it an earthquake?

A loud rumbling echoed in the confused Haruki's ears.

Kerrrackkk!

The tremor sounded like thunder.

“-Waaah!?”

Coincident with the loud noise, the ground at Haruki's feet cracked open.

It was a fissure that looked like the crevasses that happened in snowy mountains.

Haruki hurriedly steps back.

He tried to put distance between him and the crack.

After the crack had become about three meters wide, it stopped growing.

At the same time, the rumbling sound disappeared, and the area regained its silence.

“Huh... What's this?”

Nervously, Haruki looked into the crack on the ground.

The bottom of the crack was filled with a cloud of dust, and nothing can be seen.

The crack itself seemed to be running in a straight line from one end of Kamui Rock to the other.

It seemed that the cliff that used to be one had been split into two.

The section had very few irregularities.

More than being cracked open, it seemed as if it had been sliced open.

“What's the meaning of this... Ah.”

Haruki held his tongue there.

When Haruki jumped and attacked the black Fishman.

Weakness Exploit caused a light to shine.

And the Fishman hadn't been the only thing that shone with that light.

As he recalled what happened, Haruki went pale.

— No... No way... That can't be...

He tried to deny it many times, but his memory, as vivid as if he was watching a video recording of it, was proof of the reality.

At that time, along with the black Fishman...

...Kamui Rock itself was shining.

Back then, Haruki was completely focused on the Fishman, and didn't expect that he would cut through Kamui Rock, even if it shined with Weakness Exploit's light.

Who could have guessed that a cliff that was several tens of meters tall could be cut in half with a short sword?

“Yeah... Something like this can't be normal. It's not me. It's not my fault.”

Haruki kept on whispering and mumbling excuses.

Desecrating a sacred place for the Ainu was sure to be met with some divine punishment, even if it was done so in order to defeat a monster.

— What should I do?

— Should I try to pretend I don't know anything about this?

At the end of Haruki's line of sight...

“-Blegh!!”

Chep's face emerged out of a pile of rubble.

“Oh, you were still alive?”

“Don’t count me off just yet!!”

Chep seemed very angry.

Seeing her, Haruki’s racing heart suddenly calmed down.

Wasn’t there anything to harvest that was related to the dungeon? That thought fled past Haruki’s mind.

Sighing, Haruki asked Chep.

“Why did you need to come here, Chep?”

“That’s because I’m the best salmon.”

“What happens if the best salmon comes here?”

“The best salmon is an offering to the gods. You understand that much, don’t you?”

Haruki was irritated by the “are you stupid or what?” look on Chep’s face.

— How far can I kick you off this cliff?

“Uwaaahh!”

Chep quivered, probably because she had noticed Haruki’s murderous intent.

— But why do you droop every time?

“So, where did you come from?”

Asahikawa’s dungeon, Kamuikotan, had 10 floors in total.

Normal monsters appeared all the way up to the 9th floor, but no demihumans should appear there.

Therefore, Chep shouldn’t be one of the monsters that escaped from Kamuikotan during the Stampede.

So where did this demihuman come from?

“Where were you born?”

“I’m a salmon, so I was born at the river like all the other salmon, and then swam upstream.”

“There are more salmon like you in Ishikawa River!?”

Haruki shivered as he imagined a demihuman salmon swimming upstream in a butterfly stroke.

— What a wicked sight...

“Do all salmon in Ishikawa River have limbs like you?”

“Even if that were the case, I’m a spirit.”

Chep stood there arrogantly, as if saying “I’m different from those normal salmon!”

She might have been different from other spirits, but pressing that point wasn’t even worth the effort.

Haruki swallowed his words and asked another question.

“If you’re an offering to the gods, how come you’re still alive?”

“That’s because you defeated the evil god’s messenger.”

“The evil god’s... messenger?”

“Yes. That was the messenger of the evil god who once brought calamity to Kamuikotan. In order to defeat that messenger, I was planning to offer myself, the best salmon, as a sacrifice, as well as a prayer so that a god could descend upon this earth and destroy it. And yet, you...”

— So it was in order to defeat that messenger...?

Chep brought one of her hands to her cheek and smiled, as if saying “You really got in my way, you!”

Though it was a very lovely smile, it was still the smile of a fish.

It didn't resonate with Haruki's heart at all.

"Eh? Was that really the evil god's messenger?"

"That's right."

"So why did the messenger come down to Kamui Rock instead of a god or an angel when you offered the best salmon as a sacrifice?"

"...Oh, dear me!?"

Did she not know why the evil god's messenger appeared?

Chep leaned with a curious look on her face.

The first thing to do was to organize the information. Haruki put his hand on his chin and started to think.

Chep popped out of the river, and headed towards Kamui Rock.

And after she prayed atop Kamui Rock, the evil god's messenger appeared from the sky.

If you follow the mythology, it should have been a god, not an evil god's messenger, that appeared from the sky.

But why did the evil god's messenger appear...?

— Wait, weren't monster's appearing from out of the dungeon in the first place?

He gave it a bit more thought, but he found no answers.

— Should I let Chep pray again?

After thinking, Haruki raised his head and noticed the change in the sun's color.

As it approached the horizon, the sun began to turn red.

The forest and rivers joined the sun and changed their colors as well.

From atop Kamui Rock, the change made for a fantastic scenic view.

After being fascinated by the scene for a while, Haruki suddenly realized.

“Huh? What was the closing time for the contest?”

As soon as he realized, his entire body went pale and his blood turned cold.

“Wasn’t it over at nightfall!?”

— Damn it!

Immediately, Haruki made off with the black Fishman’s corpse.

It was a little too heavy to carry it by himself, but he had no time to complain about it.

“I need to use all of my strength... All of my energy to get back to the starting point!”

If he were to waste another second...

His score would be zero points...

And he wouldn’t even get the chance to increase his presence!

Hurriedly, Haruki took the Fishman’s corpse in both hands, roughly stuffed Chep into his backpack, and jumped off Kamui Rock.

“Oooohhhh nooooooooo!!”

As Kamuikotan became dyed with the colors of dusk, the screams of a salmon echoed across the forest, and soon disappeared.



At that time, a shock ran across the old Kamuikotan Station Building, which Team Aerial was using as a control room.

“The signal of a powerful monster has appeared in Kamui Rock! It’s Rank B at least!”

Sensing that signal, Becky’s lips started to tremble.

Monsters of Rank B and above were as powerful as the Lizardman they fought against

in Chikaho.

At that time, Becky was powerless against the Lizardman. Therefore, she took the threat that signal posed more seriously.

Of course, Kagemitsu was also shaken by the appearance of a monster that was at least Rank B.

But he couldn't allow himself to show his unrest in front of his companions.

Kagemitsu was the leader of Team Aerial.

If the leader looks composed, the rest of the team will feel relieved.

“Okay. I'll check it out. Becky should use her Clairvoyance to have a bird's-eye view the whole thing. Yoshi, Doraneko, and Van go to the site. Let's meet at the base of Kamui Rock.”

“Y-Yes!”

Becky pushed up her glasses, which were about to fall off her face, and picked up her phone.

While Becky contacted their companions, Kagemitsu quickly put on his armor.

Kagemitsu and his friends had reached the 27th floor of Chikaho.

Though they could have a hard time against them, Rank B monsters weren't something they couldn't defeat.

If they deal with it calmly, there should be no problem.

However...

— A monster of at least Rank B suddenly appeared in such a place. What on earth happened...?

It was too unnatural.

Perhaps monsters were still coming out of the dungeon.

Thinking about that possibility, Kagemitsu grew even more uneasy.

An adventurer who had defeated a monster was carefully stripping off its materials nearby.

An Ichibishi employee was fidgeting about as he calculated his appraisals.

— Don't let them think something's wrong.

Kagemitsu looked at Kamui Rock, trying to hide his own anxiety.

From his standpoint, there didn't seem to be any big changes in Kamui Rock.

He didn't feel that unpleasant atmosphere, like when a Stampede was about to break out.

Suddenly, Kagemitsu was reminded of a familiar adventurer.

With him, he should be able to defeat that monster more safely...

But he was in another team.

No matter how urgent the situation was, he couldn't call him like one of his teammates.

Besides, he must be doing his best to earn points for the contest.

He couldn't get in his way like that.

Kagemitsu shook his head as if to dispel the image of the mask that had appeared in his head.

At that moment...

"K... Kagemitsu? About that monster from earlier..."

Becky appeared from the station building, approaching with a half run so as not to arouse suspicion.

— Did something bad happen?

Seeing her embarrassed expression, Kagemitsu became even more cautious.

“I’ve lost its signal.”

“Huh?”

“Maybe an adventurer already defeated it.”

“...Seriously?”

“Seriously.”

The adventurers who gathered for this “Monster Hunting Contest” were all intermediate or above.

Among them, only a handful of adventurers should be able to defeat monsters of Rank B and above.

Rank B monsters are powerful creatures that appeared around the 30th floor of a dungeon.

Currently, other than Team Aerial, who had reached the deepest floors of Chikaho, one or two other teams at best should have been able to deal with something like that.

— Did one of those teams defeat it?

But could those teams have found the monster that appeared on Kamui Rock and defeat it so quickly?

Kagemitsu took a deep breath in order to calm himself down.

Then he turned to Kamui Rock to exhale...

“– Puhoooh!?”

His breath came out from his mouth and nose at the same time after suddenly seeing Kamui Rock split in half.

“...What should we do, Kagemitsu?”

“...Hmm.”

— Let’s pretend we didn’t see anything!

Kagemitsu’s opinion was bluntly dismissed by Becky.

CHAPTER 96

LET'S EXTERMINATE THE MONSTERS IN KAMUIKOTAN! – 5

In the woods of Kamuikotan...

Holding the corpse of a defeated monster, the man smirked.

After the Monster Hunting Contest started, the man had run towards the woods with all his might, and defeated three monsters in total.

There were said to be about 30 monsters in the woods.

The number of adventurers who participated in the contest was also about 30, so those who hunted three monsters would most definitely be among the top ten.

Depending on the number of monsters other adventurers had defeated, it wasn't farfetched to think that he could break into the top of the ranking.

If everything went well and he was publicly acknowledged on Kagemitsu's blog, it would catch the eyes of many.

With that in mind, the man couldn't stop smiling.

Was he finally going to be able to become a "Narou" Ranker...?

That chance was worth the efforts he had made so far.

Stuffing the monster into his bag, the man looked up into the sky.

The sun was dyed in a hue of red.

The contest was coming to a close.

It was about time he returned.

The man turned towards the starting point, but at that time...

The woods became noisy all of a sudden.

“...?”

A crow shrieked in the distance.

The sound of many birds flapping their wings all at once created a moment of silence.

It was a strange silence, as if all the creatures living in the woods had escaped.

— What’s going on?

The man tilted his head to the side, completely puzzled.

At that moment, an eerie creature appeared from the woods.

“-!?”

The creature flew over the man’s head and disappeared into the forest in an instant.

“...”

The man stood there frozen in shock with his mouth wide open.

The creature that appeared looked like a mask.

He was that mysterious masked man that had been mentioned so many times in the forums.

A mask that floated in the air, which was said to lay a curse upon anyone who touched it.

Just as rumored, the masked man had feathers growing out of his neck and had scales all over his body.

He was carrying both halves of a black Fishman’s corpse on each hand.

Perhaps the Fishman had offended the masked man, and he tore it apart with his both

hands.

There was a salmon stuffed in the masked man's backpack.

That must have been the sacrifice that the masked man will use for an upcoming ritual.

What an outrageous thing to see.

The man looked beyond the forest where the masked man had disappeared and looked down at his own hands.

After seeing that masked man, the three monsters he had seemed to be so insignificant.

Even though up until that point, they had seemed like a valuable treasure...

"Me, become a Ranker? Get sponsored?... Ha, hahaha!"

He felt so stupid, dreaming of things such as being a Ranker and getting sponsored by a company.

Aiming for the top meant that he had to compete with the masked man.

— With that man?

— Don't be ridiculous.

— I can't beat such a fiendish man!!

— I'm better off staying anonymous as long as I don't have to fight against him!!

"...I'll go home."

The man dropped his shoulders and started walking, throwing away his dream of becoming a Ranker on the banks of the river in Kamuikotan...



【Asahikawa】 Monster Hunting Contest 【Sponsored by Team Aerial】

127 Name: Anonymous who ran around Kamuikotan

Today's tournament was fun

Especially since the adventurers who participated were hardly known, instead of celebrities

128 Name: Anonymous who ran around Kamuikotan

That's right

Those who are strong but whose names are not selling are being put in a top-three list

It was an unbearable battle for me who loves to be underground

I wonder if they will be noticed by companies and become famous in the future.

I dunno if I should be happy or sad...

129 Name: Anonymous who ran around Kamuikotan

I'm happy when a minor adventurer becomes famous, but it also makes me feel a bit lonely, you know?

So I really understand how you must feel...

130 Name: Anonymous who ran around Kamuikotan

Are any of the competitors here?

I couldn't sleep since I've seen some strange things...

131 Name: Anonymous who ran around Kamuikotan

Like a ghost?

I mean, that place seems to be haunted after all

132 Name: Anonymous who ran around Kamuikotan

I don't think so

A mask floating in mid-air

Feathers growing out of its neck

And scales all over its body

133 Name: Anonymous who ran around Kamuikotan

Ah, you mean Mr. Masked Man?

So that guy did participate in the contest, huh?

134 Name: Anonymous who ran around Kamuikotan

So it must have been him, right?

He was flying through the air with a salmon stuffed in his backpack

135 Name: Anonymous who ran around Kamuikotan

Wait a second

That's a bit different from the Mr. Masked Man I know lol

136 Name: Anonymous who ran around Kamuikotan

Well, it was Mr. Masked Man after all

It seems I had jumped to conclusions...

137 Name: Anonymous who ran around Kamuikotan

I've also seen that Mr. Masked Man guy

He was searching for monsters while moving on several tiny legs

And he was firing potatoes from his eyes

138 Name: Anonymous who ran around Kamuikotan

Wait, what?

That doesn't sound human at all

139 Name: Anonymous who ran around Kamuikotan

>> 138

Have you seen Mr. Masked Man before?

If you had, you wouldn't be that surprised

140 Name: Anonymous who ran around Kamuikotan

That's right

That's just how Mr. Masked Man is after all

141 Name: Anonymous who ran around Kamuikotan

You bet I'd be surprised!

You're just accepting those facts as if they were so normal!

142 Name: Anonymous who ran around Kamuikotan

Anything goes with Mr. Masked Man

If you're surprised with this form he has taken

You'll never be able to meet him in person!

143 Name: Anonymous who ran around Kamuikotan

No way...

Ah, I'm not going to look for him or anything

I don't want to meet someone like him in person, you know?



Haruki soared through the trees with all his strength.

Occasionally, he would inadvertently break the trunk of a tree with the sole of his foot, or he would move in the opposite direction of what he had intended to, but eventually he managed to get back to the starting point.

However...

“W... What!?”

They had already started to pack things up at the old Kamuikotan Station Building.

The shocked Haruki fell flat on the floor.

Haruki had come all the way back from Kamui Rock leaping from tree to tree.

He was moving at the fastest speed, but unfortunately he couldn't advance in a straight line.

And to make things worse, he even got himself lost a few times because he wasn't familiar with those woods.

Because of that, it took him longer than expected to get back to the starting point.

The sun disappeared behind the mountains, and the stars started to show themselves.

“My... My presence...”

— Not yet.

— It's too early to give up!

Haruki mustered all of his courage and stood up.

There was a chance that the tally wasn't done yet.

He couldn't give up just yet!

Without giving up hope, Haruki approached Kagemitsu while dragging the black Fishman's corpse.

"Um... Kagemitsu..."

He approached Kagemitsu, who was watching over the clean-up process.

However, when Kagemitsu saw the black Fishman, he held his hand in front of him so as to block Haruki's words.

He frowned and pressed his fingers against his temples as if he was suffering from a strong headache.

"Ah, um... What... Come with me for a second."

With that said, Kagemitsu turned his eyes to the old Kamuikotan Station Building.

He was asking Haruki to go there with him.

Nodding silently, Haruki followed Kagemitsu.

"Well, first..."

Kagemitsu entered the station building, looked around the outside of the window, and then looked back.

"What have you done!?"

"Huh? Wait. What are you talking about?"

"I'm talking about Kamui Rock! You did that to Kamui Rock, didn't you!?"

"W... What do you mean?"

It could be seen clearly through his mask.

Air's eyes were moving nervously from side to side.

When he saw him return, Kagemitsu immediately knew it had been him.

He had been the one who split Kamui Rock in two. He just knew it.

The proof of that was the monster he had in his hands.

It was a corpse of a monster that didn't appear in Kamuikotan, split in half. Kagemitsu had never seen such a monster.

On top of that, that corpse had an eerie aura.

Even though the monster was already dead, it still gave Kagemitsu the chills.

When they reach a certain level, seasoned adventurers are able to judge the monster's ability to some extent from their appearance with a feeling similar to looking at a well-built man and conclude that they are physically strong.

— If I had to fight against this monster, I'm sure it'd give me a hard time...

A whole team should be able to defeat it.

But a solo adventurer... that would be a very difficult thing to do.

That's how powerful Kagemitsu concluded that monster must have been.

This must definitely have been the monster that Becky had sensed earlier.

But he could have never imagined that Air had defeated it.

Kagemitsu, who had been wondering how much progress Air would have been making in the Monster Hunting Contest, was completely thrown off by this unexpected turn of events, which had been absolutely beyond his imagination.

He had never imagined this guy would miss a chance to increase his presence like that.

"What are you going to do about it...?"

"I was thinking about pretending I haven't seen it—"

"Do you think you can do that!?"

Air nervously moved his hands about in response to Kagemitsu's furious question.

Perhaps he himself was panicking about the destruction of Kamui Rock. Kagemitsu felt that he could understand Air's inner feelings.

Seeing his attitude, Kagemitsu lets out a small sigh.

Kamui Rock was a natural rocky mountain.

It's not a natural heritage site, so no one should be really bothered by the fact that it's broken in half.

Kagemitsu didn't know about how things were before the Stampede, but now there shouldn't be anyone who could think about accusing an adventurer of destroying Kamui Rock.

It was a big deal, but nothing more than a small mistake.

Nevertheless, an adventurer who can defeat B-rank monsters was still panicking due to his small mistake.

Kagemitsu was relieved to see such humility coming from him.

"Well, it may have been quite an incident, but we were the only ones who noticed it. Maybe we shouldn't make such a big deal out of this."

"I see..."

Haruki was relieved to see Kagemitsu's anger fading.

— Hmm?

Haruki tilted his head, puzzled after noticing Kagemitsu's words.

"Did you notice I was fighting up there?"

"Hmm? Ah, yes. I got word that a strong monster had appeared, so I was about to head out to Kamui Rock."

"And here I was hoping you would come and help me with the battle..."

The battle with the black Fishman was quite terrifying for Haruki.

He had been so badly cornered that he had to remove his mask and rely on stealth attacks.

If possible, he would have preferred to have Team Aerial help him before having to remove his mask.

“I couldn’t have reached the top of Kamui Rock as soon as I noticed that the monster had appeared! I mean, the very moment I decided to climb up the mountain, it was already split in half, so I didn’t even have time to go there!! Say, Air. Do you realize that you have split Kamui Rock in half!? Huh!?”

The topic he had thought to be over had been brought back.

As his head twitched, Kagemitsu pinched Haruki’s face with one of his hands.

No wonder he was the strongest adventurer in Hokkaido.

Haruki’s face sounded as if it was creaking under the pressure made by his grip.

“I... I do! I do realize!”

“Good grief...”

As Kagemitsu released his grip, Haruki stepped away from him.

His skull had been about to be smashed.

Haruki took a breath as he rubbed his own head.

“But it’s really strange. Something like that just happened, but it’s like nobody has noticed yet. It’s like the fact that Kamui Rock had been split in half had no presence at all...”

“No one noticed, you say? Not even other adventurers–”

“No one noticed. No one except us from Team Aerial.”

“What...?”

Despite causing such a major incident, only Kagemitsu noticed that the Kamui Rock

had split in half.

— Should I be happy that nobody noticed it, or should I hate the fact that my presence wasn't noticed even after causing such an incident?

There is no doubt that this phenomenon is caused by that hated transparent god, Medjed.

Thinking that perhaps, if only he didn't have such a Divine Blessing, anyone would have noticed his presence by now, made him so angry that he felt his tears would start to boil.

However, without Medjed's protection, Haruki wouldn't have been able to fight this far.

He might have already lost his life in one of his past battles.

With that in mind, he couldn't condemn Medjed like that.

"B... By the way, Kagemitsu..."

"Hmm?"

"I've only defeated this Killer Rabbit and the Fishman... so..."

"The contest is over. Give it up already."

"Agh!"

Feeling like he could faint at any time, Haruki dropped on all fours onto the ground.

Even though he had been working so far in order to increase his presence...

Tears began to well up in Haruki's eyes.

"Now that you mention it, your team came in 4th."

"Huh?"

The faucet that controlled his tears creaked shut.

Haruki stood up and grabbed Kagemitsu by the shoulder.

“Doesn’t 4th place get a spot on your ranking?”

“Idiot. Only the top three get mentioned in my blog.”

“I... I see...”

“But...”

“...But?”

Haruki’s gulping echoed in his throat.

As the tension increased, Kagemitsu murmured something as he stared off into the heavens.

“You would have made it to the top three if you had gotten two more points.”

“WHAAAT!!”

Hearing Kagemitsu’s words, Haruki dropped on all fours once again.

With two more points, he would have made it to the top three.

And he had two monsters in hand, which were worth exactly two points.

— If only I had arrived a little sooner...!!”

“Waaaaaaaahhh!!”

Haruki had no choice but to resent his destiny.

CHAPTER 97

LET'S CLEAN UP AFTER THE EVENT!

Feeling as if his spirit had left his body, Haruki joined Karen, Rhea, and Esta.

Rhea seemed to be somewhat relieved, perhaps as a result of her earlier rampage.

In contrast to Rhea, Esta appeared to be considerably fatigued. He seemed to have been pushed around a lot.

"I'm sorry, we couldn't make it to the ranking because of me..."

"Ah, don't worry. By the way, I know you were late, but where have you been, Karaboshi?"

"Yeah... About that..."

As expected, he couldn't just tell her that his fight atop Kamui Rock ended up with him splitting both the monster he was fighting and Kamui Rock itself in half.

Haruki turned away trying to be evasive about the whole deal.

"Don't tell you you went back to the hot springs--"

"Muhah!"

Chep stared at Karen from Haruki's backpack, cutting her short.

Karen froze due to the salmon's sudden appearance.

Next to her, Rhea stared at Chep and pointed her two nozzles at her.

"Wait, Rhea! Hold your fire!"

Haruki hurriedly held his hands out.

If Rhea were to attack in that situation, Chep wouldn't be the only one to be damaged.

The attack would tear his backpack apart, and if she were to miss, there was a big chance some potatoes would hit Haruki as well.

"...Ah, it seems you've picked up yet another weird thing..."

Karen took her eyes off Chep, looking like she had given up on trying to explain to herself what she was looking at.

Weird would be one word to describe her.

Haruki had no objections about that.

"You cruel beast! No matter how charming I am, I have to be stuffed in this– huh?"

Chep stopped her rash ranting suddenly as if she had just noticed something, and stared at it.

She was staring at Rhea.

As she stared at Rhea, Chep's eyes started to gradually brim over with light.

"Well, well, what do we have here! What a lovely thing you are!!"

The excited Chep escaped from the backpack, falling head first onto the ground.

"Ngyooh!"

She made a strange voice, but soon stood up and prostrated herself in front of Rhea.

"What a beautiful figure you have. I've been deeply inspired by you!"

"(...What's this all about?)"

Being the target of Chep's excitement, Rhea faced Haruki as if trying to ask him that question.

However, Haruki had no idea why Chep was so excited about her.

“Hey, Chep. What’s the matter?”

“There’s nothing out there like this! Can’t you tell!? There’s a noble queen standing before us!? How haughty of you– Ngyooh!?”

It must have been too much for her to bear.

Rhea fired a potato stone at Chep.

The potato stone hit Chep’s head with a “bonk!”

Rhea’s shot had been pretty weak, perhaps because she wasn’t being really hostile to her target.

Or perhaps she was happy to have been called “a noble queen”?

The leaves on Rhea’s back were fluttering slightly.

It seemed that the latter was most likely.

Chep was a princess, and Rhea was a queen.

Of course, the queen had a higher standing.

Was that the reason why Chep prostrated herself before Rhea?

Haruki cut loose the rope that was binding Rhea and Esta together, and put them both back in their usual positions.

Chep would go on, saying things like “How beautiful is our Queen!”, “How disgraceful!”, “You’re unworthy of laying your filthy hands on our Lady!”, and so on... Annoyed by her, Rhea would shoot her potatoes at her several times.

“Why did you bring Chep along with you, Karaboshi?”

“I don’t even know that myself.”

“This is a little bit too much, even for you...”

“...Come on, Karen. What on earth are you taking me for?”

“...”

After asking her that question, Karen’s eyes began to roll around slowly.

She definitely had something wicked in her mind.

At any rate, it was a good idea to stop for a second and think about Karen’s question.

Why did he bring Chep along? Karen had asked him that question, but Haruki wasn’t really sure why.

It wasn’t like he brought her along out of pity of leaving her alone atop Kamui Rock, or with the intention of eating her later.

He just stuffed her in his backpack out of reflex.

It was like when you put away your tools after using them.

“Don’t tell me...”

“What is it?”

“Ah, nevermind.”

Haruki shook his head, drowning out his bad presentiment.

There was no point worrying about that at the moment.

He decided he would confirm his hunch the next day, when they would go to the Kamuikotan dungeon.

“Ah, Karaboshi!”

“Hmm?”

When he turned to see her, Karen had a big smile on her face.

“Actually, I...”

Seeing that smile made him feel a bit embarrassed somehow, as well as a vague

uneasiness.

— Stop.

— Say no more!

Before Haruki could stop her...

“I came in third in the Monster Hunting Contest!”

“Waaaaaahhhh!!”

— Karaboshi Haruki, 27.

— It seems I’ve had the most unlucky day today.



[Storm and Stress] By: Kagemitsu

『Announcing the results of the Monster Hunting Contest』

Hello, this is Kagemitsu.

Like I’ve announced previously, today we had a Monster Hunting Contest around the Kamuikotan dungeon in Asahikawa.

It was the first event sponsored by Team Aerial, but I was happy to see that many people gathered there.

It was also my first event, and I think there was a lot of room for improvement with the rules and procedures.

Still, I hope the people who participated enjoyed it.

Well, without any further ado, I’ll announce the results:

[Individual]

1st place: Guts 5 points

2nd place: Bart 4 points

3rd place: Karen 3 points

[Team]

1st place: Team Dandy 8 points

2nd place: Banma Sentai Adventurers 6 points

3rd place: Doukenkyu 5 points

Congratulations to those who got a place in the top three!

If you didn't make it, I hope to see you in our next event!

It seems that some people have suffered all sorts of mental damage during the event, but don't worry. You guys are not to blame...

Get back on your feet! Don't give up on being an adventurer...



"Heyo! I'm here!"

A laid-back voice echoed through the old Kamuikotan Station building late at night.

Kagemitsu raised his face and glared at the person that appeared.

"I thought, 'nah, can't be her', but you really came, huh?"

"Since my beloved disciple participated in the event, it's natural for the teacher to come."

"Which is the same as saying 'I came to kill some time here because no one is coming into my store'?"

"...So, any problem with that?"

The face of the one who appeared in the station, Yuzuki Akane, turned serious with an

unnatural speed.

It seemed that her having spare time since no one was coming into her store was the correct guess after all.

Nonetheless, she hadn't come all the way there just to watch the event.

Behind the scenes, she was supporting the event's success with the staff of Ichibishi's Asahikawa branch.

Many people were confused by her tone of voice and attitude, but in fact, Akane was the most talented employee in the dungeon department of Ichibishi, where Japanese elites gathered.

She may act like she's not thinking, but she always takes action according to her thoughts.

...Maybe.

For Kagemitsu, Akane was one of the most untrustworthy human beings on this planet.

But he trusted her all the same...

— Good grief.

Kagemitsu pushed his temples with his fingers to endure his headache.

He had wanted Air to get first place in the contest.

That would have given him the support of a big company for sure.

And yet, that guy...

Kagemitsu smiled bitterly, remembering the masked man who had acted completely contrary to his expectations.

"What do you think about this monster?"

"Hmm? Which one?"

Akane started to inspect the monster's corpse that Air had given to Kagemitsu.

The monster was a demihuman-type Fishman. Its body was completely black, and limbs grew from its carp-like frame.

This monster would be returned after its material had been appraised, but before that, Kagemitsu wanted the corpse to be inspected by someone with good eyes and tight lips.

Where had this monster come from?

And how was it as strong as a B-Rank monster?

The monster's corpse, which was being illuminated by a manually rechargeable light, still had an eerie aura even though it had been dead for quite some time.

Akane was staring at that corpse without any reservation.

"What do you think?"

"A B-Rank demihuman, huh?"

"Do you know in which dungeon does this monster appear?"

"Who knows? It's the first time I see something like this. Where did it come from?"

"I have no idea."

"What about Becky?"

"She said it suddenly popped out of nowhere."

"...I see."

Akane made a grim-looking face and folded her arms.

She was familiar with Becky's Clairvoyance skill.

It was hard to believe that the monster had appeared out of nowhere, but there had to be no other explanation, since that's what the Clairvoyance skill had sensed.

“This may be just a guess, but this seems to be a unique monster.”

“That’s what I feared...”

Deep wrinkles appeared between Kagemitsu’s eyebrows.

Unique monsters were one-of-a-kind monsters that were only very rarely found in dungeons.

Rhea was a higher-than-rare monster, but there were considerable variations in ability.

Considering that an unique-species monster that was extremely strong had appeared, another unique-species monster that was extremely weak should have appeared as well.

However, the only unique-species monster that had appeared this time was definitely a strong category, which was inappropriate for Kamuikotan dungeon...

“I wonder how Air managed to defeat this monster...”

“...Did Air tell you that he was the one that defeated it?”

“I haven’t spoken to him yet, you know?”

“Then how do you know this was Air’s doing?”

“This goddess can see through everything!”

Akane cooed at him proudly. “Ohoho!”

— Who’s this goddess she’s referring to?

A blue vein appeared on Kagemitsu’s forehead.

Guessing that Air was the one who defeated that monster hadn’t been a shot in the dark for Akane.

Perhaps she had looked at the cut on the monster’s corpse to determine what kind of weapon was used.

Such a conclusion was natural for Ichibishi's best weapon and armor shop employee.

"I can't believe he was able to defeat a B-Rank monster by himself."

"...Can you tell that much?"

"Of course. There's only one kind of wound traces on this corpse."

Kagemitsu was impressed with Akane's explanation.

"Air's getting there, huh?"

"So you think so, too?"

"Do you think he'll manage? I think he'll be okay..."

"Me too. Well, I do. But no one's talking about him."

"...I see."

Akane cast down her eyes a little.

Kagemitsu opened his eyes wide after seeing such an unusual reaction coming from her.

However, Akane's gesture soon disappeared, and gave way to an annoying expression on her face.

"So, about this monster... we're not saying anything about it, right?"

"Wasn't that obvious?"

Kagemitsu regained his composure, and folded his arms.

If word about a B-Rank monster appearing above ground were to be leaked into the public, it would surely lead to a mass panic.

The information about this monster needed to be handled with great care.

"But still, the more things that involve him, the more things we can't talk about with

others...”

“Now that you mention that, I’m glad.”

“Is that so?”

“Yeah.”

A smile began to form on Akane’s lips.

It was no wonder she looked like that.

Because Air had already begun to walk the pathless road that adventurers had yet to tread on.

Kagemitsu knew that, and was worried about him.

He was sure Akane was worried about him as well.

Everyone who had been positively affected by the dungeons was drawn to the unknown.

“You seem very interested in him.”

“He’ll definitely become an important customer in the future, so it’s only natural that I look after him, don’t you think? And what about you? You seem really worried about him as well.”

“Of course. I can’t let him get past me that easily.”

“Ah, right, right. You can’t wait to step down from your position of popularity, huh?”

Akane had hit the mark, and Kagemitsu awkwardly tried to avoid eye contact with her.

But soon, he got back to his usual serious look.

“That’s why I’d like you to find him a sponsor soon... At this point, anyone will do.”

If someone is strong enough, they will stand out, whether they like it or not.

And Air was no exception to that rule.

Even if his presence is zero, the results he got weren't insignificant.

Anyone who could notice his results should be able to notice there was something peculiar about him.

His presence should gradually be noticed by those with sharp senses.

In fact, he had already caught the eyes of Kagemitsu, Shigure, and Masatsugu.

It was only a matter of time before not many adventurers could ignore his feats.

And when that happened, companies would fight over him and spread all sorts of rumours about him.

Some disputes would surely take place.

If something meant to disrupt his presence were to happen, there was no telling how far the situation would spread out.

Worst case scenario, there could be conflict with his own teammates.

...Or they may leave him altogether.

"He's an important sprout, so think hard how to protect him."

"The same goes for you too. If anything happens, make sure to contact HQ."

"And you think that will get him sponsored?"

"Ah, sorry. My bad."

He doesn't have a noticeable presence in the company.

The chances of having a company protect him were the same as his presence, that is, zero.

However, it wasn't completely zero.

If Kagemitsu tried his best, a future could be created in which he could get him a contract with a company.

If Kagemitsu, who had a contract with Ichibishi, were to gather several referrals and recommend him personally, Ichibishi's HQ would definitely make their move.

However, there was yet another problem with Air.

As long as that wasn't solved, no company will ever offer him a hand.

That problem was... his appearance.

There was no company that would want to support an adventurer that presented himself like that.

— Wait, maybe Banma would be willing to make an effort to sponsor him?

"Hey, what do you think he should look like?"

"Give it up."

"That was a fast answer!"

"I mean, if you dress him up to enhance his presence, what will you do once he goes and equips some hideous gear like he always does?"

"Ah... Yeah. That's right. Sorry for asking that."

Undoubtedly, even Kagemitsu had to equip some hideous gear himself.

— So that's pointless, huh...

A sigh deeper than the darkness of the night echoed through the old Kamuikotan Station building.

CHAPTER 98

LET'S SET FOOT IN THE KAMUIKOTAN DUNGEON!

After soaking in the hot springs and thoroughly washing away the sweat and tears he had shed that day, Haruki immediately crawled into the bed and fell asleep while dampening his pillow.

It was best to sleep his unpleasant memories away.

The next day, Haruki woke up with a different state of mind, and started to get ready.

He had gone all the way to Asahikawa.

He was planning to spend the next few days exploring the deepest parts of the dungeon in Asahikawa.

After finishing his preparations, he met with the others in front of the inn.

Karen and Esta seemed to be the same as usual, but Rhea looked a bit discouraged.

As an exact opposite, Chep was cheerfully talking to Rhea.

It wasn't hard to guess what had happened.

Haruki ended up stuffing the noisy Chep inside one of the pockets on Karen's robe, as she complained "I'm the Queen's chamberlain, you know!? Please put me inside your backpack with her".

— When did you become Rhea's chamberlain...?

When Haruki put Chep inside the pocket, he saw Karen make a face he had never seen before.

It was an incredibly easy to understand face, which asked "Why me!?"

However, Haruki already had his hands full with Rhea and Esta.

— Sorry...

While apologizing inwardly, Haruki decided to not look at Karen's complaining face anymore.

They held the IC card at the gate of Kamuikotan dungeon, and went down to the first floor.

There were some other adventurers already on the first floor.

They were probably some of those adventurers who participated in the Monster Hunting Contest the day before.

These passionate adventurers, not happy with just having participated in Team Aerial's event, had come to the dungeon to continue hunting after the event.

"Ordinary monsters! There are ordinary monsters here!"

"I'm not scared. I'm not scared of these monsters!!"

"Whew. Looks I still got some fight left in me..."

Among them was a group fighting monsters as if they were possessed by an evil spirit.

Their eyes looked glittery, and some of them were even crying for some reason, so they were quite hard to get close to.

In Haruki's eyes, they were by no means weak. But for some reason, they seemed fixated on fighting monsters on the first floor.

It was like rehabilitation through battles.

What could have happened to them?

Haruki wasn't really sure, but he decided to go in a different direction, concluding they were better off not getting close to them.

Even if he were to go somewhere else, there were other adventurers everywhere.

Haruki wanted to take out the Skill Board to check on many things, but he couldn't do it because there were people nearby.

Until they were somewhere a little bit farther and with less people around, using the Skill Board would have to be put on hold.

The Skill Board wasn't the only thing that would have to wait until later.

The same went for Karen's magic.

"Will you be okay, Karen?"

"Yes."

She must have realized he was asking about her magic.

Karen had a bitter smile on her face.

"That way of attacking you taught me worked well during the contest, but I'm not used to it yet, so I'd like to practice it a little bit... Is that okay?"

"Of course."

Haruki nodded.

If she were to attack with her staff while it was charged with magical power, wouldn't that magical power make her attack more powerful?

That's why he had whispered "Why don't you try charging your staff with magical power and then striking a monster with it?" into Karen's ear.

His suggestion came more as a rough idea, but Karen seemed to have been able to shape it well.

Without delay, Haruki expanded his Detection and searched for monsters.

His detection immediately picked up the sign of a monster.

"Karen. There's a monster for you just ahead."

“Got it!”

Nodding, Karen ran ahead of Haruki with a fluffy gait.

There was a monster just around the road’s corner.

It was a big mouse monster, about 30 centimeters tall.

As with any monster that appeared on the first floor of a dungeon, its strength was average.

It was a monster intended for beginners.

Karen casually approached the monster.

Then she raised her staff.

The air around the staff started to change as she began to pour magical power into its tip.

Haruki saw Karen swing her staff down.

The tip of the staff touched the mouse’s body.

At that moment...

*BAAAANG!!”

The mouse’s body was literally pulverized by Karen’s attack.

“Whoa...”

Haruki was shocked by the attack’s sheer power.

To completely pulverize a first floor monster like that...

Karen’s attack had exceeded all of Haruki’s expectations.

“It would be great if you could suppress its power a bit more...”

“Ah... Yes...”

Karen held her tongue and looked down after hearing Haruki’s observation.

With her current power, no materials could be obtained from the monsters she defeated.

Such power made it very easy to defeat monsters, but if no materials could be obtained from defeated monsters, it would be impossible to make a living as an adventurer.

When ordering custom armor, one would need to gather a reasonable amount of materials taken from lower-section monsters.

If Karen’s power were to be too high then, they wouldn’t be able to get any materials at all! Something like that would be quite the predicament.

Therefore, they had to train in order to help Karen learn how to limit the power of her attack.

Moving forward, Haruki would watch over Karen’s training.

There were fewer adventurers on the 2nd floor.

And once they got to the 3rd floor, they found no signs of other adventurers.

Haruki thought he should be able to take out his Skill Board without any problems.

He expanded his Detection range, searching for any adventurers that could be approaching, and then took out his Skill Board.

<<Evil god’s messenger defeated>>

<<Obtained 3 Skill Point(s)>>

<<Quest “Defeat the evil god’s messenger” clear>>

<<Requesting Demo Graph functionality release due to fulfilling the prerequisites — Granted>>

<<“Tree Enhancement” is now available>>

Haruki's heart raced when he saw the log.

Haruki wondered if it had anything to do with a dungeon-related event, but he didn't really think there was an ongoing event at the moment.

Perhaps there were other dungeon-related "Quests" occurring in various places?

What other "Quests" were there?

Haruki was sweating out of excitement.

If they had this information, it would blow the minds of the analysis squad of the "Narou" forums.

Haruki wished he could give them this information to help them analyze the dungeon.

However, Haruki couldn't disclose this information.

He had no means to explain how he came across that information himself.

To try to explain that, he would need to talk about the Skill Board.

He couldn't allow himself to reveal it to the public.

Next was the deal with the evil god's messenger.

Just as Chep said, that black Fishman was really related to an evil god.

Haruki couldn't believe he had the power to defeat a monster that was sent out by an evil god.

So he couldn't have really been an "evil god's messenger" but something closer in status and occupation to an "adventurer". Something like a "class" of sorts. With that in mind, he could finally accept the battle's outcome.

"What's wrong, Karaboshi? You seem pale?"

"Ah, no, it's nothing."

Haruki turned away from Karen, who was staring into his face with uneasiness.

If he were to say something like “I’ve defeated an evil god’s messenger”, she could have ended up thinking he was some strange guy.

“Actually, a new feature was unlocked on the Skill Board.”

“Really? What does it do!?”

“Umm...”

Karen’s eyes glittered with excitement.

Under Karen’s gaze, Haruki swiped the Skill Board.

Karaboshi Haruki (27) Gender: Male

Skill Points: 3 → 6

Class: Hidden Sword King

Divine Protection: Overthrowing God <Medjed>

— Vitality < — >

└ Stamina 3

└ Natural Recovery 2

— Strength < — >

└ Strength 5

— Agility < — >

└ Quickness 5

└ Dexterity 5

— Technology < — >

└ Equipment Mastery

| ⊢ One-handed Sword 5

| ⊢ Throwing 2

| ⊢ Light Armor Mastery 5

⊢ Kicking 2

⊢ Stealth 3 → 4

⊢ Imitating 3

— Intuition < — >

⊢ Detection 5

⊢ Weakness Exploit MAX

— Special < — >

⊢ Growth Acceleration MAX

⊢ Taming 2

⊢ Divine Protection MAX

“Noooo!!”

— My Stealth score keeps increasing!!

Haruki screamed, holding his head in despair.

— Was that it? Was it when I took off my mask during that battle!?

— Ahh!! I’m such an idiot!!

He cursed his past self while stomping on the ground.

Though it was necessary in order to save his life, it was a huge price to pay.

“W... What is it, Karaboshi?”

“...My Stealth score increased.”

“Huh? Ah... That’s... That’s pretty bad, yeah...”

Contrary to Haruki’s voice, which sounded as if he had had a bitter experience, Karen’s voice sounded detached and without any intonation.

There was a huge difference in their degrees of enthusiasm.

“So... what’s the new function like?”

“Ah! Umm...”

Haruki ran his eyes over his Skill Tree.

As he could see in the log, he had obtained 3 skill points.

The other thing that had changed in the tree was the “< — >” that appeared next to each major skill and number, such as with his Stealth skill (which he didn’t really want to look at right now).

It was easy to assume that the “< — >” was related to the newly released “Tree Enhancement” feature.

Haruki tapped the < — > next to Vitality.

<< Enhance the Vitality Tree? Y/N (Cost: 3 points) >>

At that moment, the same confirmation he would get when allocating skill points appeared in front of the tree.

Three whole points just to enhance the Vitality tree seemed a little steep.

Currently, he could only get points when reaching a new section of a dungeon, and when a rare species monster is defeated.

Defeating a rare species that leads a Stampede was worth three points. Also, he should be able to earn a certain amount of points for clearing the target of a “Quest”.

But he guessed he wouldn't be able to earn enough points to enhance all of his stats.

To make things worse, there was nothing that said that once he enhanced a skill, it would end there.

Haruki wasn't able to enhance any of his skills without any sense of hesitation.

"I think that perhaps this new 'Tree Enhancement' function helps me increase my skills."

Haruki mouthed his conjectures.

The "< — >" was located at the top of each skill tree.

So Haruki thought that by activating that "< — >", he would be able to raise all of that major skill's subordinates.

"Perhaps?"

"Well, I won't know until I actually try it out. There's no detailed explanation. But each try costs 3 skill points. I think it's a little too much of a cost just for trying something out."

As Haruki was explaining, Karen was smiling as if she had made up her mind.

She seemed as if she was asking "So, what are we going to do about it?"

"Can't you try to use it to enhance my magical skills?"

"I guess... but..."

"Well, you can't fiddle with someone's skills without that board. I guess it can't hurt to give it a try, even if you mess it up somehow."

Having said that, an idyllic smile appeared on Karen's face.

If he messed it up somehow, all he would need to do would be to work hard and improve his skills normally.

Haruki's eyes were opened by Karen's words.

Even if he were to make a mistake when spending those 3 points, he could simply make an effort to get those 3 points back.

Certainly, her words made sense.

Haruki smiled and nodded at Karen.

Little by little, Karen's guts were starting to show.

She gave off this very dazzling aura as she moved forward step by step.

Haruki couldn't afford to come to a stop either.

With that thought, Haruki started off by tapping on Karen's tree.

Kurosaki Karen (18) Gender: Female

Skill Points: 3 → 0

Class: Hammer-wielding Spirit Master

Divine Protection: Thunder God <Okikurumi>

— Vitality < — >

└ Stamina 2

└ Natural Recovery 1

— Strength < — >

└ Strength 1

— Magic Power < — > → < + 1 >

└ Magic Power 5

└ Magic Compatibility 5

└ Magic Manipulation 5

└ Change <Thunder> 4

— Agility < — >

└ Quickness 1

└ Dexterity 2

— Technology < — >

└ Equipment Mastery

└ Blunt Weapons 1

└ Light Armor Mastery 1

— 直感 < — >

└ 探知 1

— Intuition < — >

└ Detection 1

— Special

└ Luck 2

└ Divine Protection MAX

“Just as I thought.”

Like he had imagined, spending 3 points wasn’t the end of it.

When Haruki tapped again, the explanation for the “Tree Enhancement” function appeared just like before, confirming the point distribution.

<< You can amplify the skills under this tree (MAX: 10) >>

What was written in the explanation was almost as Haruki imagined.

After that, Haruki tapped on his own tree.

Karaboshi Haruki (27) Gender: Male

Skill Points: 6 → 3

Class: Hidden Sword King

Divine Protection: Overthrowing God <Medjed>

— Vitality < — >

└ Stamina 3

└ Natural Recovery 2

— Strength < — >

└ Strength 5

— Agility < — > → < + 1 >

└ Quickness 5

└ Dexterity 5

— Technology < — >

└ Equipment Mastery

| └ One-handed Sword 5

| └ Throwing 2

| └ Light Armor Mastery 5

└ Kicking 2

└ Stealth 3 → 4

└ Imitating 3

— Intuition < — >

└ Detection 5

└ Weakness Exploit MAX

— Special

└ Growth Acceleration MAX

└ Taming 2

└ Divine Protection MAX

Choosing the tech tree with the most skills would have been more efficient.

— But, but!

— The Stealth skill is in that tree!

— That is one tree I cannot ever allow myself to enhance!!

Therefore, Haruki enhanced his Agility tree for the time being.

Agility is a necessary skill to have in order to fight with a short sword. There was no harm in raising it.

After putting away his Skill Board, Haruki side-stepped lightly.

“Hmm... It does feel different...”

He was clearly more agile than before.

The change he was feeling was the same as, or even better than, the one he felt when he equipped the feather decoration he obtained after defeating the Big Kokko.

This effect would increase even further as the skill raised to +2, +3, and so on.

Normally, skills increased with battles and training.

But what about this “Tree Enhancement”?

If this could only be raised with the Skill Board, it would be better to prioritize it and use his skill points on that rather than allocating them to normal skills.

3 points was expensive, but if that didn’t grow naturally, it would be worth more than 3 points.

“How about you, Karen?”

“I think it’s easier for me to handle my power.”

Karen took out her staff and began to pump magical power into it.

Apparently, she was able to do it more smoothly than before.

Something tapped on Haruki’s shoulder.

“Hmm?”

As he turned to check, he saw Rhea shaking her leaves.

It was as if she was trying to tell him “Don’t forget about me!”

Esta was poking at Haruki’s belly as if saying “I’m here too!”

He was wagging his tail, full of curiosity and anticipation.

Seeing those two’s lovable behavior, Haruki couldn’t help but burst into laughter.

— Okay.

— Then let’s improve both Esta and Rhea’s skills!

Rhea (1) Gender: Female

Skill Points: 3 → 0

Class: Dual Wielding Leaf Demon

Divine Protection: Guardian Deity of Underground Treasures <Ptah>

— Vitality < — >

└ Stamina 1

└ Natural Recovery 0

— Strength < — >

└ Strength 5

— Agility < — >

└ Quickness 2

└ Dexterity 3

— Technology < — > → < + 1 >

└ Equipment Mastery

└ Throw 5

└ Double Throw 4

— Intuition < — >

└ Detection 1

— Special

└ Treasure Chest 2

└ Divine Protection MAX

Rhea's main form of attack was her throwing ability, so he enhanced that tree.

Esta (0) Gender: Male

Skill Points: 3 → 0

Class: Hard Shell Bug

Divine Protection: God of Extermination (Shinchu)

— Vitality < — >

└ Stamina 1

└ Natural Recovery 1

└ Quarantine 1

— Strength < — > → < + 1 >

└ Strength 3

└ Damage Reduction 7

— Agility < — >

└ Quickness 5

└ Dexterity 1

— Technology < — >

└ Equipment Mastery

└ Carapace 7

— Intuition < — >

└ Detection 1

— Special

└ Armor Break 3

└ Divine Protection MAX

Esta was a tank. He had skills like Carapace and Armor Break, but efficiency-wise, it was better to enhance his Strength tree, where he had his Damage Reduction skill.

Both of them were fluttering their leaves and tail each, showing their excitement for having their skills enhanced.

“Hmm!”

“ ... ”

At that moment, that pending question that had been escaping Haruki's memory forcibly pushed itself into his consciousness.

CHAPTER 99

LET'S WATCH OUT FOR THOSE WICKED TREE ROOTS!

While pressing his fingers against his temples as if bearing an intense headache, Haruki directed his gaze upon Karen's pocket.

"Well, well! Lady Rhea is shining more beautifully than ever!"

Chep emerged from Karen's pocket, with her eyes sparkling as she looked up at Rhea.

How was she making that beautiful voice? Chep's soprano voice echoed beautifully throughout the dungeon.

Upon hearing Chep's voice, Rhea's leaves slumped as if they had lost their strength.

It was as if she had heard someone singing off key.

Letting out a sigh, Haruki swiped the Skill Board's screen once again.

Then...

"Thought so..."

Chep (0) Gender: Female

Normally, the Skill Board can show the stats of someone who shares Haruki's race, or if they have allied themselves with Haruki.

The Skill Board wouldn't show the skills of wild monsters.

The fact that Chep's skills appeared on the board meant that she had allied herself with Haruki.

— What a nuisance...

Haruki was at his wits' end.

The only moment when a monster's skills appeared on the Skill Board was after it had been successfully tamed by Haruki.

Did he tame Chep without realizing?

At one point, Haruki had wished for Chep's fillets and roe.

But that alone shouldn't have made the taming successful.

For the taming to be successful, both parties would need to agree to it.

Did Chep want to go with Haruki?

Haruki didn't think that could be possible.

Although she seemed to worship Rhea, Chep didn't seem to care much for Haruki.

If anything, she could only see Haruki as a brute.

A mere touch with his hand would be all she needed to yell "Nooooo !!"

— If she hates it so much, she can go off somewhere and disappear for all I care...

So, did Chep bond with Haruki through Rhea, just like Esta?

Haruki felt that could be a bit of a stretch.

The day before, when returning from Kamui Rock to the starting point, Haruki somehow felt that he could just leave Chep there.

It was a similar sensation as the one he had when he linked with Rhea and Esta.

In other words, Haruki may have already tamed Chep by the time he arrived at Kamui Rock.

— What the...

The more he thought about it, the more dark things spreaded in Haruki's chest.

After pulling himself together, Haruki looked at Chep's tree.

Chep (0) Gender: Female

Skill Points: 1

Class: Cursed Fish

Safeguard: Hero God <Samaikuru>

— Vitality < — >

└ Stamina 0

└ Natural Recovery 1

— Strength < — >

└ Strength 0

— Shamanism < — >

└ Shamanism 1

└ Shamanism Compatibility 1

└ Shamanism Manipulation 1

— Agility < — >

└ Quickness 0

└ Dexterity 0

— Technology < — >

└ Equipment Mastery

└ Fillet 1

└ Fish Scales 1

— Intuition < — >

└ Detection 0

— Special

└ Princess 1

└ Safeguard MAX

└ Spirit Non

“Hmm!?”

There were many strange things all over the place.

As Haruki advanced to the middle sections of a dungeon, he obtained a “Divine Protection”.

But Chep instead had a “Safeguard”. It was the first time he had seen such a skill.

Just like Divine Protection, the name of the god it was related to appeared at the top of the tree, indicating that Divine Protection and Safeguard may be similar skills.

So what was the difference between them?

The description of Divine Protection was “The ability to use part of a god’s power as your own”.

On the other hand, the description of Safeguard was “The ability to obtain a god’s protection.”

— Their names are a bit misleading, but does this mean that Divine Protection is offensive, while Safeguard is defensive?

From the explanation, Divine Protection seemed to be a better skill than Safeguard.

— In that case, could it be that she was assigned a Safeguard instead of a Divine

Protection when she entered a middle section...?)

Then Haruki had been lucky to have received a Divine Protection.

Up until that point, Haruki had been able to survive several battles by a hair's breadth.

If he had obtained a Safeguard instead of a Divine Protection, he could have died somewhere along the way.

Leaving that aside, it was weird that someone like Chep –who appeared in the woods of Asahikawa where there was no middle section– not only had a skill similar to a Divine Protection, but she had it MAXed as well.

The (unfortunate) god who gave Chep his protection was Samaikuru.

He was the Ainu god who defeated the evil god in Kamuikotan.

He was so confident that he once said, "I can see every corner of the country, there is no genius like me."

A wildly brutal god who had been called a fool, his achievements were comparable to those of Okikurumi.

Kamui Rock was created by Samaikuru's attack when he defeated the evil god in Kamuikotan. He certainly was a powerful deity

While Samaikuru had the qualities of a hero, he had too much power and ended up overdoing it. From this, Haruki thought that he was a narcissist and careless god.

The first salmon of the season, which was caught in Kamuikotan, would be offered as gratitude to Samaikuru for having defeated the evil god that appeared in Kamuikotan.

In other words, that would be Chep.

Could it be that Chep got Samaikuru's Safeguard because she had acted according to the myths?

Surprisingly, the level of a Divine Protection or a Safeguard might increase naturally as one gets closer to their patron god.

What “getting closer” to one’s patron god may differ greatly depending on each god, or possibly on each myth.

In certain myths, “getting closer” to a god is a metaphor for “death”, so one must exercise extra care when trying to get closer to such gods.

“...”

For a moment, Haruki was lost in thought about his favorite god.

Changing his focus, Haruki followed the tree with his eyes.

The next thing that caught Haruki’s eyes was Shamanism.

Looking at its tree, it looked similar to Karen’s Magic Power.

Shamanism generally refers to a “profession” that communicates with supernatural beings, but it can also refer to an “ideology” based on supernatural phenomena.

Was it an attack-type, a buff type, or a debuff-type skill?

It was hard to tell just by looking at its name.

— Let’s check it out later when I send Chep off into battle.

But would Chep obey Haruki’s command smoothly?

Haruki could imagine Chep screaming “Noooo!!” and squirming back to Karen’s pocket as soon as he tried to send her out into battle.

She had Fillet and Fish Scales as skills under the Technology tree, and Haruki assumed those would be some kind of racial skills.

Though Haruki wasn’t quite able to imagine exactly how one attacks with fillets...

But the biggest problem was that “Princess” skill.

The word “Princess” in the Skill Board looked like a desecration of the term.

Haruki felt like apologizing to all of the people and things called “Princess” in the

world.

Frustrated, Haruki tapped on the “Princess” skill.

Princess 1 “Grants the ability to squirm away from certain death.”

“I see...”

After reading the skill’s description, Haruki understood its effect (though he really didn’t want to understand it).

When that black Fishman swooped down from the sky...

Chep had definitely been crushed underfoot by it.

Then, she ended up buried inside Kamui Rock.

But still, she ended up being alive after all that, probably because of that Princess skill.

Such a bothersome character had obtained quite a bothersome skill.

Was that Samaikuru’s doing as well?

Haruki wanted to object to whoever was responsible for giving Chep such a skill.

— How’s this thing a princess?

Was “Princess” the ability to avoid death only once per battle? Or was it the ability to avoid dying all the time?

The latter option would mean that Chep was a fish that could never die or be killed, so Haruki had hopes that it was the former option instead.

And finally, under the Special tree, there was the “Spirit” skill

No explanation came after tapping on it.

Also, the skill’s level was mysteriously labelled as “Non”.

Despite being a demihuman, which usually appeared in the middle section of a

dungeon, Chep's skill level was rather low overall.

— So, was that “Spirit” skill something that benefited from Chep's overall low skill level?

Haruki was intrigued by that skill, but since it wasn't a skill he could allocate points to, or have its tree enhanced, there was no more information about the Skill he could get for the time being.

There seemed to be no other choice but to see things as they were for a while.

The dungeon in Asahikawa, Kamuikotan, was 10 floors deep.

The monsters there posed an average level of threat, and it didn't seem to be a dungeon that was very difficult to capture for a well-trained adventurer.

However, for adventurers who have never been active in this dungeon, it would seem to be more difficult than a normal dungeon.

The reason for that was the dungeon's layout.

“Looks like there's nothing we can do...”

“That's true...”

After reaching the 4th floor, Haruki and others couldn't proceed to the 5th floor even though they continued searching for a while.

Up to the 3rd floor, the inside is the same as a normal dungeon, but on the 4th floor, the roots of trees would block the adventurers' path.

A large number of tree roots extended from the ceiling and covered the walls.

The path ahead was straight, but the tree roots were in the way.

When searching for an alternative path, it would too be covered by tree roots.

It was possible to cut through the roots in order to proceed.

However, as soon as the roots are cut, other roots would move as if they had a will of

their own and take their place.

For that reason, it was better not to cut as few roots as possible in order to clear this floor.

The tree roots seemed to move on their own from time to time.

Roots that would be blocking the road would clear away, and go close off another path in front of an adventurer.

The movement of the roots seemed to be completely random.

With a little luck, they should have been able to reach the 10th floor in a single day, but Karen's Luck skill didn't seem to be showing its true potential.

Haruki wondered if the tree roots had a higher Luck skill stat.

Karen's Luck skill was, so to speak, the power to draw in invisible factors.

If that power can exert its influence in all directions, it will eventually be able to twist the gods' arms.

But it was reasonable to think that it would have some limitations.

The skill's effect might change depending on the distance and time

Or perhaps, while the Luck skill was affecting one event, it can't affect a different event.

It wouldn't be strange for that skill to have such limitations.

In that case, on what event was Karen's Luck skill currently working on?

How were they going to manage to avoid the tree roots using the power of Luck?

Haruki thought hard about these things, but couldn't come to a conclusion. It was useless to keep thinking about it.

Haruki was grasping at straws about what to do about those tree roots.

It almost made him want to rely on unclear powers.

— Well, is there any other way we can deal with these tree roots?

As Haruki thought about it, a certain keyword emerged in his brain.

“Shamanism”

If it was the power to communicate with supernatural beings, it would be possible to use it to drive those tree roots away.

“Hey, Chep. Can you do something about these tree roots with your ability?”

“My ability?”

“That’s right. Can you use your Shamanism?”

“Shama-neesm? What’s that?”

Chep seemed confused.

And she seemed to be honest about it.

Could it be that she didn’t know about her Shamanism skill?

Or perhaps she knew it under a different name...?

“You’ve seen Karen’s attack many times, right?”

“Yes. It’s rather weird, but very powerful indeed.”

“Can you do something similar to that power? For example, can you remove tree roots with it?”

Haruki knew his question was a desperate one.

And Chep’s answer was...

“I can’t.”

...A quick denial.

“I am powerless. The most I can do about it is pray, I suppose.”

— So, you’re basically a deadbeat.

— I see, I see.

— What a worthless fish.

Haruki clicked his tongue.

“Huh!? I’m feeling some very rude vibes!”

“Must be your imagination. Come on, let’s hurry.”

Was it that she had the ability but didn’t know how to use it, or does she know her Shamanism skill under a different name?

Or was she such a good actress that she had managed to deceive Haruki...?

In the end, he couldn’t manage to get any more information regarding the Shamanism skill.

It would have been great if he could have avoided those tree roots using Chep’s ability, but there was nothing he could do about her not being able to help.

Pulling himself together, Haruki went back to exploring the dungeon.

CHAPTER 100

LET'S GET HEALED IN THE HOT SPRINGS!

They continued to explore for a while, but they couldn't move forward at all because of those tree roots.

To make things worse, monsters would appear through the roots and attack Haruki and the others one after another.

"This is mentally exhausting..."

"Yeah..."

The monsters that appeared were Black Raccoons.

No matter how many of them came through the tree roots to attack them, they could hardly be considered a threat.

However, as soon as the Black Raccoons found Haruki, they would throw themselves at him in a futile attempt to fight him.

They were like a swarm of mosquitoes trying to suck him out of blood.

He wasn't excited at all about fighting such weaklings.

With uninterested eyes, Haruki defeated one Black Raccoon after the other as if he was placing dandelions over a stream of sashimi placed on a conveyor belt.

Karen, who had the resolve to always follow Haruki without complaining, also had a certain shadow cast over her smile.

Just as Haruki, she seemed to be tired of the situation they were in.

It's very painful to keep doing simple work that never ends.

It was mentally exhausting.

“What should we do?”

“We still have to consider your physical condition, so it may be a good idea to go back and think of a plan.”

Haruki’s body became stiff at the memory of the sharp pain he used to feel.

If something like that were to happen during this battle, it could prove to be fatal.

— It may be a good idea to not overdo it and go back for now.

Haruki accepted Karen’s suggestion.

“...I see.”

Also, if they were to go back to the inn and search online, they could find information that might prove useful on this floor.

Haruki nodded and proceeded to turn back.

However...

“Agh!”

The path they had used to get there had been blocked by tree roots.

— But we just came through here a few moments ago!

Haruki dropped his shoulders and searched for a different path.

One by one, the tree roots had blocked Haruki’s path, as if laughing at him for wanting to quickly leave the dungeon.

Haruki and the others loitered around the dungeon for about two hours, as if the dungeon itself was toying with them.

Did the dungeon get bored of playing around with them, or did Karen’s Luck come into play after all?

The road ahead opened just before Haruki ran out of willpower, and they finally

reached the 5th floor.

“What have we done to deserve this...?”

After reaching the 5th floor, Haruki didn't feel like exploring any further, so he activated the gate and quickly returned to the inn.

— I'll have to soak in the hot springs just to restore my willpower...



After entering the open-air bath, Haruk soaked in the rock bath up to his shoulders and sighed deeply.

“I want to eat something delicious...”

Haruki was craving a lavish meal.

The food at the hotel wasn't bad at all. He didn't know how it was before the Stampede, but nowadays, there were dishes that were worth their price.

However, the quality of the food provided at the hotel was inferior to what Haruki could produce out of harvesting in the garage dungeon.

Haruki, who always enjoyed ingredients of the highest quality, was not satisfied with the taste of the hotel's food.

He had been able to put up with it so far, but this time around, Haruki was mentally exhausted after being played around with by the dungeon.

Because of that, his desire for delicious food seemed to break through the limits of his patience.

“But it's not as if I can do something about it...”

Haruki had yet to reach the deepest section of Kamuikotan.

He didn't want to go back to K-Town just because he wanted to eat delicious food, because doing that would mean that he had lost the battle of fortitude against the dungeon.

For a while, he'll have to put up with the bland taste of the hotel's food.

With that in mind, Haruki's sighing became deeper and deeper.

Kamui Spring's open-air bath, where Haruki was enjoying the hot springs, had a men's bath on the east side and a women's bath on the west side.

The men's and women's baths were surrounded by a high wall, but there was an open space between them.

It was a mixed bath that connected the men's and women's baths, as if it was some kind of landing to a stairway to heaven.

The women's bath cannot be peeked at from the men's bath, no matter what angle one would try to look from. But the mixed bath was a different story.

Haruki could feel somebody was in the mixed bath.

He could hear the sound of water droplets splashing around from time to time.

— Don't tell me...

Did she get into the mixed bath by herself?

But how? Why?

Haruki slowly and quietly approached the mixed bath while watching out for Esta, who was playing in the tub.

The craving for delicious food had completely disappeared from Haruki's head.

After all, Haruki was a man.

And so, he wasn't a dead man who wasn't moved by the idea of a mixed bath.

Haruki's nostrils swole at the thought of those two words, "mixed bath".

"Hmph..."

Haruki wasn't into masks so much that he would wear his mask while soaking in a hot

spring.

Therefore, he was not wearing his mask at the moment.

And without his mask, Haruki was a man with an extremely low presence.

Supposing that a woman enjoying the hot waters of the mixed bath would fail to notice someone like Haruki, it wouldn't actually be Haruki's fault.

— That's right, it wouldn't be my fault!

— It would be her fault for not noticing me!!

There was a sign at the entrance leading to the mixed bath, that read "Please follow the etiquette and enjoy your bath quietly."

— I came here to enjoy the hot springs.

— I'm not soaking in the hot springs with unscrupulous thoughts at all!

— I'm not going to stare or anything like that!!

"Kuhuhuh!"

— Calm down, calm down!

Haruki pulled himself together and resisted the urge to laugh.

Having regained his composure, Haruki readied himself to enter the mixed bath.

There, he found a woman with an unmistakable figure.

"..."

A completely naked woman was taking a bath in the mixed bath.

Though she was a fish-woman...

"..."

Seeing Chep floating in the hot water of the mixed bath caused Haruki's eyes to twitch.

— I knew it!

— What on earth are you doing here!?

Half-frustrated, Haruki quickly took Chep to the men's bath with him.

After taking her out of the hot springs, he threw a bucket of water at her.

"Haaahpew!? Uhh... I thought I was going to die!"

Haruki seemed a bit disappointed with the fact that she only thought she was going to die.

But on the other hand, he was relieved that she didn't.

It would have been a nightmare to have an acquaintance of his boil to death in the hot springs.

"I'm glad you're safe. But why did you come here?"

"Huh? Did you hear something?"

"Hey!!"

Blinking, Chep stared at Haruki, perhaps because she had finally noticed his existence when he yelled at her.

"Ahhhhh!! I'm being disgraced by a molester!!"

"Shut up!"

"Ngyooh!!"

Haruki bonked Chep on the head with his fist.

It was dangerous to be called a molester in an open-air bath where everyone could hear you scream.

It would be best to avoid behaviors that would get the police being called on them.

“How terrible! To be approached by a naked gentleman, then splashed at, and punched at when trying to call for help...”

“You’re the terrible one!”

— What’s wrong with you...?

Haruki felt an intense headache as he saw Chep drooping and covering her face with both hands.

Sure, Haruki was barely hiding his important spots with a cloth, but that was because he was in a hot spring.

He didn’t have such a mentality that would make him feel comfortable to walk in his birthday suit around others.

The reason he had splashed at her was in order to save her, and the reason for him bonking her in the head was just to shut her up.

He by no means had any outrageous intentions.

He was being falsely accused.

“*stares*”

— Hmm?

Chep seemed to be looking at Haruki through her fingers as her hands still covered her face.

When Haruki looked at that, Chep yelled “Nooooo♪” and closed her fingers, blushing.

— This fish...

— Should I give her another bonk on the head?

— But at full force this time.

“...Why were you soaking in the hot springs? Didn't Karen tell you to wait quietly in the room?”

“She did tell me. But I was just attracted by the magic of these hot springs, so...”

The magic of these hot springs.

Those words caught Haruki's interest.

Akane had told Haruki that if he soaked in the hot water that sprang from the dungeon, the hindrances caused by the rapid leveling up would be improved.

Soaking in the hot springs had actually freed Haruki from the pain caused by the Level-Up sickness.

Could it be that his condition had improved like that because the hot springs have magical power?

“This is the magic of these hot springs, which are so great for the skin!”

“So that was it...”

— And here I was, getting my hopes up. I feel like an idiot now.

Haruki hung his head in disappointment.

Certainly, this hot spring was said to have a beautiful effect on the skin.

However, it was a mystery whether it was effective for a fish like Chep.

“It was so cruel of Karen to forbid me from soaking in these hot springs that are so great for the skin! I'm sure she's afraid I'll become even much more beautiful than I already am!!”

“...”

— How do you manage to be so wrong all the time?

— You really don't have much going for you other than Samaikuru's Safeguard, don't you?

Haruki breathed out a deep sigh.

“Listen here, Chep. This isn’t the woods. We’re in the middle of a city where humans live. If you run off somewhere without having either me or Karen around, some other human might see you, and then another adventurer will come and kill you. That’s why Karen told you to stay in the room, and that’s why I don’t want you going off on your own.”

“I... I see.”

“If you get it, then don’t ever go off on your own, okay?”

After saying that, Haruki went back to soaking in the hot springs.

Now probably aware of her situation, Chep walked around the porch of the hot springs while dropping her shoulders.

As she approached the mixed bath...

“Hey, where do you think you’re going?”

Moving quickly, Haruki grabbed Chep by her head.

“I-I’m going back to the princess’ hot springs!”

“Did you hear what I said?”

“I did. You’re really worried about me going off on my own, right? Ehehe.”

With cold eyes, Haruki looked down at Chep, who was wriggling her limbs while hanging from her head by Haruki.

— Don’t you ever feel ashamed of yourself...?

“So why are you going off on your own, then?”

“I’m a princess! Isn’t it natural for me to go to the princess’ hot springs?”

“It doesn’t matter if you go to the men’s bath or the women’s bath. No one will care about your gender if they see you.”

“Huh!? I’m feeling some very rude vibes again.”

“Must be your imagination again.”

During their conversation, Haruki gave off instructions to Esta.

Esta would be in charge of making sure Chep didn’t escape.

Having left Chep under Esta’s supervision, Haruki went back to soaking in the hot springs.

However...

“Let me go! I don’t want to be in the gentlemen’s math! Waaahh!!”

Even though he was in the hot springs for a change of pace, Haruki had no time to relax.

CHAPTER 101

LET'S GET THE INGREDIENT THAT HAS THE SPIRIT OF HOKKAIDO!

Having returned from the hot springs, Haruki exhaustedly booted up his computer.

In order to defeat the Kamuikotan dungeon, it was absolutely necessary to do something about those tree roots.

When he searched for “How to end the life of tree roots”, he got thousands of results.

Not all of those results were related to the tree roots of Kamuikotan. Dubious pages such as “Killer for hire” and “Twelve ways you can kill somebody” had appeared as well.

He picked up only those related to Kamuikotan.

Even then, it was more than a hundred results to check.

Several adventurers who were well-known for being adept at defeating dungeons expressed their great stress and frustration regarding those tree roots.

Blog after blog, words of deeply held resentment were written all over the place.

Haruki had fallen victim to those tree roots as well.

Sympathizing with the authors of those blogs, tears began to form in his eyes as he read about their hardships.

— I have to purify and destroy those tree roots by any means necessary...

“Ah... I almost forgot what I was actually looking for.”

Pulling himself together, Haruki went back to searching for a strategy that would help him defeat the dungeon.

The fight between adventurers and those tree roots had a long history.

In the past, adventurers have tried several things in their battles against the tree roots in Kamuikotan.

Some sprinkled powerful herbicides, while others tried cutting the tree roots down with their swords.

The herbicide strategy didn't go so well.

Those who tried cutting them down could never completely get rid of them.

Both strategies resulted in the tree roots to retaliate and block those adventurers' path, making so they couldn't escape the dungeon for a while.

In those sad stories of their battles, some adventurers finally realized what would work against those tree roots.

Fire.

Of course, it wouldn't be just normal fire.

They had already tried using normal fire before.

When a certain adventurer used a torch while approaching those tree roots, the roots tried to avoid the adventurer.

Since then, all the adventurers who have defeated Kamuikotan were said to have dived into the dungeon with a torch in their hands.

Those torches needed to be made out of a piece of those tree roots.

It was believed that when you approach them with a lit torch made from those tree roots, the tree roots feel scared as if they were being burned.

It was the same as when placing a scarecrow in a garbage collection site.

By using it as a visual threat, it is possible to avoid mischief in such sites out of fear of ending up like the scarecrow.

Seeing that information, Haruki instinctively clenched his fist.

It was a pity that he couldn't annihilate them, but at least he had found a way to avoid those pesky tree roots!



【Demihumans and beast-like】 Elf Enthusiasts Unite! 4 【Warm Welcome!】

1 Name: Anonymous looked down on by a noble elf

This thread is an adventure record about the demihumans and beast-like found in the dungeon.

Our first goal is to discover an elf girl, which are shy creatures that have yet to be seen in a dungeon, but it's okay to talk about other demihuman and beast-like girls.

However, elf fundamentalists are not allowed. In addition, those who transgress others' creeds or religious views will be banned.

Let's make an effort to find an elf girl in the dungeon while acknowledging our love of elves!

2 Name: Anonymous looked down on by a noble elf

This may be just a report, but I've found a demihuman lady

Moreover, she seems to be a princess

3 Name: Anonymous looked down on by a noble elf

>> 1 Let's make a great record!

>> 2 Really!? I want the details!!

4 Name: Anonymous looked down on by a noble elf

At last!!

How does that story end?

The first post was already the best one lol

5 Name: Anonymous looked down on by a noble elf

Is she arrogant!?

6 Name: Anonymous looked down on by a noble elf

She's a salmon Fishwoman about 30 cms tall

She's not a mermaid though. More like a fish with legs and arms...

7 Name: Anonymous looked down on by a noble elf

Ok no

8 Name: Anonymous looked down on by a noble elf

>> 2 How worthless

9 Name: Anonymous looked down on by a noble elf

Come on, you had us hoping for something like that?

Give me back my hopes and dreams!

10 Name: Anonymous looked down on by a noble elf

>> 2 This guy has betrayed the dreams of all of us who love demihuman girls

Don't you ever wish you could get all lovey-dovey with a demihuman girl?

11 Name: Anonymous looked down on by a noble elf

>> 10 I just came up with a dream like that

It was a dream where a Fishwoman who called herself a princess would approach me

Well, it was more of a nightmare...

12 Name: Anonymous looked down on by a noble elf

Ah...

So you two are pretty close, I see...

My bad...

13 Name: Anonymous looked down on by a noble elf

Are we supposed to be of the same mind?

Give me a break...



The next day, Haruki quickly went to a tool shop near the dungeon.

It was affiliated to the tool shop in Sapporo.

Several mysterious items were put on display in this shop as well.

Among those items, Haruki found the torches made using those tree roots, and purchased 10 of them.

“You bought a little too many of these, Karaboshi...”

“Karen. We’re heading into the dungeon. There’s no over-preparation when it comes to equipment and items!”

“Ah... Hah...”

Contrary to the shocked Karen, Haruki’s body was full of energy.

With these torches, they should be able to defeat the dungeon without any frustrations or stress.

Haruki, both an adventurer and someone who loves adventuring, could finally see himself going further into the dungeon, so it was no wonder he would be so full of energy.

With a torch in hand, they headed towards the ticket gate and went down to the 5th floor.

As soon as they passed through the gate, the tree roots obstructed their path.

“Hehehe...”

— You may have tormented me a lot yesterday, but it’ll be a different story today!

Without delay, Haruki ignited the torch.

As soon as he did that, the tree roots began to stir slightly.

“Ohh!”

The torch was more than 10 meters away from the tree roots.

Despite that, the tree roots squirmed, and those close to the torch had already begun to withdraw.

It had been more of a nervous reaction than Haruki had imagined.

“This should make defeating this dungeon much easier.”

“Yeah. I can’t wait!”

“Ah, Karaboshi... Try not to be too enthusiastic about this, okay?”

Karen smiled bitterly.

Her reaction reminded Haruki that he couldn’t fight using his full strength until recently.

Those tree roots had been so frustrating that Haruki had completely forgotten about the pain he used to feel.

If his sharp pain returned, he could be rendered completely defenseless by it.

Did his fear of being in pain get alleviated a bit because of the frustration he felt with those tree roots?

— I don't think I should feel grateful to those roots for it, though...

Haruki checked his physical condition by closing and opening his hands.

However, he didn't feel any anxiety or fear of pain.

— I think I can fight with all my strength without any problems.

“Yeah. Got it.”

However, he couldn't allow himself to make Karen worry too much.

For the time being, Haruki etched the word “prudence” in his mind.

The monsters that appeared on the 5th floor were Killer Rabbits.

While Karen and Rhea dealt with the Killer Rabbits, Haruki worked hard to keep the roots at bay with his torch while gently petting Esta's head, who was sad about not being able to participate in the attack.

From the 6th floor onwards, the monsters that appeared were Silver Wolves.

They were just as strong as the ones in the garage dungeon and on the 6th floor of Chikaho.

They wouldn't pose too much of a threat if Haruki and the others stayed on their toes.

Haruki and the others were able to pass through this floor without any issues, now that being blocked by tree roots or monsters wasn't a problem anymore.

“Hmm...”

“What's wrong?”

Haruki tilted his head to the side as he went down the stairs.

Curious about what was going through Haruki's head, Karen squinted.

“I don't think we've seen a boss in this dungeon yet.”

“Right... We haven’t come across any bosses yet. Is this a dungeon that has no bosses?”

“No, there must be a boss somewhere...”

If they don’t find any bosses in the dungeon, there could only be one explanation.

Another adventurer who was exploring the dungeon had already defeated them.

It was said that it could take hours and even days for a boss to respawn after being defeated.

So, the fact that there were no bosses around meant that they had already been defeated before Haruki arrived at the dungeon.

“Aw... And we’ve come all this way here, I thought we might as well fight the boss...”

“That’s right... At least I’d like to see if there’s a boss on the 10th floor.”

The bosses that appeared in the deepest part of a dungeon, commonly known as Dungeon Lords, were different from regular section bosses.

The difference depends on each dungeon, but it was said that the one that appeared in Kamuikotan was the kind of boss who would reward adventurers for their hard work after having reached the 10th floor.

Information about Kamuikotan’s Dungeon Lord was posted on WIKI, but it was tagged as a spoiler.

The real thrill of an adventurer is to meet the unknown.

There are only a few adventurers who would willingly throw that thrill away.

Besides, the opponent would be the Dungeon Lord. Even though all he knew about it was its name, it was out of the question for Haruki to check it out by himself.

Surely, he would like to meet the Dungeon Lord himself if possible.

“I hope the Dungeon Lord is still there...”

“Same here.”

“If the respawn time is always the same, whoever defeats a boss first could potentially come back to defeat it again as soon as it respawns. They would monopolize the boss.”

“That would be the worst...”

Hopefully, the Dungeon Lord of Kamuikotan was a type of monster that couldn't be monopolized.

Haruki couldn't do much more than hope that was the case.

After arriving at the 7th floor, Haruki and others activated the gate and proceeded.

Haruki's Detection picked up the presence of something fluffy up ahead.

It was the shape of a monster Haruki had never felt before.

“What's this?”

Haruki raised his face and closed his eyes.

A white thing appeared from the other side of the road where a large number of tree roots were entwined with the wall.

“A sh—”

Haruki trembled.

The torch fell from his hand.

White fluffy hair and a black face.

The monster he had felt was...

“A sheep!!”

Haruki became fiercely excited about the sheep monster he had found.

— Wait up, raw lamb!

Lamb chops, lamb tongue, mutton and veggies!!

“Huh!?”

As his butt became numb, Haruki regained consciousness.

The sheep was naked bare, and there was a lot of wool around.

The sheep monster that he had found looked pitiful as it lay dead in front of Haruki.

“What... What just happened!?”

He couldn't remember a thing.

Haruki tilted his head to the side, utterly puzzled.

However, the monster's corpse was still hot.

It was the heat of having fought with all its strength.

“Oh well...”

— Let's break it apart for the time being!

Haruki cheerfully began to chop the sheep up.

“You seem to be having a lot of fun, Karaboshi.”

“_!”

Haruki heard a chilling voice from behind, cold enough to quickly freeze a burning body.

The frightened Haruki's body started to shake as he looked back, like a machine running out of oil.

“Ka... Karen!?”

“You haven't been very prudent now, have you?”

“What do you mean? I have, haven't I?”

As Haruki awkwardly forced a polite smile on his face, Karen's own smile became even fiercer.

"Do you call this 'prudence'?"

Karen pointed to her side.

There was a lot of sheep –all stripped bare– lying around the field.

There seemed to be about 40 sheep in total.

"...How did this happen!?"

"You did this, Karaboshi!"

— Sorry, I can't remember a thing.

Trembling, Haruki kept on shaking his head in denial.

Karen exhaled a deep sigh, wondering what was going through Haruki's head.

CHAPTER 102

LET'S ENJOY THE FOOD THAT HAS THE SPIRIT OF HOKKAIDO!

Since they had gotten themselves some lamb meat, Haruki decided to stop exploring for the day.

After all, he had obtained lamb meat, which was considered to be an ingredient filled with the spirit of Hokkaido.

He couldn't help the need of enjoying it while it was still fresh.

They had obtained 101 sheep in total.

After stuffing them into the magic bag, they ended up filling it up completely.

The excuse Haruki used to go back at that time was that they were so packed that they wouldn't be able to get another item into their inventory.

Of course, that was way more than they could eat, but they couldn't let it go to waste.

They kept a single sheep for themselves and sold the rest at the shop.

The clerk of the shop was trembling and seemed to be close to crying, perhaps because she was so deeply moved after seeing such a huge amount of delicious-looking lamb meat.

Haruki then took the remaining one to the hotel, and asked the hotel staff to cook it for him.

The price of lamb from the dungeon doesn't go down easily, so it seems that the people at the hotel didn't have many opportunities to cook it.

When Haruki handed over the lamb, the landlady and the chef seemed to be very pleased.

That night, Haruki fulfilled his heart's desire to have a lavish meal.

The first dish that they brought in was charcoal-grilled lamb.

The oil was slowly melting into the golden-colored meat.

“Looks delicious!”

Thankful for being alive, Haruki and Karen took their first bite.

“Mmmmm!!”

“~~~!”

Haruki cried out, and Fire Lotus couldn't hide the smile as she chewed.

The lamb meat's fat began to melt in their mouth as soon as they took their first bite.

At the same time as the scent of lamb, the scent of charcoal fire filled the area.

That fragrance filled their mouths with joy.

The more they chewed the meat, the more the deliciousness oozed into their mouths.

Unlike mutton, lamb meat had less odor.

Even so, people outside of Hokkaido wouldn't be familiar with its odor, so some people wouldn't be able to eat it because it smelled weird for them.

Haruki thought those people were fools.

— This smell is exactly why lamb meat is so delicious!

“Karen, would it be okay if I had a beer today?”

“Sure.”

“Alright!!”

Haruki joyfully picked up the menu and ordered a jug of beer.

After all, you can't have lamb chops without a beer to go with.

After taking a bite of the lamb, he tried the beer.

"Kuhuuuhh!!"

— That hit the spot!

Haruki had tears in his eyes.

Lamb and beer were the best combination.

"This is so good!!"

"Is that so?"

Karen's eyes were fixed onto the beer jug. She might have been curious about the combination of lamb and beer.

However, she was still a minor.

— You can't drink alcohol until you're twenty!

— You'll have to make do with sodas for now.

Haruki then put a seasoned lamb steak on a plate with a lot of bean sprouts.

Both steam and a sweet fragrance rose the moment the sauce touched the iron plate.

Haruki purred like a cat as his stomach reacted to the smell.

Once it was cooked, he took the meat and bean sprouts and put it on top of some rice.

The rice was from the Nakasatsunai dungeon. Haruki and others had given the hotel an entire sheep, so the chef prepared it specially for them in return.

After scooping up some of that white rice, Haruki gulped down the meat, bean sprouts and rice in one go.

"Mhmm!!"

Haruki felt as if he could almost faint after tasting the delicious mix of sauce, rice and the lamb meat's fat.

The flavor of the sauce soaked into the meat, and the flavor that came out of the meat soaked into the beans.

And the presence of the white rice complements them even more.

It was the strongest combination.

— This is the flavor I've been craving for...!"

Haruki, who hadn't been able to eat dungeon food for more than two weeks, continued to spill tears for some time.

Haruki enjoyed his dish, eating bite after bite while wiping his own tears.

Karen too let her tears fall as she silently enjoyed her own dish.

Next to Haruki, Esta was chewing on a piece of lamb steak while hiding inside a towel. He probably thought it was really delicious, since he was wiggling his tail.

Being lifted up every time he wiggled his tail under the towel, Rhea seemed upset, as if she were about to yell at him "Stop it already!" like an older sister fed up with her younger brother.

It looked like a happy family meal.

Haruki felt at home.

Karen, who was sitting in front of Haruki, was carrying some more lamb meat inside her magic bag.

Chep was in there as well.

From inside the bag, they could hear a sigh that expressed the emotion of enjoying a good meal.

— Why is the one who hadn't moved a finger enjoying her meal like everybody else?

— I can't believe this freeloader fish...

Haruki clicked his tongue.

Before they realized, the delicious lamb dishes the hotel staff had prepared for them were already gone.

"I'm so glad to be alive..."

"This was really something..."

Completely full, Karen and Haruki were deeply moved about having enjoyed such a delicious meal, and felt thankful for being alive.

After emptying their plates, the two of them put their hands together and thanked the chef for all of the delicious dishes he prepared for them.

""Thank you for the meal!!""



【Heaven?】 Regarding the contents of the Gacha balls 61 【Or Hell?】

769 Name: Anonymous who's not getting any rare items anytime soon

I've got this capsule thing in the dungeon

When I opened it, I found a weapon I couldn't have obtained otherwise in it

Is this one of those Gacha balls?

770 Name: Anonymous who's not getting any rare items anytime soon

>> 769

More details!!

771 Name: Anonymous who's not getting any rare items anytime soon

Please explain using the template provided in >> 1

772 Name: Anonymous who's not getting any rare items anytime soon

Alright

[Rank] Intermediate Adventurer

[Place of the drop] Minamiuonuma Dungeon, Niigata

[Capsule's features] Fist-sized, one half of it was red and the other half white

[Item obtained from the Gacha] Greatsword (unidentified)

My main weapon is the Great Sword

This is the first greatsword outside of the high-end series lined up in stores I couldn't equip

I was scared because the greatsword was definitely bigger than the capsule it came out of when I opened it

773 Name: Anonymous who's not getting any rare items anytime soon

So though you're an intermediate adventurer, and you main greatswords, you still can't equip it...

This is just a guess, but it must be of a rarity of SSR at least...

774 Name: Anonymous who's not getting any rare items anytime soon

>> 773

You lucky bastard! I'm so jealous!!

775 Name: Anonymous who's not getting any rare items anytime soon

I don't believe this!

I've spent 10 million yen opening those things and I haven't gotten anything better than those entry-level models!

This is so unfair!!

776 Name: Anonymous who's not getting any rare items anytime soon

You're just pretending you don't know anything, but you're really bragging about it, aren't you?

People like you are better off [deleted by admin]

777 Name: Anonymous who's not getting any rare items anytime soon

Who knows if what he's saying is even true

Don't feed the trolls

778 Name: Anonymous who's not getting any rare items anytime soon

Someone please heal >> 775's heart

I can't just ignore his poor soul...

779 Name: Anonymous who's not getting any rare items anytime soon

No really, it's true

I came here to ask a question and all I get is people calling me a liar anda troll...

780 Name: Anonymous who's not getting any rare items anytime soon

>> 779

Never mind them, they're just mad because you got lucky

They're just jealous because they can't get anything better than lower-than-rare stuff

Just think of it as the price you pay for getting something very rare and move on

781 Name: Anonymous who's not getting any rare items anytime soon

It's been quite some time since a report of a SSR item gpt this rough

Though these kind of reactions are to be expected

Take it easy in the real world, alright?

Because these forums are the only place where these kind of reactions end up this peacefully



The following day, Haruki and the others headed for the dungeon while being sent off with a smile by the manager and the landlady.

Haruki would start on the 7th floor, however the idea was to go straight downstairs.

There was still a lot of lamb meat left in the inn, and they had also supplied a large amount to the stores. There was no need to harvest any more meat at the moment.

After getting down to the 7th floor, Haruki took out one of his torches and headed for the 8th floor.

Since they didn't spend any time hunting sheep, they found the stairs to the 8th floor just before noon.

They would leave this room that had no boss and go to the 8th floor.

After activating the gate, they started exploring.

The monsters that appeared on the 8th floor were dark Silver Wolves.

They seemed to be about the same level of those found on the 7th floor of Chikaho.

They were no rivals for Haruki and the others.

So far, most of the battles other than the battle against the sheep had been carried out only by Karen and Rhea.

Karen was the main attacker, while Rhea provided cover fire.

Karen took this opportunity to train her magic staff attack against opponents she could deal with by herself.

Whenever there were too many monsters for Karen to handle on her own, Rhea would help reduce the number of monsters.

In these battles so far, Karen had been able to considerably reduce the power of her magic staff attack.

Karen poured magical power into her staff in order to attack with it.

The attack power seemed to go up and down depending on the amount of magical power poured into the staff.

That being said, she still wasn't able to control it perfectly.

From time to time, she would whine about putting too much power into her attack and ending up blowing a monster's head up.

Karen's Magic Manipulation level was 5.

And her Magic tree had been enhanced by 1 as well.

Despite that, the reason why it was taking her so long to control it was that her magic staff attack wasn't only affected by her Magic skill.

The skill that affected the actual ability to wield the staff, her Blunt Weapons skill, was at level 1.

Haruki thought that this was the reason why she wasn't being able to control her attack well.

— But since that skill is at level 1, it would be a waste to use the board to add points to it...

It was easy to increase the level of a skill naturally while it's low.

As long as the amount of Skill Points they had was small, there would be no room for spending them carelessly on skills that were easy to increase naturally.

Karen didn't have any Skill Points at the moment.

The easiest way to get new points was to reach the 16th floor of a dungeon.

However, it would be a waste to use points obtained by reaching the 16th floor of a dungeon to raise the level of her Blunt Weapons skill from level 1 to 2.

Besides, Haruki's Skill Board was now capable of enhancing an entire skill tree.

It would be more efficient to invest points into enhancing skill trees that would probably never improve with training, rather than strengthening skills that would eventually improve.

Haruki was now more cautious when it came to allocating skill points.

That's because even though they didn't have many options when it came to obtaining new points, they were getting more options in regard to spending them.

Haruki couldn't help but feel he needed to be more careful with them.

If it's something they could increase naturally by training, then it might be best to just do it like that.

Haruki chased away the thought of using the Skill Board to increase Karen's Blunt Weapons skill, and decided to appreciate Karen's efforts to raise her own skills.

The 9th floor also had Silver Wolves.

They were as strong as the ones found on the 8th floor of Chikaho.

But groups of 4 or 5 appearing at a time were a bit more frequent than their Chikaho counterparts.

Though Kamuikotan had 10 floors, normal monsters only appeared until the 9th floor.

Only the Dungeon Lord appeared on the 10th floor.

After reaching the 9th floor, which was the last floor where they would fight normal monsters, Haruki was excited to see what kind of monsters would appear.

However, he found nothing but more Silver Wolves.

He was really disappointed.

“This is so boring.”

“I don’t think dungeons are supposed to be challenged for fun, though...”

“Hmm.”

Haruki seemed puzzled by Karen’s sudden serious remark.

“But dungeons should at least be somewhat interesting in my opinion...”

“I think you’re on your own on that.”

“Well, then why do other adventurers seem to be looking forward to challenging dungeons?”

“...To save Japan, perhaps?”

Karen glared at Haruki as if asking him not to forget why they were doing this.

Certainly, the number one reason adventurers were allowed to dive into dungeons in the first place was to defeat the dungeons.

However, boys yearn for exploration and adventure.

When Haruki was a kid, he stepped into a nearby mountain with a stick in his hand, calling it an adventure.

He swung the stick around in order to defeat the weeds that looked like monsters for no other purpose than enjoying the situation.

It wasn’t just Haruki.

Like Haruki, other young boys also devoted themselves to various adventures (although in different shapes).

But back then, none of those young boys could have expected that they would actually dive into dungeons and fight real monsters...

If you went back to the past and told those young kids “In the future, you will be diving into dungeons and enjoying true adventures”, they would surely be overjoyed.

That's just how boys are.

Even if they understand the true purpose, they can't help but enjoy going on an adventure more than anything.

Those were the excuses Haruki thought to himself as he tried to escape Karen's cold gaze.

CHAPTER 103

LET'S FIGHT THE LORD OF ASAHIKAWA DUNGEON!

After going through the unmanned boss room, Haruki carefully went down the stairs.

The Dungeon Lord would be waiting ahead.

Haruki became even more nervous just by thinking about that.

At the end of the stairs was a circular hall with a diameter of several hundred meters.

The ceiling seemed to be several tens of meters high as well.

The room descended from the outside towards the center, making it look a bit like a giant earthen mortar.

The dungeon wall was made of rock, and about half of the area was covered with green moss.

The entirety of the 10th floor looked like an empty space that could fit several baseball stadiums.

“There’s no gate...”

Haruki looked around, but he couldn’t find any passages other than the place where they had come from.

Apparently, the Dungeon Lord’s room was not accessible via the gate.

The deepest part of the room seemed to be one step higher than the rest of the floor around it.

It looked like a stage made out of stone.

Since it was in the Dungeon Lord's room, there was sure to be some kind of secret related to it.

Haruki wanted to investigate the stage right away, but he stopped right where he stood and didn't take a single step.

He couldn't move.

A feeling on the nape of his neck told him it was dangerous to move any further.

There was a large tree standing in the middle of the 10th floor, between Haruki and the stage.

The tree was huge like the Jomon cedar that grows naturally on Yakushima.

The large black tree swayed its black leaves even though there was no wind.

"Is this Kamuikotan's Dungeon Lord...?"

Haruki was overwhelmed under the giant tree's intimidating air, and was unable to move.

Behind Haruki, Karen was the same.

She was holding her staff tight and couldn't move a single step.

The giant tree pulled some of its roots out of the ground.

It began to move them around like tentacles as if trying to provoke Haruki and the others.

As soon as he saw the roots, Haruki noticed.

"So this is the one behind all those pesky tree roots..."

"Looks like it..."

At the same time, Haruki and Karen regained their ability to move.

Though they had been completely intimidated just a few moments ago, the surprise

had vanished from their eyes, leaving behind an overwhelming murderous intent.

“How dare you get in the way of my exploration...”

Haruki had seen those tree roots in the dungeon over the past few days.

Haruki, who saw various shapes and noticed small changes and differences, had no way of not noticing after looking at the Lord’s tree roots.

That’s right.

This giant black tree was the one behind those tree roots that grew naturally in Kamuikotan, blocking the path of adventurers.

It was said that this Dungeon Lord was the kind of boss that would reward adventurers for their efforts in reaching the 10th floor, but after all, they must have meant to say that hitting this Dungeon Lord made you feel better.

“Hehehe...”

— In that case, let’s forget about the pains of being endlessly tossed around the dungeon by doing something enjoyable, shall we?

Laughing, Haruki took out his two short swords.

The hatred and murderous intent he was feeling were fully applied to the blades.

Karen was also holding her staff, ready for battle.

Her eyes were also filled with an unusually vivid hatred.

Rhea sat on Haruki’s shoulder, ready to go at a moment’s notice.

Esta was wiggling his tail, eager to go.

After taking a deep breath, Haruki shouted.

“Let’s go!!”

“Yes!!”

With a shout of encouragement, Haruki rushed in with all his strength.

There was some distance left to the Dungeon Lord.

200 meters.

100 meters.

Before Haruki could get any closer to it, the tree furiously slammed its roots at him.

“–Kuh!”

Haruki had never fought a large tree before.

Since it doesn't have muscles or bones, he couldn't predict its movements based on his own experience.

Even so, he made use of his dexterity and avoided the attack at the last moment.

— My body feels so light!

He felt even lighter than when he fought against the black Fishman.

Haruki could quickly feel the effect of his enhanced Agility tree.

Rhea let loose with a barrage of shots just as Haruki dodged the tree's attack.

Her potato stones flew towards its trunk.

But the tree used one of its branches to block the attack.

“Okay!”

Still, Haruki's voice sounded even more excited.

Rhea's potato stones were utterly destroying the branch the boss was using to defend its trunk.

The broken branch slowly fell, making a thunderous sound as it collided with the ground.

It was hard to tell because of the distance, but it seemed that the fallen branch was quite heavy.

The sound of the fall caused Haruki's lungs to shake slightly.

Haruki watched the movement of roots and branches as he approached.

The roots suddenly jumped out of the ground and attacked Haruki.

As he jumped up to avoid them, he shook the branches off as if the tree had taken too much of a careful aim.

Haruki skillfully twisted his body to avoid the attack.

Rhea and Esta followed Haruki when the boss' attack was about to come into contact with them.

Haruki's movements hadn't been optimized for dealing with such an opponent.

For that reason, even avoiding its attacks could leave him wide open.

It was a series of absurd movements for Haruki.

At this rate, he could end up being driven to a corner.

Fighting an unfamiliar opponent highlighted his lack of actual battle experience.

Haruki was unable to make the best out of his increased physical abilities.

It was a lot more work than any monster he had ever fought.

Besides, he was unable to predict its movements at all.

"Damn it!"

Haruki voiced out his frustration, which was the one would feel when they know they can run faster than ever but still can't run fast enough.

Gritting his teeth, Haruki kept dodging the attacks at the last moment.

He couldn't let his guard down for even a millisecond.

However, Haruki was at a loss when it came to avoid being hit by the branches as the tree slammed at him from above.

It was easy to avoid those branches.

However, Haruki's Detection would pick up attacks coming from different angles.

No matter if they come from the right or the left, Haruki would end up taking the tree's attacks.

Haruki had been cornered by the Dungeon Lord, which had blocked his escape earlier than what he could have imagined.

“-Tsk!”

— Should I try to block it!?

Haruki put up his short swords as he crossed his arms in front of his chest.

Just before the branches could hit Haruki...

Vrooom!!

A huge lightning bolt fell above the top of the huge tree.

The Dungeon Lord was slightly stunned by the lightning.

During that time, Haruki barely escaped what would have otherwise been a direct hit.

Haruki wiped out the thick sweat that had fallen alongside his temples.

He had to somehow be able to predict its movements first and foremost.

While he was being attacked by roots and branches, Haruki suddenly began to concentrate and stopped breathing.

Concentrate and consolidate your consciousness.

Dive deeper and deeper inside.

A place severed by all worldly thoughts.

Monochrome, and moving frame by frame.

Use such an extreme world to get to the bottom of your opponent's movements.

Look for signs of slight changes on its bark.

Save it as a video file inside your memory.

Imagine and assume your opponent's movements using that file.

The Detection skill tells of the number of roots and branches, and their speed.

From all the information, deduce a solution to its behavior.

Breathing once again, Haruki wielded his short swords.

A light caught on the back of his eyes.

A slight shock.

Haruki's short sword cut through the light caught by Weakness Exploit.

He avoided the branch attacks from overhead to the right.

Then he back-stepped away from the incoming roots from the right.

He avoided some of the attacks and cut through the others.

Then, for a brief moment, the boss stopped attacking.

A complete void as if it had just been hit by some kind of turbulence.

Haruki had broken through the storm of attacks.

A huge opening was created after he had escaped the boss' aim.

Then...

Vroooooom!!

Ratatatat!!

Karen and Rhea showered the boss with a barrage of attacks.

Karen's lighting hit the boss directly.

Its body began to glow and black smoke started to rise from it.

The branches and roots that were hit by Rhea's attacks were quickly destroyed.

Haruki was quickly accumulating battle experience with this Dungeon Lord.

He had become able to predict movements that cannot be seen by looking at the tree's bark, using only its preliminary movements.

The tree's attacks no longer posed a threat to Haruki.

He could easily get closer to it.

Even so...

"Tsk...!"

Haruki still seemed to have a clouded expression on his face.

— This is bad.

— At this rate, the battle will be over before I can take all of my frustration out on this boss!

That frustration he felt while exploring the dungeon...

Even though he was trying to forget about that by enjoying himself with the boss, Haruki was way behind Karen and Rhea in terms of firepower.

— I have to get rid of this frustration before this is all over!!

Focus and anticipate your opponent's actions.

Guess, assume, imagine.

Haruki instantly got right in front of the tree.

Attempt, act, and retry.

Using both of his short swords, he cut off the tree's roots and leaves one after another.

The roots, thicker than Haruki's body, and the branches and leaves fall to the ground making a thunderous noise.

He had finally been able to catch up with Rhea.

However...

Vroooooom!!

He couldn't catch up with the power of Karen's lightning attacks.

Her attacks burned the tree's branches and leaves, causing the boss to take damage over time.

No matter how much it was ingrained into the ground, it was still a tree after all.

Just like a wooden house on the top of a hill would catch fire after being struck by lightning, so was the Dungeon Lord releasing smoke from all over its body.

Like the rare species of deer, the movement of the Dungeon Lord seemed to be slowing down. Was that due to it being repeatedly hit by the lightning bolts as well?

After all, it seemed that Karen's lightning strikes could have a debuff effect that hindered the opponent's movement.

Moreover, Karen's positioning was perfect.

She would move away from the tree's attacking range and cast her spells as soon as her charging was complete.

This allowed her to concentrate on charging without being the risk of being attacked, and to launch an attack at the perfect timing.

Besides, she was not only dealing damage to the boss.

She would look at Haruki's situation and stun the monster at the right time.

Thanks to this, the threat of the Dungeon Lord's attack had been greatly reduced, and Haruki's offensive posture was less likely to be broken.

Karen was very well matched against the Dungeon Lord, and the way she was fighting maximized her advantage.

Her judgment during battle had improved considerably.

He wasn't just a few laps behind her in the race.

Haruki was unlikely to be able to catch up with her, after she had gained so much momentum.

— It's not enough.

Haruki's attacks on the other hand, felt somewhat lackluster.

His short swords were too short to dig deep into the Dungeon Lord.

It wasn't a matter of sharpness.

He could easily cut through its roots and branches.

But it was simply not enough to cut through its thick trunk.

Even when he did cut through the trunk, it would be nothing but a slight wound for the Dungeon Lord.

He couldn't cut any deeper than a bear's markings.

The blades couldn't reach the core of the trunk.

Its bark was too thick.

The light he could see with Weakness Exploit wasn't bright enough to allow for a fatal wound.

It shouldn't be very surprising.

Short swords were a poor choice when the opponent was a large tree.

If Haruki was a greatsword user instead, he could have done a lot of damage by attacking the trunk with that kind of weapon.

"...Huh!?"

Haruki realized something that took his breath away.

Could it be that "an adventurer that can defeat such a large monster with a single blow" would stand out more than "an adventurer who fights with small weapons"!?

— Damn it.

— Why did I choose to use short swords!?

At that moment, Haruki regretted that his main weapon wasn't the greatsword instead.

This would certainly not be the only super-large monster that appeared in the dungeons.

Haruki could be faced with yet another wall that cannot be overcome with a short sword in the future.

— After this battle is over, I'll train so I can use greatswords as well.

Haruki wondered if he would get the Greatsword skill under his technology tree as well.

But he couldn't waste time thinking about skills he didn't have yet.

Haruki shook the idea away.

— There's nothing I can do about it now. I have to do what I can at the moment.

With tears in his eyes, Haruki accepted the fact that his weapon was incompatible with the boss, and turned his focus to supporting Karen by distracting it.

CHAPTER 104

LET'S CHECK THAT STRANGE STAGE!

Two hours after the battle started.

A voiceless voice shook the entire 10th floor, and the huge tree stopped moving.

Karen had started to run short of breath on the way, but in the end, Haruki and the others succeeded in defeating the Dungeon Lord without sustaining any serious injuries.

The reason why the battle took so long was not only because Karen, who was the party's main source of damage, had run short of breath during the battle, but also because the Dungeon Lord's Vitality was unusually high.

It was so high that it couldn't be compared to the Vitality a regular boss would have.

It was no wonder this tree was the boss that represented this dungeon.

After dying, the Dungeon Lord was not absorbed into the dungeon.

It remained ingrained to the ground as it turned gray and stopped moving.

As his slight Level-Up sickness subsided, Haruki approached the terrifyingly ashen gray Dungeon Lord and placed his hand on its corpse.

"It's so hard..."

The Dungeon Lord's corpse was unusually tough.

Haruki tried stabbing it with his Magic Sword.

Clink!

The Magic Sword made an unpleasant noise and slid on the trunk's surface.

There was no scratch where the Magic Sword's tip had slid over.

It was as if it had hit stone or metal.

"Will this corpse disappear?"

"It might never do..."

A sweaty Karen also approached the tree and placed her hand on its trunk.

Perhaps the temperature on the surface was pleasant, since Karen seemed pleased and more relaxed after she touched the trunk.

"I thought it would be absorbed by the dungeon and respawn when the time came. Do defeated Dungeon Lords stay dormant until they resurrect or something like that?"

Haruki handed Karen a water bottle and allowed her to rest.

Karen gulped down the water and took a deep breath.

After getting the bottle back from Karen, Haruki watered Rhea's planter with the remaining water.

Rhea skillfully scooped the water with her leaves and comfortably moistened her body.

"Phew. This tough battle got me really tired!"

Coming out of Karen's pocket, Chep exhaled as if she was tired.

"...And exactly what did you do in this battle?"

"I was desperately praying that Lady Rhea wouldn't get hurt!"

"Ah, right."

He wanted to keep pressing her, but he could see himself getting tired of it pretty quickly.

So Haruki instead decided to ignore Chep.

Haruki, who entrusted Rare and Esta to Karen, got the magic bag from her and used it to store the materials collected from the boss.

The materials were, of course, the fallen branches and roots.

They could be used to craft various weapons and items.

The most famous items were Asahikawa furniture.

It was high-class furniture that has been prized by high-class people even before dungeons first appeared.

After removing the mud from the roots and the leaves from the branches, Haruki stored them in the magic bag.

He then checked to see if there were any special items among the materials dropped by the Dungeon Lord.

However, he couldn't find anything that looked like a rare drop.

Unfortunately, it would appear that Haruki wasn't blessed with a rare item this time around.

How much would he get by selling the branches and roots that he obtained from the Dungeon Lord?

Haruki was looking forward to selling those materials.

Humming cheerfully, Haruki collected roots and branches that were larger than himself.

The boss had dropped quite a few materials.

Since they were pretty large, the magic bag quickly became full to the point of bursting.

However, there were still some materials left to be collected.

It was going to be a waste, but there was no other choice but to give up on them since they wouldn't fit in the bag.

“Maybe it would be more efficient to collect the wood while defeating the boss?”

Haruki looked into the sky as he muttered that.

The Dungeon Lord had turned completely grey.

It wasn't only its trunk, but the branches that were still attached to it seemed to be as hard as stones and metal as well.

If the idea was to collect materials, there might be no better choice than cutting off its roots and branches while it's still alive.

Rather than defeating the boss quickly, you can get more materials from it by taking your time fighting it.

“There are some adventurers that make a living like that too.”

Haruki was but a fledgling adventurer who just started this season, but other adventurers were different. The earliest one had been an adventurer for five years.

There was no way that any of those senior adventurers wouldn't have already realized about something a fledgling adventurer had noticed.

It seemed they had already done so much by defeating monsters and ensuring a stable supply of materials.

If the only purpose is to acquire materials, there would be no need to defeat the Dungeon Lord.

It would be enough to simply keep it close to death and cut its branches and roots while it's still alive.

You can get materials for days and keep them on the market without having to wait for the boss to respawn.

Then, if a large amount of materials were to be collected and kept continuously on the market...

The actual selling price of the Dungeon Lord's materials may end up getting lower than Haruki could imagine.

Haruki, who was looking forward to seeing how much money he could get for the materials gotten from the Dungeon Lord, dropped his shoulders slightly.

“What’s wrong, Karaboshi? You look a little depressed...”

“Ah. I’ve been happily collecting these things, but now I’m not so sure that they’ll sell very well...”

Karen smiled bitterly.

“Ah, so that’s what it was. I saw you being so enthusiastic about collecting these materials, I got a little worried after I saw you drop your shoulders so suddenly. I thought you might be feeling sick again.”

“Well, my body seems to be doing well.”

Haruki unfolded his hands as if to show Karen that he was okay.

He had felt a slight Level-Up sickness a while ago.

A large amount of monster energy flowed in, strengthening the body.

But even though he felt that Level-Up sickness, there was no other change.

There was no severe pain, and no discomfort at all.

“Perhaps I’ve completely recovered.”

“Still, don’t overdo it.”

“Yeah, got it.”

Haruki nodded obediently.

If he went about getting too much stronger too quickly, he could end up suffering the same thing again.

And if the same thing happened again next time, it could very well be the end of the man known as Karaboshi Haruki.

“Anyway, don’t you think it would be fine even if the Dungeon Lord’s materials turned out to not fetch a high price?”

“Really?”

“Yes, because these items are a testament to our first defeat of the Dungeon Lord. Whether they’re expensive or cheap, they’re still important to us!”

“...”

Haruki squinted, thinking Karen’s was a little bit too pure and a little bit too radiant.

— Sheesh. I’m a bit embarrassed to be always talking about how much money I can make...

“Well, yes. You’re right.”

“Hmph—”

Haruki carelessly patted Karen’s head in response to her lovely purity.

Karen combed her crumpled hair with her hand while complaining that Haruki should be more careful when stroking someone’s hair.

But her eyes were laughing.

For some reason, Rhea got agitated and started to slam at Haruki’s legs with her leaves.

It was very painful.

“...”

Haruki tilted his head in confusion, unsure as to why Rhea seemed to be in such a bad mood.

Then, Rhea put even more strength into her leaves.

Thinking there was nothing he could do about it, Haruki gently stroked Rhea’s head (flower).

Rhea crossed her vines in front of her, as if trying to say “that’s why you can’t cheat on me!”

However, it didn’t seem to be all that bad.

Rhea’s spiky leaves gradually became rounded once again.

After the break, Haruki headed to the place on this floor he had been most interested in: the stone stage.

The stage was just a huge stone, 10 meters long, 5 meters wide and 1 meter high.

Its surface was flat as if it had been polished, but no pattern was engraved on it.

It was an object with nothing worthy of note about it.

However, Haruki felt a slight sense of discomfort on the stage.

He stopped right in front of that discomfort and observed closely.

Since the time he was working at a printing shop, it had been a habit that Haruki stopped whatever he was doing right in front of a feeling of discomfort.

If he were to leave even the slightest feeling of discomfort be, a big mistake could occur later.

For that reason, whenever he was checking the plate-making, Haruki did his work while carefully reviewing it without ignoring any of those feelings of discomfort.

Most of the papers that Haruki felt uncomfortable with ended up having some flaws.

Haruki knew well that a slight sense of discomfort was a sign of an oversight.

Therefore, Haruki pondered seriously about it.

What exactly was this sense of discomfort?

He looked at the stage, then at the ceiling, and then at the walls.

When he saw the stage again, Haruki noticed the truth behind his discomfort as if he

had received a revelation.

“This stage looks man-made.”

“Man-made?”

“Oh. It’s such a flat and rectangular object. I’ve rarely seen something like this in a dungeon.”

The interior of a dungeon usually looked like a cave.

Starting from their middle section, dungeons also looked like open fields, albeit natural ones.

Haruki has never seen anything shaped like an artificial object inside a dungeon before.

“That’s right, but aren’t there stone roads here as well?”

“There may be some rugged stone roads, but they seem natural enough. But have you ever seen anything this perfectly flat in a dungeon before?”

“Well...”

“First of all, there are no seams in this stage. Did someone cut a huge slab of rock down to make this, or...?”

“Or...?”

Karen gulped in response to Haruki’s suspense.

“So this isn’t some meaningless thing?”

Haruki shrugged as if saying he wouldn’t go as far as saying that for sure.

Haruki was a former printing company employee, not a scholar.

He had the ability to notice when something was off, but he wasn’t able to analyze what he had discovered.

A seamless, man-made-looking stone stage.

Haruki kept wondering what it was, but no matter how hard he thought about it, he couldn't come up with an answer.

Haruki put his hand on the stage as if to take his mind away from its supposed mysteries.

At that moment...

“-Huh!?”

“-Eh!?”

The color of the stage began to gradually become darker and darker from its top to its bottom.

Flustered, Haruki and Karen took a step back.

Then, the stage suddenly stopped changing color.

The upper portion of the stage was about 70% darker, while the lower half was about 50% darker.

“What did you do, Karaboshi?”

“I didn't do anything...! I guess?”

He wasn't so sure.

The color change started the very moment Haruki touched the stage.

He wasn't confident enough to say that he hadn't caused it.

“Ah, that's right.”

At times like these, he could count on the Skill Board.

If some big change had happened, then there should be something logged about it.

Haruki took out his Skill Board and checked the logs.

<<Giant Dark Tree subdued successfully>>

<<3 Skill Points obtained for the first subjugation of a Dungeon Lord>>

“Oh!”

There was some new info displayed in the log.

Giant Dark Tree seemed to be the name of this Dungeon Lord.

Defeating it increased one’s points by 3.

For Haruki, this increase in skill points was a pleasant surprise.

The question was about the next part.

<<Absorbed energy from the dungeon’s core>>

<<Conditions have been fulfilled>>

<<Requesting Demo Graph functionality release due to fulfilling the prerequisites —
Granted>>

<<“Item Enhancement” function is now available>>

The last four lines of the log were way beyond Haruki’s expectations.

CHAPTER 105

LET'S TRY OUT THE NEW FEATURE!

<<Absorbed energy from the dungeon's core>>

<<Conditions have been fulfilled>>

<<Requesting Demo Graph functionality release due to fulfilling the prerequisites — Granted>>

<<"Item Enhancement" function is now available>>

If this was correct, then the stage that Haruki touched was the dungeon core.

The dungeon core, as the name implied, was the core that the dungeon was made up from.

There were many posts in the "Narou" forums talking about the existence of these cores and their possible locations in the various dungeons.

They would refer to these cores as gem-like stones that stored enough energy in order to maintain the dungeon.

Since they hadn't been actually discovered, the idea that these cores didn't really exist was also spreading in the forums.

However, the cores were real.

And Haruki could have never imagined that such a shabby stage was actually one of those dungeon cores.

But even supposing that what the log said was true, it was no wonder that no adventurer who had reached the deepest part of this dungeon couldn't find the core.

Even Haruki thought that the core would look a bit more impressive.

No adventurer would imagine that a regular stone stage would actually be a dungeon's core.

Then there was the part where it said "Absorbed energy from the dungeon's core".

That could be somehow related to the stage changing colors.

The brighter portion of the stage would be the part that still had energy left, whereas the darker portion would be where it had lost its energy.

Then, after he had "absorbed" that lost energy, the requirement had been met.

Realizing that, Haruki gasped with a "Ah!"

— Then...

— Then that was my fault after all, wasn't it...?

"What's wrong, Karaboshi?"

"No, ah... Hmm."

A cold sweat ran down Haruki's forehead.

Seeing that, Karen's eyes became gradually colder.

It was as if she was saying "Ah, I knew it, it was you after all, just as I thought..."

"So, what exactly did you do, Karaboshi?"

"Ugh... It looks like this was the dungeon's core..."

"Huh? You mean THAT dungeon core!?"

"Yeah."

"But no one has seen a dungeon core before... Also, others have cleared this dungeon before, right? So they should have definitely seen this..."

"But it really doesn't look like what anyone would expect a dungeon core to be, right?"

“Well, you’re right, but... Do you really think no one could have noticed it by now?”

Karen’s face was full of doubt as she looked at the dungeon core.

Thinking about something, she approached the core and put her hand on it.

“Huh?”

“It’s not changing.”

The core didn’t change its color when Karen touched it.

Seeing that, Haruki touched the core once again.

“Oh!”

Its color started to change again, and Haruki quickly backed away.

<<Absorbed energy from the dungeon’s core>>

It was clearly written in the log.

“It seems it won’t do anything unless it’s you, Karaboshi.”

“Yeah... I see, though...”

It would appear that the core only responded to those who had a Skill Board.

Or perhaps, this particular Skill Board had the ability to absorb energy from a dungeon core...

In any case, there was no doubt that the board was a key item.

“What would happen if I absorbed all of the energy from this core?”

“The most popular theory in the forums was that the dungeon it was linked to would wither and die.”

Another opinion was that the dungeon would collapse as soon as the core was destroyed.

To think that the entire dungeon would come crumbling down the moment all of its energy is absorbed was truly a nightmare.

— This might be the chance to make a dungeon disappear for the first time ever!

Contrary to such expectations, feelings of anxiety about the collapse of the dungeon crossed his mind.

“What should we do?”

“We’ve come this far, so why don’t we try absorbing all of its energy?”

“And what if the dungeon comes crumbling down?”

“We make for the exit as fast as we can!”

Karen clenched her fist, her eyes sparkling with an intense light.

Apparently, she wasn’t afraid about participating in an Indiana-Jones-esque escape scene.

Of course, with that Luck skill, she would have a high chance of surviving...

“Phew...”

Having made up his mind after being worried for a while, Haruki placed his hand on the core.

The core began to gradually lose more color.

It looked as if a light that had been lit inside the stage had started to grow dimmer.

The last bit of dark gray vanished from the stage.

At that time, a light suddenly emerged from the stage and flew towards Haruki’s chest.

The bursting light melted into Haruki’s chest as if it was being absorbed.

The stage turned completely black.

Haruki and Karen put themselves on guard right away.

— The dungeon could start to collapse any time now...

5 seconds. 10 seconds.

They stayed on guard, watching for changes, holding their breath.

20 seconds. 30 seconds.

Still, no change seemed to occur inside the dungeon.

“...Nothing’s happening.”

“...Yeah.”

Haruki and Karen nodded at each other and relaxed a little.

They couldn’t feel completely relieved yet, but at least the dungeon didn’t seem to be collapsing anytime soon.

Haruki took out his Skill Board once again.

<<Received energy from the dungeon’s core>>

<<All of the core’s energy has been absorbed>>

<<Core’s activity temporarily stopped>>

<<Next Stampede outbreak time has been delayed>>

“What’s this...?”

Haruki seemed exhausted after looking over the log many times.

“What does it say, Karaboshi?”

“Uh... The dungeon’s not going to collapse. The core simply went dormant... This core seems to be somewhat related to the Stampedes...”

“Eh?”

Karen made a weird voice as she asked that.

She sounded like was in doubt, but that didn't mean she didn't understand Haruki's words.

The proof of that was that her eyes were wide open.

“Are Stampedes caused by the dungeon's cores!?”

“According to the log, that seems to be the case. But it doesn't go very much into detail.”

— I wish the explanation was a little bit more detailed.

The wording of the log was too vague and could lead to a wide range of interpretations.

“The log says ‘Core's activity temporarily stopped’. And this was due to me absorbing all of its energy.”

“Temporarily stopped... What does that mean exactly?”

Karen seemed a bit disappointed.

Haruki also looked rather vexed about it.

Temporarily meant that it would be reactivated at some point.

But there was no info on the logs as to when that would be.

Also, it was unclear what “activity temporarily stopped” meant.

It was impossible to know whether the log referred to the dungeon's activity itself or if it was an activity that generated a new stampede.

“It says that it has lost all of its energy, its activity is now stopped, and the ‘next Stampede outbreak time has been delayed’. So maybe it means that the energy of the dungeon's core was being used in order to generate the Stampedes.”

“Well, Stampedes are phenomena where several monsters appear and start overflowing

from the dungeons.”

Given that energy is used to create a large number of monsters, Haruki’s idea would not be too far off the mark.

“So in order to prevent these Stampedes from occurring, you would need to keep absorbing this energy... Right, Karaboshi?

“Looks like it...”

Only after he had finished saying that did Haruki realize what an atrocious thing that Skill Board of his was.

It can be used to develop someone’s abilities, to empower their skills and skill trees, and even to control the Stampedes.

Should it become known that Stampedes could be controlled and delayed, there would certainly be petitions all over the place asking for adventurers to go to the deepest part of the dungeons where the cores would supposedly be located.

Haruki didn’t mind helping people.

He knew that by effectively preventing further Stampedes from taking place, he would be helping a lot of people.

However, if and when Haruki’s power alone would make it impossible to go around all of the dungeons, those who would have been saved by Haruki could easily turn the other way.

[Why won’t you defeat our dungeon!?] [Come and help the people of our city!] [Are you going to let us die?] [You monster!] [Discriminator!] [We’re gonna kill you!!]

This was no longer an item a single person could handle.

However, there was no sure method to transfer the Skill Board to someone else.

After a certain distance from the Skill Board, it would simply return to Haruki’s chest. Even if he handed it to someone else, it would return to Haruki just by leaving that person.

In that case, anyone who wanted to steal Haruki's Skill Board would have no other choice but to kill him.

"Now I have even more reasons to not talk about my Skill Board with anyone else..."

"Yeah..."

Both of them seemed even more depressed.

If the existence of the Skill Board were to be revealed to the world, Haruki would be hunted down forever.

"If it comes to that, I can always MAX out my Stealth skill..."

"You can't do that, Karaboshi! Don't give up on yourself like that! What if no one can see you!?"

"But there may be no other way for me to—"

"No matter how small it may be, you can never give up hope on your presence!!"

"Kuh...!"

It was just as Karen said.

Haruki wiped out the tears that had started to form in his eyes.

— No matter how small it may be... Wait, what?

— Did Karen just diss me?

Haruki stared at Karen.

He couldn't feel any malicious intent in Karen's comment, though.

If this was her true opinion, which she let out without any malicious intent...

— Nah, I'm reading too much into things.

— That's something too sad to be true!

It would appear that the Skill Board's recent enhancements had turned Haruki a little naive.

The thoughtless speculation that had appeared in his mind almost broke his heart.

Wiping out the rest of his tears, Haruki shook the idea out of his head.

The Skill Board had become a little stronger, but Haruki would continue to do it.

He would continue to help people within his reach.

He would do his best to reach more people to help.

The most important thing for Haruki was to stand out.

And to obtain a fully-fledged presence!

"Well, we've saved the best for last! Let's try out that new feature!"

Haruki brightened up his voice so as to shake off the dark mood, and tapped on the Skill Board.

Then, he swiped it until he reached the page of the new function, "Item Enhancement".

"Umm... What's this?"

The item enhancement that Haruki imagined was a function that literally enhanced the items that he had with him.

He couldn't be that wrong about it.

Because if he were to be wrong...

[Item Enhancement]

[Remaining Points] 3089 pts

Pebble 0

Pebble 0

Pebble 0

Pebble 0

Pebble 0

...

...

Then all he could enhance were the pebbles at his feet, according to the Item Enhancement feature display.

It seemed that the board was able to perceive everything that was around Haruki.

As a test, Haruki walked forward one step at a time.

After about 10 steps, a “Giant Dark Tree Branch” was displayed on the board.

As he looked around, he found one of the boss’ branches that had fallen during the battle.

“Its detection range is pretty narrow.”

The branch was about 3 meters away from Haruki.

If it had been any wider than that, it would display an enormous amount of useless stuff lying around that he had no intention to enhance.

After returning to where he was standing earlier, Haruki then swiped down to the page that listed the pebbles.

No matter how much he swiped down, it was pebbles all over.

— They should call this function “Pebble Enhancement” instead...

Just as Haruki was about to give up...

“Oh!”

He found an item that wasn't a pebble.

[Item Enhancement]

[Remaining Points] 3089 pts

Kokko Feather Necklace 0

Potato Stone 0

Potato Stone 0

Potato Stone 0

Potato Stone 0

Potato Stone 0

Potato Stone 0

The Kokko Feather Necklace was the one Haruki was wearing.

The potato stones need no explanation.

At that point, the only items that were confirmed were Rhea's planter and Haruki's Silver Wolf Short Sword.

The function had yet to find the armor Haruki was wearing.

"Could it be that it can't enhance items past a certain level?"

That possibility existed since they could see items that weren't displayed on the board.

However, they couldn't be sure whether it would be possible to enhance them as the board's rank increases or not.

They would need to wait until the board ranked up again before they could tell for sure.

— It would have been great if I could make the main armor I'm wearing stronger...

Haruki was a little disappointed because the items that seemed to be eligible for enhancement were low-level items.

Pulling himself together, Haruki taps his Kokko Feather Necklace, which was the easiest to understand from the list.

[Would you like to enhance Kokko Feather Necklace?]

[Enhancement level 0/3]

[Points needed: 50 pts]

[Y/N]

Since he was wearing his Kokko Feather Necklace, it would be difficult to experience its changes.

What kind of change would it make after it was enhanced...?

— Maybe if I enhance it, it will become a high-end accessory in one go!?

As long as you have enough points, you can turn any item into a high-end version of itself...

The excited Haruki's heart raced to that assumption.

"He... Hehe..."

Haruki vigorously pressed [Y] while fighting against the feeling that his heart was going to pop out of his chest.

The second level cost 100 points. The third level cost 150 points.

And then MAXing it out cost 200 points.

After spending a total of 500 points, Haruki enhanced the Kokko Feather Necklace to the maximum in one go with the momentum brought about by his excitement.

The Feather Necklace seemed to have changed somehow.

A feeble light shone from Haruki's neck, and it felt hot.

“So, how about it!?”

CHAPTER 106

LET'S ENHANCE SOME ITEMS!

“So, what do you think!?”

As he triumphantly turned towards Karen...

“...Oof!”

Karen heaved a sigh.

Trembling, she fell to her knees and her hands hit the ground.

— Why did she have to react like that...?

Confused, Haruki reached for his neck.

When he did that, he felt that the Feather Necklace had become so bushy that it couldn't even compare to how it was before...

“Oh-!”

— The necklace is so fluffy now!

The feathers themselves hadn't changed in length.

What did change was their density.

Previously, it had about 20 feathers lined up in a row, but now it seemed to have several times the amount of feathers it had before.

The feather's size was a little different as well.

The necklace used to be furnished with nothing but tiny feathers, but now it had a combination of various widths of feathers.

Some of them were larger than Haruki's palm.

As soon as he started to move, Haruki quickly noticed the difference in his body's agility.

This Item Enhancement wasn't just for show.

Still, Haruki was scratching his chin.

"It's a bit dangerous to have an item change its appearance when it's enhanced."

"W... Why do you say that?"

Karen, who finally pulled herself together, tilted her head to the side.

"Well, don't you think it would be bad if I started to look weird?"

"...Eh?"

— You think!?

Karen was staring at Haruki with her eyes wide open.

He had been looking weird for quite some time now.

He has only now started to worry about it as if he didn't think he already looked weird.

A mask that floats in mid-air and a plant that wriggles on his back.

Feathers grew out of his neck, and a centipede was parasitizing his body.

A backpack with a white face and two slimy tentacles...

Even though he showed himself looking like this to the people around him, he really didn't think he was a weird-looking adventurer...

Maybe it was... the other way around?

Karen gasped at the horrifying thought that had crossed her mind.

— Could it be that he's afraid that his items will start to look "normal"?

Certainly, Haruki was wearing some pretty unique pieces of equipment.

If he were to be equipped with "ordinary-looking armor"...

Some people may start to think he's weird!?

The horrifying truth Karen had arrived at through her speculations caused her to forget about breathing.

"...Hmm?"

Haruki looked at Karen, who had suddenly become stiff.

He wondered what had gotten into her.

Haruki used short swords, which have an average low damage output, so he had chosen his armor with an emphasis on their performance.

It was always nice to have an item become stronger by enhancing it. But if its appearance changed too much, it might be seen as weird by others, who could think it was some kind of "special" item.

If an item's appearance were to change completely, some people could start to think that it's some kind of item one could get as a drop in a dungeon.

However, if the appearance of his commercial equipment were to change, Akane would definitely notice.

He could easily envision a future where people could say "There's something wrong with my armor, isn't it!?"

That's why Haruki was worried that enhancing an item might make it look weird.

"It would sure be nice if it looked stronger."

"It would be better if it didn't change its appearance at all."

"Huh?"

“Hmm?”

Haruki and Karen spoke out at the same time.

An uncomfortable silence followed, making seconds seem like hours.

“W... Why don’t you try it with other pieces of equipment? The changes should be different for each item. You may end up liking how some of those items turn out!”

“Y... You think?”

— I’m not sure what exactly I’m going to like, though...

Haruki nodded and looked down at the Skill Board.

[Item Enhancement]

[Remaining Points] 2589 pts

Potato Stone 0

Potato Stone 0

Potato Stone 0

Potato Stone 0

Potato Stone 0

Potato Stone 0

Planter 0

Silver Wolf Short Sword 0

Haruki decided that the next item he would enhance would be Rhea’s planter.

The reason for that was simple: the planter was always in his backpack, so even if it changed a lot, no one would see it.

“Come here for a moment, Rhea.”

Haruki took Rhea and placed her on top of the stage.

Rhea seemed to be looking around, wondering what happened.

“I’ll enhance your planter. It would be a disaster if the planter got hit and broke.”

No such thing had ever happened.

Haruki had already taken measures against attacks from his back, but there was nothing helping the planter if an attack would cause Haruki to fall on his back.

One could always order a reinforced planter from any armor store. However, Haruki couldn’t find any workshops that would make those.

Since he didn’t know where else to ask, Haruki had put that issue on hold.

But with this, it would be possible to solve that issue.

With his board in his hand, he asked Rhea before pressing the enhance button.

“Are you satisfied with this planter, Rhea? Do you have any problems with it, are your roots okay? Something like that?”

“(It’s spacious and comfy. A bit too soft, though.)”

That’s the thought that went through Rhea’s mind when Haruki asked.

Given how tall Rhea was, there was no way her roots could fit well inside her planter.

It looked like she was able to adjust her space at will by using her Treasure Chest ability.

Nodding at Rhea’s answer, Haruki tapped on the board.

[Would you like to enhance Planter]

[Enhancement level 0/1]

[Points needed: 1pt]

[Y/N]

“It’s cheap!”

Haruki unconsciously opened his eyes wide in surprise after seeing how it required only a single point.

That, and that its maximum enhancement level was at +1.

Apparently, the enhancement points required and maximum enhancement level were related to the grade of the item to be enhanced.

“Well, I did buy this planter at a hardware store...”

It wasn’t an item meant for adventurers.

Would it make sense to enhance it at all?

However, it only cost 1 point.

Even if it didn’t make much sense, it was really cheap.

Haruki tapped on the Y button.

— Wait, depending on how it changes, would I still have to ask around for workshops to make a new planter?

Haruki thought so, but he changed his mind a little when he touched the enhanced planter.

“It feels a bit interesting.”

“Ah... You’re right.”

Haruki’s words seemed to have intrigued Karen, and she touched the planter as well.

The planter’s appearance didn’t seem to change at all.

But it felt different.

The first thing they'd thought was that it felt like iron.

But it was different from regular iron.

"It's as if it had been made with tempered iron... and it's different at the same time. It's as if it had been remade out of some kind of special metal."

"You're right. It feels... really nice."

She seemed to really like the texture.

With a serious look on her face, Karen kept on touching the planter with her fingers.

From its texture, it was clear that the planter had been enhanced.

It looked like it would be more resistant than before.

But Haruki had absolutely no idea about what kind of metal it was.

He was really curious about it, but he had no plans to have Akane appraise it.

Haruki was sure that if Akane saw that planter, she would realize it was not a regular item in the blink of an eye.

"Hmm. It would seem that we would be better off not enhancing everyday items."

The enhanced planter looked exactly the same as before.

However, the material composition was so different that it was easily noticeable just by touching it.

It might be easier to notice the changes in appearance of an enhanced custom item.

At least Akane would know that there's something wrong with that particular item.

Those items would have the manufacturer's logo in them, so they wouldn't be mistaken by items obtained in a dungeon.

— For the time being, let's refrain from enhancing custom items.

Haruki made a mental note of the items he should never enhance, and tapped on another item on the list.

[Would you like to enhance Potato Stone?]

[Enhancement level 0/3]

[Points needed: 10pt]

[Y/N]

Haruki didn't go into the dungeons with Akane.

Even if they're enhanced, any changes in the Potato Stones shouldn't be noticed so easily.

And if the changes were to be noticed, he could say that he got that particular Potato Stone in the dungeon.

He could pretend it's like some kind of cursed item that changed its appearance and properties after being used.

— Yeah, that should work.

Thinking about that, Haruki pressed the Y button.

He then put his Skill Board away and took out the Potato Stones that were stored in the jar inside his backpack.

"...Ah! I messed up!"

Since a lot of Potato Stones were placed in a single container, Haruki wasn't sure exactly which was the one that he had enhanced.

Haruki realized a little too late that he should have taken a Potato Stone out of the jar first, and then enhanced that one.

Disappointed, Haruki started to take out the Potato Stones, one after another.

Then...

“Oh...!”

There was a single Potato Stone that was slightly heavier than the rest.

It looked exactly like any other Potato Stone.

Haruki scanned over its surface twice, but even his eyes that didn't overlook things easily were able to find any difference with the other Potato Stones.

Having finished inspecting the stone, Haruki gave two stones to Rhea.

“Can you shoot these for me, Rhea?”

“(shakes)”

Rhea swunged her leaves as if saying “Sure, sure.”

Without delay, Haruki took two branches that had fallen from the huge tree, along with other things that resembled them, and leaned them next to the tree's body.

“First, shoot the branches with a regular stone.”

“(shakes)”

Rhea shook her leaves, loaded the regular Potato Stone, and fired.

Bang!!

The Potato Stone flew, making a noise that didn't sound at all like a stone being fired from a plant's nozzle.

The stone beautifully broke the branch exactly in half on impact.

Rhea's aim was perfect, even though she was 50 meters away from her target.

It really was an impressive throwing aim.

Next, Haruki asked Rhea to throw the enhanced Potato Stone at another branch.

Rhea absorbed the +1 Potato Stone and fired.

Blam!!

The shot sounded clearly different than the previous one.

The sound pressure it generated made it echo inside Haruki's lungs.

Then, the stone collided with the branch.

Boom!

The potato stone pulverized the center of the branch.

“ .. ”

“Whoa...”

The difference in power left Haruki staring with his mouth wide open, while Karen couldn't help but express how impressed she was.

Rhea was also quite surprised herself, as she suddenly stopped moving.

Both stones flew at about the same speed.

However, while the regular stone split the branch in half, the reinforced one pulverized the point where it came in contact with the branch.

There was a clear difference in power.

Perhaps the reason why its power had changed so much was because of their weight difference.

Throwing a sponge ball won't hurt you, but throwing an iron ball of the same size would definitely result in a serious injury.

Of course, the difference in weight wasn't as evident in this case.

However, Rhea's Throwing ability level was 5. And its tree was enhanced to +1 as well.

This high degree of proficiency made a big change in each attack's destructive power, even though the weight difference was slight.

If you want to fight stronger monsters in the future, strengthening your weapons is indispensable.

If you never get a stronger weapon, no matter how high your Throwing level is, you'll eventually stop dealing enough damage with it.

Just like the first adventurers who dared to challenge a dungeon with pistols...

Haruki could get stronger weapons whenever he needed to deal with stronger monster

But that was not the case for Rhea.

Rhea had no other weapon but the Potato Stones she threw.

And those stones had ended up becoming something that couldn't be replaced.

"Well... What should I do now?"

Haruki scratched his chin.

The Potato Stones were in a growing jar.

No matter how much he could enhance the Potato Stones, it didn't necessarily mean that the enhanced ones would multiply inside the jar.

"Hmm..."

Haruki groaned while thinking.

Then, a ray of light appeared in his brain.

— Will it work? I don't know...

However, he did know that if he made a mistake, he would lose the points he had spent.

But it looked like it was worth a try.

Haruki took out the Skill Board, believing in the Potato Stones.

He enhanced all of the Potato Stones in the jar to +1.

There were a total of 13 Potato Stones.

There were fewer stones in the jar than what Haruki had expected.

He had 2448 points left.

“Rhea, try sucking up all of the Potato Stones in the jar.”

“(?)”

Rhea seemed confused, but still put her suction ivy inside the jar.

One by one, she absorbed all of the Potato Stones.

As Haruki watched for changes in the Skill Board, a slight smile began to appear on his face.

“I knew it.”

Even after absorbing all of the enhanced Potato Stones, the regular Potato Stones didn’t reappear on the board’s display.

The growing jar had the ability to literally multiply the items stored in it.

If there were no items inside it, then it would multiply based on the amount it had.

Haruki enhanced all of the Potato Stones in the jar while the multiplication process had stopped.

As a result, even if the Potato Stones were to multiply, the new ones that would be generated would become the enhanced version instead of the regular one.

This wouldn’t have been possible if the jar was the “jar that registers the first item stored inside it” as Akane had previously described it.

It was a trivial mistake on Akane’s appraisal, who couldn’t deliver a detailed appraisal

at the time.

However, Akane's mistake was understandable.

Because the jar started to produce new items once the old ones were taken out.

Since it was impossible to replace the contents in the usual way, there was no way to assert the possibility that the contents could change.

Thanks to Haruki using his Skill Board to trick the jar into creating enhanced Potato Stones, that was now an established fact.

"Since we've come this far, I might as well MAX them out... Huh?"

After tapping on the board one more time, Haruki's jaw dropped when he saw the number displayed.

[Would you like to enhance Potato Stone?]

[Enhancement level 1/3]

[Points needed: 200pt]

[Y/N]

"That's quite a jump..."

It needed only 10 points to enhance each stone to +1, but the +2 enhancement cost 200 points.

Haruki had 2448 points left.

He was a little too short on points to increase all 13 Potato Stones to +2.

Not replacing all of the jar's contents, even after enhancing them, could mean that the multiplication process could potentially fill the jar with +1 Potato Stones.

Which would essentially be a waste of points.

But why did the cost increase so much?

Could it be that the Potato Stones would get a new ability at +2 or something like that?

Haruki thought about it, but he had no way to be sure.

On the other hand, he simply didn't have enough points to try it, no matter how curious he was about it.

If he used his points just to try things out like this, he would soon run out of them.

"Aw, I wanted to go all the way through since it seemed like a good chance..."

Haruki sighed.

It looked like he would have to give up on that plan until he earned more points.

The way to earn more points seemed simple enough.

All he needed to do was to get to the bottom of a dungeon, and then touch the dungeon's core.

For someone like Haruki, who had only reached the 15th floor of a dungeon, it was a fairly simple task compared to earning Skill Points.

But upgrading Rhea's artillery was really going to take a lot of effort.

— Let's work hard on earning enough points.

Haruki sighed again, and was about to put away his Skill Board one more time.

Then...

"-!?"

A single item caught Haruki's eyes.

He put his backpack on the floor and took a step back.

However, the name of that item didn't disappear from the screen.

The reason why it didn't disappear even though it had moved away from Karen and

Rhea was that it moved with Haruki.

In other words, it was something Haruki was equipped with.

“So that means... No way...”

With his trembling fingers, Haruki tapped on the item’s name.

[Would you like to enhance Mask (Seal)]

[Enhancement level 0/3]

[Points needed: 2000pt]

[Y/N]

“I’ll enhance the Masked Man himself!!”

CHAPTER 107

LET'S ENHANCE THE MASKED MAN!

"I'll enhance the Masked Man himself!!"

Haruki's joyful voice echoed through the 10th floor, where the boss had been defeated.

"Are you going to enhance your mask?"

Unlike Haruki, who was trembling with joy, Karen's expression instantly turned cloudy.

"Do you think it will be okay to enhance your mask, Karaboshi?"

"Yeah, it should be okay. It's appearance didn't change."

"Wait, have you already enhanced it!?"

"Of course! This mask... No, this godly mask is something I should have enhanced before anything else, don't you think!?"

To increase Haruki's presence.

When he was equipped with that mask, Haruki's presence was recognized by all living things.

But without the mask, Haruki's face would go unnoticed by everyone!

There was no item in Haruki's possession that helped him increase his presence like that mask.

This was surely some kind of graceful item that a nameless god with a strong presence had given to Haruki to help him with his pitiful presence!

Only Haruki saw it that way, though.

For Haruki, that mask was a godly item.

The only unfortunate thing was that the mask's appearance made people mistake Haruki for some kind of suspicious person.

However, that was yet another issue that would be solved eventually.

When equipped with the mask, people would recognize Haruki's presence.

If his presence continued to be recognized, word about him would spread out and everyone would eventually understand that the Masked Man is a "friend", and not some suspicious guy.

Just by having a presence, he could change people's impressions on him.

— How amazing!

— Not only it can increase my presence, but it also has the potential to change people's thoughts about me!

— This mask is truly a godsend!

A surge of dopamine flowed through Haruki's brain.

Haruki seemed extremely pleased in his own delusions.

"So, how is it!?"

"How is what?"

"Has your presence increased?"

"..."

Karen squinted as she asked Haruki that question.

Then she stared at him and started to groan.

"I... think my presence is just the same as before?"

“Wait, wait. You’ve spent 2000 points on enhancing that mask! It must have done something, right!?”

“I’m sorry...”

Haruki apologetically bowed at Karen.

— That was a lot of points to spend in one go...

— Damn it! What a let-down!!

Haruki was deeply disappointed that the mask didn’t seem to have changed at all like he expected.

“Ah... But even if its appearance didn’t change, maybe its performance did!”

“Its performance? Is there anything besides increasing my presence?”

“No no, there must be something else! Increased defensive power, improved breathing, something like that!”

“Ah... Now that you mention it, there are a few things here...”

Haruki, who had gone pale, started to recover his color after hearing Karen’s words.

Haruki’s mask’s abilities weren’t limited to increasing his presence.

Even though there didn’t seem to be any holes in the mask, he could see through it, and it didn’t make it difficult to breathe at all. There was no harm done by keeping it on at all times.

If he were to stick it to his face with glue, he could feel as if he wasn’t wearing anything at all.

That feeling had caused Haruki to sometimes go to bed with his mask on.

Were there any other changes on the mask’s basic abilities?

Haruki took off his mask, touched it with his hand, and then put it back on to check on its condition.

“It feels a bit different...”

First of all, the mask’s texture was slightly different.

It used to feel like carved wood, but now it felt harder than wood.

“So your defense has improved then!”

“Hmm. Yeah, looks like it...”

True, his defense might have increased.

But Haruki didn’t ask for defense when spending 2000 points to enhance the mask.

It was presence.

What Haruki wanted was a stronger presence!

sigh

However, the mask still had two more enhancement levels left.

There was still a chance it could gain a presence-increasing ability as it leveled up.

Haruki’s bright future had just been postponed a little.

All he needed to do was to get more points and keep enhancing the mask.

— Just you wait, dungeons.

— I’ll absorb every last bit of energy you have!

Thinking about that filled Haruki with determination.

“Ah, Karen. There’s something else.”

“Something else... Is it another change on the mask?”

“Maybe.”

There was something he could see only when wearing the mask.

“I can see a strange light coming out of your body.”

When seen through the mask, there seemed to be a thin layer of light around Karen’s body.

It was colorless and transparent, like water.

However, the outline was clearly visible, so he was sure it was there.

It wasn’t just Karen. Haruki also had a thin layer of light around him.

Rhea and Chep had it as well.

But theirs were too thin compared to the one Karen had.

The difference in thickness was similar to that between a hard-cover book and a tissue paper.

Haruki and the others weren’t the only ones covered by this transparent aura.

The ground, walls, and even the dead Giant Dark Tree. The entire dungeon was covered with this aura-like thing.

“Could it be... Can you now see it too, Karaboshi?”

“Uh, huh? Can you see it, Karen?”

“Yes. That aura is the source of magic.”

“Magic...”

Certainly, if this was the source of magic — namely, MP—, that would explain why only Karen’s aura was thicker than everyone else’s.

“So I wasn’t able to see this until now because I didn’t have any ability for magic?”

“Maybe that’s not it... But I can’t tell for sure.”

Haruki wondered why Karen had never told him about this before.

Though Haruki had never told Karen about the light he saw whenever he used Weakness Exploit.

It was risky to speak of things no one other than Karen or Haruki could see.

It was always best to not speak of those things until they knew there was going to be something to back them up.

Like an employee of a large company who has the ability to do a “detailed appraisal” and reveal information about an item’s properties.

“Rhea and I have it too. Neither of us can use magic, so what does this mean?”

“It seems you don’t necessarily have to be a magic user in order to have this aura on you.”

“Is this what you use in order to cast your spells?”

“Yes. Whenever I’m outside the dungeon I use mine. However, inside the dungeon, the dungeon itself lends me its strength too.”

The dungeon’s walls and floor also had this thin aura around them.

Haruki could understand why Karen would say that the dungeon would lend her its strength.

Haruki nodded as he scratched his chin.

“With this, it would be safe to assume that the concept of MP doesn’t exist.”

“What do you mean?”

“Up until now, I had thought that you could use magic because you had MP, but if everyone has this aura and it’s not something only magic users have, does this mean that everyone can use magic? Like we all have the foundation for it, but no one else has been able to develop it.

Perhaps it is not magic by itself but something you transform into magic when you use

it, Karen.”

So rather than calling it MP, or magic points, it would be better to call it “vitality”, or “energy”...

Vitality already existed in the Skill Tree, but it had nothing to do with magic.

So would it be better to call it “energy”?

To be able to see this “energy” was a happy side-effect of enhancing Haruki’s mask.

Haruki couldn’t use magic. However, if this aura was some kind of raw energy that Karen could change into magic, then there would be a chance that it could be used in other ways.

— Like, a magic sword of sorts...

Haruki gasped.

— A magic sword!

— What a strong presence would something like that have!!

“I need to put all of my efforts into being able to use this...”

Haruki’s eyes fired up.

Haruki took out his Magic Sword and put all of his strength into his fist.

However, there was no change in the aura that surrounded his body.

“Hey, Karen. How do you make your staff shine... Umm... How do you charge it with energy?”

“Let’s see... It’s like pouring the power inside me towards the staff. Ah, I said power, but I don’t mean physical strength.”

Not physical strength...

In other words, there was no point in putting effort through the muscles.

“Hmm-”

Haruki closed his eyes and began to focus.

He made a mental image of the aura that surrounded his body, and then he imagined it flowing towards the Magic Sword.

“Oh?”

When he did that, he could feel a slight sensation of something moving a little.

However, that sensation vanished instantly, perhaps because he wasn’t focused enough.

Once again –this time with his eyes wide open– he put a lot of effort into imagining his energy flowing towards the Magic Sword.

Then, something moved inside his body.

It was almost as if he could feel his energy flowing out from his body and into the Magic Sword.

Then, an aura as thin as a leaflet began to surround the Magic Sword as well.

The moment Haruki noticed the change, the aura disappeared.

“Hmm. It’s very difficult.”

“It gets easier as you get used to it. I wasn’t very good at it in the beginning.”

— Did you think you were casting spells back then?

Haruki questioned Karen’s words in his mind, but didn’t say anything.

Of course, there would be both skilled and unskilled swordsmen and magic users. Haruki hadn’t considered that Karen would have been unfamiliar with magic at first.

It was enough to see Karen’s charged staff attack to realize just how useful energy-based attacks were.

If he were able to do something like that... Then Haruki would be able to cut through

a giant tree with a short sword!

[Look at that man, slicing through large monsters with a short sword!]

[Who is that?]

[The adventurer, Air!]

[Wow, look at that strong presence!]

[What an impressive presence, being able to slice a monster right in half with a shorts sword!]

“Uhehe...”

A sinister laugh started to overflow from the delusional Haruki’s mouth.

— That’s definitely something people would notice!

— I’ll start training to get better with the Magic Sword as soon as we get back!!

Haruki solidified his determination to learn how to use energy-based attacks.

To have brought about such an amazing discovery...

Haruki didn’t feel bad at all about having spent so many points on enhancing his mask.

Haruki turned his palm towards his face and touched his mask with his fingertips.

“Well! I’ll say your body has been disgraced, Lady Rhea!”

The long conversation between Haruki and Karen seemed to have bored her.

Jumping out of Karen’s pocket, Chep climbed up the stage and started to groom Rhea’s leaves.

Since Haruki fought really close to the Giant Dark Tree in his previous battle, both Rhea’s body and her planter’s soil were littered with small pieces of crushed wood.

Chep began to respectfully remove them with her hands.

“Hmm?”

At that moment, Haruki noticed a slight change through his mask.

Small bubbles began to appear and float around Rhea and Chep.

Raw power started to overflow from the ground.

Then, the bubbles gathered in the center of the stage.

“Let’s get you back to the backpack, Rhea... Ah! Esta!”

Haruki called out to Esta, who he hadn’t seen for a while, while putting Rhea back into the backpack.

Haruki’s voice echoed throughout the floor.

Then, a shining deep crimson thing fell from the top of the greyed-out giant tree.

It was Esta.

Was he playing at exploration by himself?

Still, he had gone all the way up there...

Haruki smiled bitterly at the playful Esta’s actions.

Esta curled up as he fell to the ground, picking up speed.

Then, as he approached the ground, he unrolled and spread all of his tiny legs.

He slowed down as he used his entire body as a parachute.

He spun forwards once, and then he landed gracefully.

— Impressive!

Haruki had to repress the urge to yell “Ten out of ten!” after seeing Esta’s performance.

However, they were in the middle of an unusual event.

Haruki regretted not having time to play with Esta at the moment.

“Look, Karaboshi! There’s a pattern on the stage!”

Haruki immediately turned to see what was that about after hearing Karen’s seemingly worried voice.

A dark red pattern emerged on the surface of the upper side of the stage, which had been completely plain until a few moments ago.

A chill went down Haruki’s spine as he saw that pattern.

“A magic circle!? Step back, Karen!!”

CHAPTER 108

LET'S VENTURE INTO THE SECRET PASSAGE!

"A magic circle!? Step back, Karen!!"

"Yeah–"

Karen hurriedly stepped away from the stage.

The next moment, the magic circle started to shine brightly.

The magic circle's light illuminated the dungeon wall behind the stage.

Then, the magic circle transferred itself to the wall.

The magic circle on the stage lost its light.

However, the one on the wall was still shining brightly.

After a while, the magic square was sucked into the dungeon wall as if water had dropped onto dry ground.

"That... It's the first time I see anything like it, what on earth just happened?"

"I don't know... I haven't seen anything like this before either– Huh!?"

"Wha-!?"

A cracking noise, as if something hard had begun to break apart, startled both Haruki and Karen.

Suddenly, the wall behind the stage came crumbling down.

Making a dull noise, a hole began to appear on the wall.

"No way... A hidden door?"

What appeared in front of Haruki was an open discolored door.

There was an ordinary staircase behind that door.

The stairs seemed to go upwards.

Were they some kind of escape route?

“I wonder if they mention these stairs anywhere in the Wiki...”

Haruki always gathered the information he needed in order to tackle a dungeon in the Wiki pages.

However, he always looked for the minimum amount of information needed.

For example, in Kamuikotan’s case, all he searched for was its location and a map of the dungeon. The only other thing he looked for later was how to defeat those dark tree roots.

Looking into anything more than that would ruin the fun of his exploration.

Haruki gathered just enough information so as to avoid taking away the pleasure of adventuring.

It’s the same as when watching a series.

Even if you look for info about its plot and characters, if you look into it with too much detail, it would ruin the fun of watching it.

He had to be moderate with his research.

That was the best way for him to enjoy life.

Of course, exploring a dungeon wasn’t like watching a series, so he still had to be careful.

Besides, even if Haruki didn’t know anything about this door or the stairs behind it, it didn’t mean that no one else would know about them.

“Do you know anything about this, Karen?”

“No... I’m sorry. I haven’t checked the Wiki thoroughly...”

Karen apologetically shook her head.

Haruki looked at the door, then at the stairs, and then returned to the stage.

The magic circle that was there had completely disappeared.

“Could it be that some time had to pass for that magic circle to appear?”

“We have been talking here for a while, haven’t we?”

After defeating the Giant Dark Tree, Haruki had spent some time looking at the Skill Board’s new feature.

While they remained on that 10th floor, the magic circle appeared.

Could it be that the magic circle would have appeared after some time even if an adventurer leaves immediately after defeating the Giant Dark Tree?

— It’s not very likely it’s just time, isn’t it?

Haruki tilted his head and crossed his arms.

— Could there have been some other conditions?

Haruki carefully looked around.

Then, he found a wood splinter of the Giant Dark Tree on top of the stage.

This wood splinter was placed there earlier by Chep when she was cleaning Rhea.

— Could this be it?

“Maybe it’s something like ‘by offering a splinter of the Giant Dark Tree atop the stage, a door will be opened and a new road will appear’, don’t you think?”

“Ah, I see! There’s a sense of unity between this and the appearance of those stairs.”

A sense of unity...

Haruki nodded.

Defeat the Giant Dark Tree and place a piece of its wood on the stage.

Then, as a result of a piece of the Giant Dark Tree being offered at the stage, a new path had opened.

It made sense.

“In that case, what could be waiting beyond these stairs...?”

Haruki squinted and stared into the other side of the stairs.

“Maybe there’s a reward for defeating the Dungeon Lord!?”

“Waahh!”

Excitement ran wild throughout Haruki’s body.

His body felt sweetly numb.

That was definitely possible.

Haruki and Karen quickly checked their equipment and approached the gate.

“Okay, let’s go!”

“Yes!”

Even though the two of them were excited about the possibility of finding the dungeon’s greatest treasure at the end of the stairs, they remained alert.

They were still inside the dungeon.

They couldn’t allow themselves to be careless.

Haruki and the others went up the stairs while resisting their impatience.

The stairs spiraled upwards.

Haruki climbed the stairs one step at a time, checking for traps.

100 steps, 200 steps.

How far up would it go?

300 steps, 400 steps...

“So these must be just for heading back above ground, huh?”

“Maybe...”

Karen dropped her shoulders, probably because she was getting tired of going up those stairs.

Just before reaching 500 steps, the space above them started to become brighter.

It didn't seem like it was coming from the dungeon. It was natural light.

“So we're back on the surface?”

Haruki got disappointed, thinking that the chance of them finding some kind of treasure chest at the end of the stairs had been significantly reduced.

Still, it was the first time Haruki climbed these stairs.

The excitement of not knowing where those stairs would take him made up for the lack of treasure somewhat.

Ten steps later, they came out of some kind of exit.

“A wall?”

“There's a road next to it.”

As they came on the other side of the exit, they found a wall in front of them.

There were roads going left and right next to the wall.

They seemed to lead towards the woods and mountains.

It looked like a scenery one would see above ground.

Apparently, the place where they came out was higher than the entrance to Kamuikotan. The scenery they saw seemed to be high above ground, since they could see far off into the distance.

“Oh-!”

“What a beautiful view...”

As Haruki carefully looked at the landscape...

“Huh!?”

It was exactly as he remembered it.

— No way...

A cold sweat ran down Haruki’s spine.

“What’s wrong, Karaboshi?”

“Ah, no, it’s nothing.”

“...”

Hearing Haruki’s shaken voice, Karen turned her gaze at him.

Her look seemed as if she was about to ask “What on earth did you do?”

— It wasn’t me!

Haruki wanted to say that, but he couldn’t deny it.

In order to escape Karen’s gaze, Haruki climbed the wall.

Then, he reached a plateau.

“Is this really Kamui Rock?”

Below him lay a vast forest and a river flowing between two walls of rock. It was Kamuikotan.

The place they had arrived at after climbing up the spiraled stairs was the top of Kamui Rock.

And the place where Haruki and the others emerged was in the fissure Haruki was a bit too familiar with.

There was no way he could say “I didn’t do anything!”

“So, Karaboshi... What on earth did you do?”

“Ugh!”

Karen, who emerged from out of the fissure, stared at Haruki.

“Ah, Karen! I’m impressed you could climb through this fissure so quickly! You’ve definitely improved a lot!”

“Are you trying to change the topic?”

“Ugh!”

He was like an open book.

Haruki slowly retreated.

A smile started to appear on Karen’s face.

At the same time, a tremendous amount of energy starts emanating from her body.

Haruki shivered.

Now that he was able to see Karen’s energy, it made Karen’s smile even more dreadful.

Intimidated by Karen, Haruki got on his knees on the spot.

He then explained how he had split Kamui Rock in half.

“See, I knew it. It was you after all, Karaboshi...”

Yes, it had been his doing.

But of course, Haruki didn’t expect this to happen.

Still, Karen seemed to be aware of that as well.

With a bitter smile and a “Please consider your own strength when doing things”, no further chase was made regarding the incident in Kamui Rock.

Haruki let out a sigh of relief after being released from Karen’s questioning.

— But why did we end up here of all places?

If the idea of the stairs was just to take them out of the dungeon, it would have made more sense that they led to the entrance.

It made no sense that the stairs led to the top of Kamui Rock instead.

It was also weird that the stairs took them to the inside of the fissure Haruki made earlier.

If the fissure hadn’t been there, Haruki and the others wouldn’t have been able to go out on the other side of the stairs.

A fissure and stairs leading to the top of Kamui Rock, connected to each other.

What did this all mean...?

— Did the fissure I made create those stairs? Or were there already there and the fissure caused them to only reach that far?

An alarm bell rang inside the pondering Haruki’s brain.

He felt as if he was missing something important...

Haruki looked at the landscape from Kamui Rock in order to find out what was wrong.

There was no difference in the sky or in the forest.

The only thing that was different than before was the river.

The river looked as if it had been under a heavy rainfall.

It had a dark ocher tint, and its flow seemed violent.

Had it rained while they were exploring the dungeon?

Whatever happened, Haruki had a bad feeling about that muddy stream.



The spirits that were created by the will of the dungeon were the ones who would find qualified people and guide them to the trials as challengers.

These spirits would at times drive unqualified people away from the dungeons, and at other times appear outside the dungeons to guide the qualified ones to the right path.

Spirits were created and extinguished depending on whether they were needed or not.

When they disappear, they float in the air like bubbles.

She, too, was a spirit created by the dungeon's will.

Born as a spirit, she, like all other spirits, were supposed to have no will of their own.

However, she had an ego.

Did the dungeon make a mistake, or was it one of Samaikuru's pranks?

When she was created by the dungeon's will, noise from this ground mixed with her.

That noise gave rise to an ego which wasn't supposed to be there.

However, she had done her job perfectly without being fooled by her own ego.

The challengers that the dungeon found here had been perfectly guided to the land of trials without delay.

There had been no problem with her guidance.

If there had been a single problem with it, that would be...

— Ah, Lady Rhea. Even after I'm gone, please lead a pure, proper, and beautiful life...

She was supposed to guide the challenger to the ground and then disappear.

A soul had been born in this spirit who was supposed to be discarded after its role had been fulfilled.

— This masked man and that plain young lady... And that mischievous little brother of hers... I wonder if they will be able to properly protect Lady Rhea...

She was a bit afraid of disappearing.

She was worried about not being just a spirit meant to disappear after having fulfilled its role.

— I guess I just wanted to be with you all a little longer...

She hated the idea of disappearing like bubbles in the air.

She, Chep, had a wish.

A wish for the best future.

All while knowing that wish wouldn't come true.

Chep had no other choice but to hope.

If there was a god in this world...

If this wish of hers could be granted...

The time for her disappearance was at hand.

She knew this because her consciousness was steadily leaving her body.

Until that moment when she went completely unconscious, Chep prayed to the

heavens over and over, refraining from losing those precious memories she had gained in her short life.



— Help.

Haruki's shoulders shivered after hearing that voice so close to his ears all of a sudden.

He wondered if anyone had whispered into his ears, but there was no one around.

It was a woman's voice.

But Karen was walking a bit apart from Haruki.

Did he hallucinate it?

Haruki tilted his head to the side.

At that moment, Haruki noticed a slight feeling of discomfort.

Chep, who had been in Karen's pocket, had suddenly moved to the center of Kamui Rock.

But when?

The more he thought about it, the worse his uncomfortable feeling would get.

Chep's eyes were devoid of light.

It was as if she was sleeping with her eyes wide open.

Haruki had only seen Chep like that once so far.

That was when she was about to boil herself to death in the mixed bath.

Perhaps she had gotten sick?

"Hey, are you o-!?"

As he was about to ask if Chep was okay, his words got stuck in his throat.

A monster had suddenly appeared in front of Haruki.

It appeared without any warning, no preamble, and no indication.

It was a monster completely made out of armor.

He was piercing the ground with a greatsword, holding its handle with both hands.

Haruki's spine shivered at the sight of that jet black knight.

That jet black knight's appearance had been very unusual.

Haruki always kept his Detection skill active.

And still, he hadn't realized the monster was there until it showed itself.

It hadn't been hiding anywhere.

It was as if it had just spawned there out of nowhere.

The identity of the jet black knight was unknown.

Haruki had no way to assume how strong it was.

That in itself was very strange.

Haruki couldn't take that out of his head even for a moment.

Cold sweat ran down Haruki's back.

Furthermore, the black knight was covered with a thick layer of energy, just like Karen was.

It was overwhelmingly thicker than Haruki's.

That difference in energy made Haruki feel that there was an overwhelming difference in ability between himself and the enemy.

The primal fear he had forgotten about so long ago made him look into himself.

His instinct shouted at him to run away.

However, Haruki didn't move.

No, he couldn't move.

Overwhelmed by this black knight's presence, Haruki was unable to move a finger.

The black knight calmly stood there with his hands on the greatsword that was stuck into the ground.

There was no weak spot in his posture.

Haruki could easily imagine a future in which even if he slashed at it with all his might, the black knight would make short work of him.

— Then, what should I do...?

Karen's voice echoed inside the ears of Haruki, whose forehead was dripping with cold sweat.

"At your feet, Karaboshi!"

CHAPTER 109

LET'S DEAL WITH THE BLACK KNIGHT!

Karen, who had already put distance between the monster and herself, called out to Haruki.

A magic circle had appeared on the ground of Kamui Rock, which hadn't had anything of the sort before.

It had been drawn with energy.

And it had the exact same pattern as the one that appeared on the stage on the 10th floor of the dungeon.

"Run away, Chep!"

Haruki called out to Chep, but there was no reaction from her.

Her eyes didn't move at all.

— Did she faint?

— But why...?

He didn't know the reason, but Chep's life would be in danger if he didn't do anything.

Haruki started to move carefully.

At that moment...

The black knight, who had remained motionless so far, suddenly began to move.

"-!"

Haruki immediately steps back.

In the blink of an eye...

A jet black greatsword swung past the exact spot where Haruki had been standing.

The black knight, who had merely remained standing steadfast, now had a clear murderous intent.

That evil aura had intimidated Haruki.

That perfect stance. That strong murderous intent. That quick swing of its sword.

All of those things were ahead of Haruki.

“Ha... Haha...!”

— This is amazing.

Haruki laughed at the attack’s tremendous power.

On top of that, the enemy was fully clad in armor.

A knight wearing armor was the worst possible matchup for Haruki, who fought by detecting his opponent’s slightest muscular movements.

Its face was completely covered with a helmet. Haruki couldn’t even read his opponent’s aim by looking at its eyes.

However, it wasn’t Haruki’s first time fighting such an opponent.

During his battle against the Giant Dark Tree, he guessed his opponent’s movements without resorting to detecting the movements of its bones or muscles.

He had to make use of that battle experience.

Haruki shook off his timidity and encouraged himself.

The knight slashed at Haruki several times in quick succession.

Haruki managed to dodge each of its attacks at the last moment.

Taking even a single one of those attacks would throw him off balance.

Rhea also reacted to attacks coming from dangerous angles.

She used her Potato Stones to divert the greatsword's trajectory.

— Hmm?

At that moment, the knight's hatred moved.

His attacks were still aimed in Haruki's direction.

However, the angle from which its attacks were coming from had changed a little.

— Rhea!

Haruki noticed the knight was now attacking at an angle which would allow it to kill Rhea if it hit.

Haruki got really flustered by this, but he gradually regained his composure while dodging the knight's attacks.

The knight's attacks seemed lighter.

His murderous intent was the same. The only difference was the angle of his attacks.

— I see...

Haruki understood that the slight change in the angle of attack allowed Haruki to parry the knight's attack at the last moment.

The black knight and Chep.

And the feeling of discomfort about Kamui Rock he still hadn't been able to break free from.

Haruki had a lot of questions.

But he couldn't afford to think about them. There was no one else who would answer them.

Haruki couldn't allow himself to get distracted from the battle for even a second.

There was little he could actually do.

But if he did nothing, it would be all over.

He would be sliced in half by that knight's greatsword.

— That's why I have to concentrate.

— I have to keep focused!

Focus, think, imagine, and assume.

Carve every single one of your opponent's moves into your mind in order to imagine how it'll move.

Don't miss even the slightest habit.

Convert those images into data and use them to improve the accuracy of your predictions.

The knight's attacks and preliminary moves...

— I have to see them all!

— I have to get ourselves out of this situation!!

His thinking got faster and faster.

Haruki's brain started to get hot.

Block, avoid, sidestep.

Go around it and attack it from behind.

Haruki found a chance to attack...

— So hard!

Haruki frowned at the Magic Sword's reaction upon hitting the knight's back.

It was a sensation he had never felt before.

— Well, it's obvious. After all, it's fully clad in armor.

Haruki smiled bitterly at the words that came to his mind.

He then quickly tightened his expression.

Coincident with Haruki's attack, Rhea opened fire at the knight.

She threw countless Potato Stones out of her two nozzles.

Since they were difficult to avoid, the knight simply knocked them away with his greatsword.

— Can this guy be damaged at all?

Haruki stared at the monster.

Weakness Exploit revealed a faint light shining on the knight's body.

If there was light, then it could be damaged.

However, there was no line leading Haruki to a fatal strike.

The light that shone over various places of the knight's body only merely scratched its armor.

— What am I supposed to do, then?

Haruki was very confused.

At that moment...

“-Huh!?”

The knight's greatsword approached Haruki's eyes.

Haruki had let his guard down, and the knight had taken that opportunity.

Haruki tried to dodge the blow with all his strength.

But he didn't make it in time.

All he had time to do before the greatsword touched him was to change his center of gravity.

Haruki was certain that he was about to die.

He looked at the greatsword that would take his life.

Then, the greatsword...

Clank!

Changed its course.

The reason for that was Esta.

Esta collided with the greatsword, forcing it to change its course a little bit.

It had been but a slight change.

However, Haruki was able to match it.

He managed to block the greatsword with his Magic Sword.

The difference in power was overwhelming.

On top of that, his posture was the worst.

Haruki couldn't take the shock, and was blown backwards.

His body fell on the ground, bouncing off and ragdolling in mid-air.

In order to kill his momentum, he stabbed the ground with his two short swords as he got on all fours.

The short swords made a loud noise as they carved their way onto the ground.

After sliding for about 10 meters, Haruki finally killed the attack's momentum.

He was able to take the attack without sustaining any injuries.

However, the aftershock of his sliding caused his limbs to go numb.

The knight's attack still made Haruki go dizzy.

It was an absurd amount of power.

But Haruki was still alive.

"Ha... Haha!"

A moment that swayed between life and death.

Haruki's body burned with passion after having his life nearly snatched away from him.

The tension had reached its limit and was causing his entire body to tremble.

This knight was clearly superior to the Lizardman Haruki had fought against before.

This would be a monster he could find anywhere between the 35th and 40th floor of a dungeon.

Haruki felt that even approaching it would be a bad idea.

Even so, Haruki stood against it.

It wouldn't do to just let himself die without doing anything in the face of such an overwhelming threat.

Even if he was going to die, he would do so while facing his opponent.

Such are these creatures called adventurers.

Haruki encouraged his numb limbs and got back on his feet.

Even though he had just managed to get up, the knight was already preparing his next attack.

— Move.

— Move!!

Haruki shouted silently.

However, he wouldn't make it in time.

And Haruki knew that.

Still, he shouted.

— Move.

— Move, you useless body!!

Haruki did not give up and managed to move.

The next moment...

Vroooooommm!!

A dazzling light came crashing down from the heavens and fell on the black knight's head.

A roaring sound echoed.

It shook Haruki's mask.

Tiny pieces of crushed rock splattered about and made noises as they hit Haruki's mask.

Upon hearing those noises, Haruki quickly started moving again.

That dazzling light had been one of Karen's lightning bolts.

She must have been charging it up for quite some time. It had been greater than

anything Haruki had seen before.

It had been so powerful that if it had struck down on a Werewolf instead, it would have left nothing more than its charred remains.

Karen's attack had been a direct hit.

However, Haruki didn't let his guard down.

The monster before him didn't even bend the knee after being struck by lightning.

Worst case scenario, it could have failed to even stun it.

Fearing that, Haruki went around the knight.

His fears had come true.

The knight's greatsword crashed onto the exact spot where Haruki had been.

If he had stood there for another second trying to guess it's next move, he surely would have been split in half.

"Let's run away, Karen!"

"Yes!"

Haruki shouted.

They weren't a match for this opponent.

It was pointless to throw away their lives in a battle they couldn't win.

That's why Haruki chose to escape.

However...

"-Gah!!"

Far ahead from Haruki, Karen had been sent flying.

— What on earth!?

Haruki immediately put himself on guard.

The knight hadn't moved from where he had attacked Haruki earlier.

However, his hands weren't holding a weapon.

The thing that had sent Karen flying was the knight's greatsword.

Perhaps the knight had thrown his weapon at Karen as she started to run away.

The thrown greatsword fell on the ground, making a loud noise.

"Wha..."

Even though he was in the middle of a fight where he couldn't allow himself to be distracted for even a second, Haruki was still surprised.

Haruki never imagined that their opponent would attack by throwing his weapon.

He was furious with himself for not realizing that before.

How could he fail to predict the knight could do such a thing?

Even Haruki himself could attack by throwing his short swords.

He should have always considered that the enemy too could attack by throwing their weapons.

His next thought gave him the shivers.

— What if there are other monsters out there that can fight like that...?

Haruki quickly went to check on Karen, who lay on the ground.

Had she managed to block the attack or had it been a direct hit?

Thankfully, she hadn't sustained any serious injuries like having a severed limb or anything like that.

Still, Karen had been on the receiving end of the knight's attack.

After being hit by the thrown greatsword, Karen was sent flying and then she rolled on the ground for quite a distance.

Having rolled on the ground with such a terrifying momentum caused her Werewolf Robe to become tattered.

The once nearly-white robe was now stained with blood everywhere.

Even so, Karen was still alive.

After confirming that Karen was alive, Haruki put weight on his reasoning in order to suppress his intense rage.

Haruki didn't have much of a grip on the knight's movements yet.

But they, on the other hand, had been driven to a corner.

The knight seemed to be impervious to Haruki's attacks, and could easily block Rhea's Potato Stones with its greatsword.

Even the tankiest member of the team, Esta, had a slight crack on its carapace after its previous collision with the greatsword.

It also seemed to be undamaged by Karen's lightning bolts.

The team's main source of damage, Karen, had been sent flying by the thrown greatsword and fainted.

They had literally run out of options.

They had been completely defeated.

— This is the worst possible scenario...

Their situation was terrible.

Haruki thought they wouldn't be able to make it back to the stairs.

He had been lenient.

Because of that, Karen had been injured.

— I should have realized earlier that we had to run away...

All of this had happened because of his error in judgment.

Haruki bit hard into his own lips.

As Haruki stared at it, the jet black knight began to calmly approach him.

The roaring sound of the muddy stream flowing through Kamuikotan echoed into his ears.

It was flowing even more violently than before.

At the end of Haruki's line of sight, a dazed Chep appeared.

Her mouth seemed as if she was having a hard time breathing, and her tears overflowed from her eyes.

— That shape she's making with her mouth is...

The roaring sound of the muddy stream echoing in his ears.

Unfading, unceasing, and unabated.

His concentration made a single second last an eternity.

His thinking accelerated, and countless factors ran through his brain.

Kamuikotan. A muddy stream, a fissure, and the best salmon.

A special quest from the messenger of the lower gods.

"Ah, I see..."

Haruki finally noticed the true nature of his discomfort.

Having returned from the depths of his consciousness, Haruki stood upright.

His thought process continued at the deepest part of his consciousness.

The battle atop Kamui Rock wasn't over yet.

This was, so to speak, a sidequest.

This was a continuation of the "event" of defeating the Black Fishman.

An evil god had arrived at Kamuikotan.

The evil god had sank the Ainu, who went up and downstream, down the river.

Samaikuru took a stand against this evil god.

The Kamuy, Samaikuru and the other spirits that resided in Kamuikotan, joined forces to defeat the evil god that had threatened that place.

To thank the gods, the Ainu started to offer them the best salmon they could fish out of the river.

That's the legend of Kamuikotan.

Due to being passed down by oral tradition, the details vary depending on the Ainu village it's being told, but that's the general gist of the story.

If this quest was based on that legend, the best salmon would have been offered to call a god for help.

It wouldn't have been a means to summon an evil god.

In other words, Chep hadn't been the one who called this black knight.

The one who had called this black knight, who had been selected to play the part of the evil god, had been the dungeon itself.

The dungeon's event placed Haruki and the others as the helpful gods that would come to save Kamuikotan, using Chep to lead them into this battle.

It was all meant to take them atop of Kamui Rock, the site where the fierce battle between Samaikuru and the evil god once took place.

According to the Skill Board, Chep had the special skill “Spirit”.

If this meant that she had been created in the dungeon...

If this “Spirit” skill was meant to control the progress of this quest...

And the right to be alive was given to her only while the quest is in progress...

— Then maybe she’s already...

Haruki felt a bit of desolation that passed like a cold draft.

But more than that, he got angry with himself.

The motionless Chep’s mouth started to move.

That movement led to words.

— I want to live.

— I want to live.

— I don’t want to go yet.

Her strong desire for survival shook Haruki’s heart.

CHAPTER 110

LET'S STRIKE BACK AGAINST THE BLACK KNIGHT!

Her strong desire for survival shook Haruki's heart.

At that moment, Haruki's thoughts accelerated dramatically.

His concentration broke through its maximum limit.

All of his efforts were put into breaking the deadlock they were currently in.

Right away, Haruki felt a sense of discomfort.

It was energy.

All of Kamui Rock was covered by energy.

The mountains and the forest weren't covered by anything.

But despite this, only Kamui Rock was covered by energy, just like the dungeon.

— In other words, this is...

The moment he was convinced of it, he heard it loud in his mind.

— This is a dungeon!

Had it always been like that, or was it a recent change?

In either case, it was clear that they were in a dungeon. The entirety of Kamui Rock was filled with something that wasn't found in nature.

If this was a dungeon, then he would be able to take out his Skill Board.

Just as Haruki thought, the Skill Board appeared in his hands without delay.

To turn the tides of this battle...

To avoid the worst possible outcome...

Haruki tapped on the board as hard as he could.

Skill Points: 3 → 0

—Agility < + 1 > → < + 2 >

└ Quickness 5

└ Dexterity 5

The knight was far superior to him in terms of physical strength and technology skills.

However, Haruki was slightly on par with it in terms of Quickness.

This was due to his enhancement of both his Kokko Feather Necklace and his Agility tree.

By further increasing his Agility, he should be quick enough to avoid the knight's attacks and escape.

However, Haruki had already kicked the escape option down Kamui Rock's cliff.

Haruki was an adventurer and there was a monster in front of him.

There was only one thing he could do.

He quickly put the board away and prepared his short sword.

The black knight probably noticed Haruki's murderous intent, as he stopped walking briefly and turned its face, which was hidden behind the helmet, towards him.

Hostility and an urge to kill filled the air.

The knight didn't have his greatsword with him.

As long as he didn't pick it up, Haruki could turn the tides of this battle.

While Haruki was thinking that, the black knight held out its hand.

The next moment...

The greatsword had returned to its hand.

“-Tsk!”

Did it have the same properties as a Skill Board?

Haruki never imagined that it would be able to recover its greatsword without picking it up.

Still, it had recovered its weapon, and there was nothing he could do about it.

Haruki focused all of his consciousness into the battle at hand.

“Rhea!”

Rhea opened fire at Haruki’s signal.

All of her shots were deflected.

Anticipating this, Haruki sped up.

He got behind the knight and slashed at it with his short sword.

Its defense was strong.

Haruki’s attack was nothing more than a scratch on its armor.

But this time, he wasn’t in a hurry.

His consciousness was focused on nothing more than toying with his opponent.

Focus, gather, bundle, and collect his thoughts.

Concentrate his conscience, compressed to its utmost limits, into that single point of battle.

Observe its conduct, perceive its behavior, predict its attacks.

Counterattack, revise, and retry.

Thanks to the Skill Board's enhancements, Haruki's was now a bit faster than the black knight.

However, since he was still not used to his new Agility, his movements were a bit too unnecessary.

This created a gap which the black knight did not waste.

And the timing for it couldn't have been better.

Awesome reflexes and a terrifying technique.

It was something absolutely nasty.

That attack...

Clank!!

...Was also blocked by Esta.

However, Esta didn't come out of that attack unharmed.

The crack on his carapace had broadened due to the impact.

"Esta! Don't overdo it!"

"(wiggles)"

Esta shook his feelers sideways as if saying "I'm okay!"

"All right..."

Haruki was worried that his friends would get hurt.

But he pulled himself together.

Rhea started firing a barrage of Potato Stones.

During that time, Haruki back-stepped in order to regain his posture.

The knight was uprightly deflecting Rhea's Potato Stones.

— But it simply blocks my attacks with its body instead... No way!

Haruki had enhanced the Potato Stones in the deepest part of the Kamuikotan dungeon.

Haruki guessed that the knight didn't use its own body to block the Potato Stones as it did with his short sword because it was aware of the enhanced stones' high potential.

— That's actually quite possible.

Haruki quickly put a strategy together.

He shared it with Rhea and Esta.

"Let's go!"

Haruki raised his voice as he approached the knight.

The knight wasn't able to react in time due to Haruki reducing his preliminary movements to zero thanks to the technique he learned from Shigure.

Gritting his teeth, Haruki swung down with his short swords with all his strength.

His target was... the greatsword.

Clang!!

The Magic Sword and the Werewolf Short Sword came into contact with the greatsword almost at the same time.

A golden spark flashed in the space between Haruki and the black knight.

The swords were in contact with each other for less than a second.

Being inferior in physical power, Haruki was easily pushed backwards.

However, that interval of a decimal of a second, it was possible for him to deliver three blows.

In the short time that Haruki had given her, Rhea shot with all her might.

Ratatatat!!

All of the Potato Stones that Rhea threw hit the knight's mask directly.

Each hit caused the mask to dent little by little.

Due to those direct hits, the knight lost is balance.

Its body leant back in a big way.

The knight then promptly lowered one of its knees.

It must have been trying to avoid leaving itself open by falling.

The knight avoided the fall at the last minute.

However...

"Now I'll return the favor!"

Behind the knight...

With her forehead still bleeding, Karen stood holding her staff aloft.



When the greatsword hit her body, Karen couldn't understand what had happened to her.

She didn't even realize she was being attacked.

It wasn't strange that Karen couldn't see the knight's attack coming, since she didn't have the physical abilities that someone who fights in the front lines would have.

It wasn't until she had regained consciousness that she realized she had been attacked.

Her entire body was in intense pain.

“Uh... Ugh...”

It hurt so much she was about to cry.

Her entire body would scream just by her moving her fingertips.

She didn't want to move at all.

Karen's fighting spirit had been completely shattered by the first major injury of her life.

The high-pitched sound of clashing iron made her way into her ears.

— Karaboshi...

Then she realized.

Haruki was still fighting with that fiendish knight.

The moment she noticed that, she regained her fighting spirit.

— I can't be dozing off here. I can't leave this all to him. I can't let myself go back to being useless!

Gritting her teeth, Karen desperately forced her aching body to move.

As she sat up straight, she felt her blood dripping down her forehead.

Trying to ignore her terrible headache and rough breath, Karen gripped her staff tightly.

There was a clear trace of Karen's trajectory over the ground.

The trace went on for about 10 meters ahead of where Karen was sitting.

Karen understood just how terrifying that attack had been judging from that trace.

But even with that attack, the knight hadn't been able to knock Karen out completely

thanks to the armor and bracelet she was wearing.

She had gotten that bracelet from the capsule the hero Masatsugu had given her.

By sending power to it, Karen's body was covered with a protective film.

This film increased Karen's defense by several levels.

The bracelet was a magical piece of equipment exclusively for magic users that boosted defense by consuming one's own energy.

Karen stood up using her staff as support.

At the same time, she didn't forget to pour energy into her staff.

Every time Karen reorganized her mind to understand the situation, a violent anger flared up within her.

Anger with her feeble self, who wasn't able to damage the knight even after having her Magic tree enhanced.

Anger with her pitiful self, who let herself become disheartened and left Haruki to fight by himself.

And above all, anger with the unreasonable embodiment of power standing before them.

Karen didn't seem to be satisfied with just having to vent out about having been defeated with a single strong attack.

That was just resentment. Nothing but lashing out.

However, that feeling still flared up inside Karen.

Still, contrary to her emotions, Karen calmly analyzed the situation.

If this were Akane versus the Spoon Worms, Akane would be swallowed by them.

Karen knew she had to distance herself from that useless flow.

In order to do that, she couldn't attack the monster like she had before.

Even with her most powerful magic, she hadn't been able to even stun him for less than a second.

Magic didn't work against the knight.

Could that be the case?

Karen wondered to herself.

Karen's lightning bolts had been able to affect even the Dungeon Lord, who was a huge tree.

So long as her opponent had a physical body, her attacks would definitely deal damage.

If the knight was impervious to magic, then there must be some reason behind it, like something that gave it an immense resistance to magical attacks.

— Could it be that armor it's wearing?

It had also been the greatest lightning bolt she had conjured so far...

While she kept on thinking, Haruki kept on fighting.

— I want to help him, quick!

Her impatience turned into energy which flowed into her staff.

Her staff had gathered a huge amount of energy, almost to the point of being out of control.

However, thanks to her enhanced Magic tree, Karen was able to control it at the last moment.

— I have to make this hit.

To seize the great chance that had presented itself during this battle.

Karen slowly approached the place where the two were fighting.

She desperately chased after the movements of both Haruki and the knight.

As she watched them fight, the chance finally appeared.

Haruki, who had been assessing the situation, was now getting on the offensive.

Karen, who didn't fail to notice that, began to run.

To turn her energy into magic...

Wouldn't this be beneficial for the knight?

In other words, if she could hit the knight with her raw energy without converting it into magical power...

With that in mind, Karen held her staff aloft.

— If I can't use magic...

— Then I have to pour my raw energy directly into my attack.

Haruki had blocked the greatsword with his two short swords.

Rhea had used that chance to fire at the knight.

The knight had bent backwards after being hit directly by Rhea's attack.

Karen stood behind the knight.

This was the chance she had been waiting for.

— Now I'll return the favor!

Karen made a full swing with her staff behind the knight's head.

The energy that had been gathered at the tip of her staff bursted in a wild explosion.

Karen's attack, which had been dealt directly with her powerful magic staff...

...Blew the knight's defenses away.

Boom!!

“Wah!?”

The knight’s helmet burst open as if it had melted.

Haruki, who saw the firepower of Karen’s magic staff attack first-hand, was surprised at the impact.

If it had been a regular monster, the blow would have been deadly.

But for this knight, such injury was not fatal.

There was no head inside the helmet.

The knight itself had no body.

Normally, Haruki would have relaxed his stance a little with the conviction of having won after such an attack.

But he didn’t change his offensive stance.

He immediately chased after the knight.

However, Karen was faster than him.

Vroooooommm!

A lightning bolt that struck from above broke through the knight’s armor.

The shock of her own attack sent Karen flying back.

No, it wasn’t just a shock.

No such strong shockwave had been generated.

Karen jumped backwards in response with the shock, in order to avoid any counterattacks from the knight.

“Karen, here!!”

Realizing her intention, Haruki quickly reached for his backpack, took of the mask that was attached there, and threw it at Karen.

It was the mask that had the ability to hide one's presence.

Karen was currently the main source of damage against the knight.

With her strong attacks, she was sure to attract a lot of aggression from it.

But Karen had no means to escape the knight's attacks.

In that case, there was no other choice but to have her wear that mask that would deceive the knight's eyes.

She seemed to have understood Haruki's intentions.

Her face seemed a bit uncomfortable, but still she pressed the mask against her face.

Immediately, Karen's presence diminished.

Seeing that, Haruki went pale.

"What a dreadful ability!!"

It was truly a fiendish mask.

If Haruki were to equip it by mistake...

Just like that, Karaboshi Haruki could disappear from the face of the earth!

Even being near that mask could put his presence at risk.

The mere thought of her presence being gradually diminished by it gave Haruki the chills.

"Uhh..."

An intense chill ran down Karen's spine.

The continuous use of her magic staff and lightning bolts caused her body temperature

to drop sharply.

Normally, one would feel tired after spending energy.

It makes it difficult to keep focused, and the core of one's body would become heavy.

The reason why her temperature had dropped so dramatically was probably because she had used a large amount of energy in a very short time.

In addition, she had the usual symptoms of having consumed energy added to that.

Her body felt as heavy as lead.

She couldn't fight for a while like that.

As Haruki instructed, she put on the mask while trying to suppress the shaking of her own body.

All while trying not to imagine the mask's horrendous visage as much as possible...

CHAPTER 111

LET'S DEFEAT THE BLACK KNIGHT!

Haruki got excited to see Karen holding the mask with her two hands as her body trembled.

— She really does seem pleased with equipping that mask, huh?

— Did she want to have a mask that hides her presence!?

— You should have told me earlier!!

Haruki decided that he would give Karen the mask as a gift.

He was sure she would love it.

— Anyway...

Haruki changed his focus of attention.

After being hit by a lightning strike, a thick, smoldering smoke started to emanate from the black knight's body.

Karen's series of lightning bolts had certainly reduced its health in a big way.

However, the less health it had, the more the hatred that filled its armor grew.

Even Haruki, who had the advantage of being faster than the knight, couldn't easily attack the knight.

However, Haruki had seen Karen's attack.

Haruki couldn't simply stay calm after seeing Karen's success, the huge leap in her abilities, and her growth as an adventurer.

"Ha... Haha!!"

— This is good.

— This is really good!!

Her position, standing with her gaze fixed in what would come next.

Her excellent timing, following up on Haruki's attack.

Karen's attack had been a beautiful display of power that didn't rely in a single magical attack.

On top of that, the speed at which she had followed up with her lightning and how she retreated instantly after that.

Karen had definitely turned the tide of the battle.

And even after getting the best possible result, she never let her guard down.

The fruits of her training with Akane were definitely starting to show.

Just as he was impressed with Karen's growth, something frustrated Haruki.

— She stands out so much! I'm so jealous!!

Haruki laughed fiercely.

As a fellow adventurer, Haruki could only say good things about Karen's performance.

Haruki, who wished for a strong presence, couldn't allow himself to remain silent in this situation where only Karen was standing out.

Haruki had seen Karen's attack.

He had perceived all of it.

Then, he would...

— I'll stand out more, way more than Karen!!

Haruki bolstered his focus.

The knight stood in front of him, slowly preparing its greatsword.

Its murderous intent flickered, more poisonous than ever.

In the blink of an eye...

The knight approached Haruki.

It swung its greatsword horizontally.

Haruki avoided the roaring greatsword.

Then went around the knight for an attack.

However, Haruki's attack was blocked by the armor.

The knight turned instantly.

Haruki took a step back.

Another slash...

And the greatsword's tip nearly scratched the surface of his mask.

The knight was speeding up, getting closer to Haruki's speed.

That ability it had to show its full potential when cornered was almost human-like.

— But this is good.

— This is really good!!

“Ha... Haha!!”

His brain accelerated.

His body heated up.

His enjoyment started to surface.

Laughter, laughter, laughter.

Concentrate, integrate, imagine, and assume.

Recall the input image and overlay it on your body.

Haruki had already stored the knight's movements into his memory.

Stored and understood.

A slight preliminary movement, which was a force of habit.

It would move the tip of its greatsword sideways, about 3 millimeters.

That would be the knight's cue.

He could tell the angle from the position of its elbows and hips, and the momentum from its knees and ankles.

It was a matter of calculating where such an attack would hit, and avoid it based on that calculation.

He would always get his prediction right.

Everytime he was right, Haruki would get pins and needles in his chest.

The knight was still more powerful than him.

But Haruki was faster.

Therefore, the knight's attacks could never touch Haruki again.

The greatsword cut through the air several times.

Haruki's evasion was still at the last possible moment.

But at the same time, there was an unavoidable gap.

To the knight, it might have seemed as if Haruki was walking on a tightrope.

However, Haruki was enjoying it.

It would grow faster in a short amount of time.

Moving at such speed was fun.

Haruki was completely absorbed in his speed.

He thought it would be at the level of Kagemitsu, Shigure, or maybe even Masatsugu.

The top rankers would definitely be able to reach these superhuman levels of speed.

— More.

— More!!

Haruki seemed happy.

The slightest mistake would be fatal.

Even so, Haruki was laughing.

Haruki matched the knight's movements as he laughed.

— Alright! It's my turn now.

Haruki poured his energy into his Magic Sword.

The way to pour one's energy into something was to get the feeling the first time you try it.

Then, the rest was easy.

Just imitate Karen.

That's all there was to it.

As Haruki tightened his grip, energy flowed into the Magic Sword.

The blade became sharper as if to please Haruki's energy.

The sword itself would become heavier if it exceeded the amount of energy put into it inside the dungeon.

The actual weight of the sword didn't change.

In order to hold a weapon charged with energy, one would need to have the same amount of energy.

If you put all your heart into it, your weapon would become too heavy to be able to use it for attacking.

Haruki steadily put his energy into the Magic Sword while searching for the right place to stop.

At one point, the Magic Sword let Haruki know that he had reached that place.

So Haruki stopped pouring energy into it at that moment.

It felt quite heavier.

But that was exactly why it was good.

A blow with this would certainly be heavier, too.

— This is good.

— Amazing!

Haruki's grin grew bigger.

For the first time, the knight was alert of Haruki's movements.

— It would have been great if he wasn't this alert, though...

Apparently, it wasn't that easy to land a fully-energized attack.

However, Haruki wasn't disappointed.

His preparations were almost done.

Haruki approached using his Shukuchi.

His short sword flashed on the knight's chest, who couldn't match his movement quickly enough.

But the knight dodged the hit.

Then, it counterattacked.

Haruki had no room to avoid it.

Esta jumped from Haruki's waist and collided with the greatsword again.

At that moment...

The knight's greatsword sustained so much damage at its base that it broke in two.

The knight seemed upset about having lost its weapon.

It didn't have a face, or even a head for that matter.

But its humanlike aura was shaken on a grand scale.

The knight wouldn't have expected his weapon to be destroyed at the moment Haruki stabbed at it.

However, Haruki had predicted that that would happen.

That was because not only Rhea, Karen, and himself, but also Esta... all of them were wearing themselves out during the battle.

The specialty of the Centipede species such as Esta wasn't defense.

It was Armor Break.

When its carapace took damage...

Esta would tell Haruki "It's okay. Trust me."

So, Haruki believed in Esta.

He trusted that he would be able to destroy the knight's weapon.

And Esta's efforts had come to fruition.

The knight's attack had been completely disrupted after its greatsword broke.

This caused the knight to leave its biggest opening so far in this battle.

Haruki didn't miss this chance.

Haruki swung down with his energized Magic Sword with all his strength.

Right before Haruki's Magic Sword could come into contact with the knight's armor...

"-!?"

The knight struggled.

It extended its open hand to try to catch Haruki's short sword.

If he were to stop his attack with that, it would mean Haruki would have to go back to the drawing board.

However, Haruki didn't lose any momentum at all.

That's because...

Ratatatat!!

Whenever the clutches of evil would try to reach Haruki...

Rhea would drive them away.

Rhea pulverized the knight's hand.

The knight had literally nothing else to stop the blow with.

"It's checkmate!"

At the same time, Haruki's Magic Sword touched the knight's chest.

At that very moment...

Weakness Exploit's light flickered intensely.

Haruki's attack cut through the knight's chest, reaching the back of the armor on the other side.

And that wasn't all.

The remaining energy ended up splitting the knight's armor in half.

The shock sent the knight's torn armor flying back.

Haruki's attack passed through the knight's armor and again created a crack in a straight line on Kamui Rock.

On the other side of Haruki's field of vision...

A smile appeared on Chep's face, who until that point had remained expressionless, as if she had died.

She was a spirit.

Like an event-exclusive NPC inside the dungeon.

-So when this subjugation event is over, then...

As if to affirm Haruki's expectation, Chep's body silently began to fade until it disappeared.

The only thing she had left behind were the tears that had spilled from her eyes...

Haruki cautiously got back up as soon as the shockwave had subsided.

He looked around and confirmed the silence of the shattered knight.

Haruki looked around and gazed at the landscape.

The river of Kamuikotan had regained its beautiful flow.

The landscape looked so natural and enormous.

Even if he were to reach out to it, there was no way he could touch it, but he would get the illusion that he was about to reach it.

Haruki's heart was filled with even stronger emotions than when he unexpectedly arrived there for the first time.

The overflowing colors of life were more beautiful than any landscape photograph taken by a professional photographer he saw at his former job.

More than something he could have seen in a photograph, it felt like a landscape he had obtained with his own strength.

— Did we win?

There weren't any hostile entities within Haruki's Detection range.

Taking a short breath of relief...

Haruki collapsed onto the floor like a marionette whose strings had been cut loose.

Before his consciousness vanished, the sky reflected in Haruki's eyes seemed to be so close that he felt as if he could reach it.



Immediately after defeating the black knight, Haruki and the others lost consciousness due to level-up sickness almost at the same time.

It was something usual for Haruki, but not so much for Karen, Rhea, or Esta. None of them had been knocked unconscious by it before.

"You always faint due to level-up sickness like it's no big deal, Karaboshi... I thought I was going to die..."

It seemed to be the first time she had felt a pain so sharp that had caused her to faint.

Karen said that with a serious and pale face.

“But it’s more comfortable than dying, don’t you think?”

“Huh? So this feeling isn’t strange for you, Karaboshi?”

— I mean, have you ever died before?

— You wouldn’t be here if you had.

Haruki and the others checked on themselves while telling such jokes.

First, they tended to their wounds.

Karen’s biggest injury was the one she sustained on her forehead, which seemed to have started to heal after they applied some ointment to it.

Many blood vessels are gathered on the head. As a result, a large amount of blood flowed out.

The wound disappeared completely, and Haruki let out a sigh of relief.

Rhea had a lot of damaged leaves. Some of her thinner stems had also been broken.

This was because when Haruki was blown away by his attack, and later fainted he had fallen on his back.

So it had been mostly because of Haruki.

Rare’s wounds got better by putting some of the recovery medicine purchased at the tool shop in her planter’s soil.

It was made from materials collected in the dungeon that could heal even the wounds of plants.

Next, it was Esta’s turn to get his broken carapace treated, but...

“Come on...”

Haruki applied the ointment to his carapace many times, but the cracks wouldn’t heal.

Then he tried with the recovery medicine, but to no avail.

Moreover, the cracks in Esta's carapace seemed to be growing larger.

"Hey, Esta, are you okay!?"

"Ah, don't move!"

Esta began to squirm away, almost as if he was feeling no pain despite his wounds.

After seeing that, Haruki and Karen tried to restrain him.

But it was too late.

Esta's carapace made a loud noise as it split into two.

"N... No way...!"

"Esta..."

Both of their faces went extremely pale.

Then...

Slowly and steadily, Esta comes out of his broken carapace.

"Huh?"

"Eh?"

Neither Haruki nor Karen could understand what was happening in front of them.

It was as if another Esta had come out from inside, leaving the broken Esta's body behind.

There was no way they could have understood what had happened at first.

The newly born Esta had turned into an even deeper shade of crimson than before.

And the broken carapace that he had left behind looked like some kind of cicada shell.

"Don't tell me... he was shedding his skin?"

“I got scared for a minute there...”

After realizing what had really happened, the two seemed relieved to see Esta squirming around looking for earthworms like usual.

Haruki stored Esta’s broken shell as it would surely be useful for something.

Then he collected the shattered pieces of the black knight’s armor.

After they were done collecting the shards, Karen looked at the center of Kamui Rock with a troubled expression.

“Did Chep summon that monster here?”

“I don’t think that’s what Chep wanted to do. All Chep did was set the event in motion.”

Chep’s body had already disappeared.

Her body was gone shortly after the event had finished.

The “Spirit” skill that appeared on the Skill Board indicated she was the one who would play such a role during the event.

The reason why her abilities were displayed on the Skill Board wasn’t because Haruki had tamed her.

It was because Haruki’s own spirit was directly related to the “Spirit” that would set the event in motion.

That’s the only thing that could explain the fact that Chep had seen Haruki in the hot springs, despite him not wearing his mask at the time, and Chep not having any Detection skills.

Still, Haruki couldn’t understand what was the purpose of her “Princess” skill.

— How could someone like her be a princess anyway?

Haruki’s heart felt a little heavy as that thought crossed his mind.

Haruki looked at the sunset-colored sky.

The sky, which had seemed to be so close before, now seemed to be very far away.

“It feels a bit lonely around here, don’t you think?”

CHAPTER 112

APXH

Haruki glanced at Karen after she had said that.

He had been fed up with that troublesome spirit.

She may have been troublesome, but now that she was gone, even he wondered...

“Hmm...?”

Haruki’s eyes opened up wide when he saw the place where Chep would have been.

A pattern, which wasn’t a magic circle for a change, was written there.

[Thank you for everything up until now]

They were words of farewell.

The one who wrote them... was Chep.

[It was a short life, but my memories of the time I’ve spent with you all shine radiantly in my mind. Particularly, the best memory I have was when I first met with Lady Rhea. Oh, Lady Rhea...

Ah, yes, by the way, Lady Rhea wakes up at 5 AM, so make sure to wake up at 4 AM to fetch water for her, and to sing a song at her in order to encourage a refreshing awakening before the rising sun for her–]

“It’s so long!”

Stopping halfway, Haruki complained at the length of her letter.

She was supposed to have been laying dead all this time, and yet she had the time to write such a lengthy message.

Rhea, who was reading behind Haruki, hung her leaves feebly.

— Yeah, it's a long read.

Haruki laughed as he imagined just what kind of torture Rhea would have had to endure in the few days that Chep had spent with them.

“Then, make sure to wipe Rhea's leaves one by one every day. Try to give her some water from the hot springs from time to time. Umm, what else...?”

“Hey.”

Haruki pushed his temples hard to endure his headache.

At the end of the lengthy message, there was someone still writing on the ground with their fingers. A Fishwoman.

She was about half the size she had before, but... There was no mistaking her.

“Chep!”

“How come you're still alive!?”

“Huh!?”

As soon as he called out to her, Chep's body disappeared.

The light that floated from the place where her body had disappeared was absorbed by Karen's bracelet.

“...”

“...”

Haruki and Karen stared at the bracelet, completely at a loss for words.

Then, the light emerged from the bracelet and flew to the shadow of the weeds that grew from the place where the rock had been split into two.

Chep's body appeared from the shadow of those weeds.

“(shakes?)”

“..”

“..”

That Fishwoman emerged from the tall grass.

Does she want to make friends?

“I’ll throw her off the cliff right now.”

“Yes.”

“W-Wait a moment, please!!”

Chep approached Karen and clung to her leg with tears in her eyes.

Karen smiled awkwardly at Chep, who looked at her with puppy eyes as if begging to not be thrown off the cliff.

“What should we do? Should we throw her off?”

“P-Please refrain from doing such a thing!”

Haruki puffed up his lips in discontent.

Of course, he had no complaints about her having survived.

Chep, who they thought had died, was alive.

The surviving Fishwoman had been writing an absurdly long list.

Emotions mixed and swirled around her stupid self after considering her feelings a little.

“No matter what we do, but...”

— We have no choice but to throw her off the cliff, right?

Haruki, who was about to complete his sentence, stopped talking after he saw the reaction on Karen's bracelet.

A small light-blue jewel had appeared in Karen's bracelet, which had had no decoration at all up until that point.

It fit perfectly inside a hole on the bracelet.

There was one possible theory.

Before Chep's soul was lost, Karen's bracelet took it in.

And that light-blue jewel was created as a result.

Haruki thought his theory should be close enough to the correct answer as Chep had already shown to turn into light and jump into the bracelet.

Was it because the bracelet was able to capture Chep's soul since she was the "spirit" created by the dungeon?

In any case, Karen's bracelet had changed from an useful magical tool that enhanced her defensive power to an annoying magical tool that housed an even more annoying Fishwoman.

"I'm glad you've obtained such a rare piece of equipment."

"I-It's just like you, Karaboshi!"

Karen smiled, though her face seemed to be about to cry.

It was a painful smile that would pierce into anyone's heart.

— Why does she look like that if she's saying that it's "just like me"?

Haruki was a bit embarrassed, but still sympathized with her feelings.

<< Successfully subdued the Lesser God "αρχη" (Arche) >>

<< Special quest cleared >>

<< Quest reward: 10 Skill Points >>

<< Obtained Skill: Divine Energy>>



[Asahikawa] Let's talk about Kamuikotan 56 [Sacred Place]

623 Name: Anonymous who waits for salmon at the river banks

So yeah, Kamui Rock was a dungeon

Looks like an adventurer I know was investigating the place and found that out

624 Name: Anonymous who waits for salmon at the river banks

So it wasn't the entrance to the dungeon but a dungeon itself?

How did they find out?

625 Name: Anonymous who waits for salmon at the river banks

It's a trade secret

Take a guess

626 Name: Anonymous who waits for salmon at the river banks

Ah, you used a secret "Skill", got it

627 Name: Anonymous who waits for salmon at the river banks

Come on lol

628 Name: Anonymous who waits for salmon at the river banks

Anyway, there was something big inside, huh?

That Dungeon Lord...

Did it go inactive?

629 Name: Anonymous who waits for salmon at the river banks

Did that guy beat us to it already?

630 Name: Anonymous who waits for salmon at the river banks

I'm sure it has only been beaten once before

It was Masatsugu who defeated it, right? It's been so long ago...

I've heard that some raid teams have been organized recently, but still...

Really, if it wasn't a raid team, who could be that strong to defeat that thing? They'd need to be at Masatsugu's level or something

631 Name: Anonymous who waits for salmon at the river banks

Even if you could collect its materials

I don't think there's anyone who could be that strong to not fight it as part of a raid team or something

Are you sure your info is legit?

632 Name: Anonymous who waits for salmon at the river banks

Maybe something else happened that caused it to go dormant...

But in any case, it looked like it had been defeated

633 Name: Anonymous who waits for salmon at the river banks

Who could have defeated it other than Masatsugu...?

634 Name: Anonymous who waits for salmon at the river banks

Well, Kagemitsu recently hosted an event in Kamuikotan

Some strong adventurers gathered in Hokkaido, right?

Maybe one of those adventurers did it

635 Name: Anonymous who waits for salmon at the river banks

Ah

Maybe all of them just went after the event and took it down?

636 Name: Anonymous who waits for salmon at the river banks

It would have been quite the news in the forums if everyone joined forces to defeat it, don't you think?

637 Name: Anonymous who waits for salmon at the river banks

But then, who would have been able to defeat the Dungeon Lord?

Maybe Team Dandy, who are led by Guts?

638 Name: Anonymous who waits for salmon at the river banks

Team Dandy is on par with Team Aerial's level

It wouldn't be weird if they took it down

639 Name: Anonymous who waits for salmon at the river banks

But the blogs are rather silent about it

If someone posted about it, they would be standing out a lot, and they'll probably be approached by companies

If it had been me who defeated the Dungeon Lord, there would be no way I won't post it on my blog about it

640 Name: Anonymous who waits for salmon at the river banks

Then who else is out there?

641 Name: Anonymous who waits for salmon at the river banks

Our boy Mr. Masked Man of course

642 Name: Anonymous who waits for salmon at the river banks

>> 641

Well then, aren't we a fan of Mr. Masked Man?

It's true the Masked Man tends to do that kind of thing

But I don't know what to think lol

643 Name: Anonymous who waits for salmon at the river banks

If that Masked Man is the one behind this, then I'm curious as to why did he defeat the Dungeon Lord

The Dungeon Lord has a ridiculous amount of health

There's little profit in defeating it for anything other than its materials

644 Name: Anonymous who waits for salmon at the river banks

Maybe he just wanted to defeat the dungeon?

645 Name: Anonymous who waits for salmon at the river banks

I can see the combo of "Become my followers" → *we refuse* → *we get slaughtered*

646 Name: Anonymous who waits for salmon at the river banks

And then that Masked Man will finally become a Demon Lord...

647 Name: Anonymous who waits for salmon at the river banks

Maybe that Masked Man did defeat the Dungeon Lord?

He did come by the store yesterday to sell wood

648 Name: Anonymous who waits for salmon at the river banks

Oh, as expected from our Masked Man

These are just the first steps towards world domination

So you've chosen to capture Kamuikotan as soon as possible?

649 Name: Anonymous who waits for salmon at the river banks

This is just the beginning of the reign of terror of Mr. Masked Man, the Demon Lord

650 Name: Anonymous who waits for salmon at the river banks

Come on guys, stop messing around with Mr. Masked Man lol

Everyone loves Mr. Masked Man lol



After they recovered, Haruki and the others returned from Kamui Rock feeling exhausted.

They weren't exhausted because of their battle with the knight. They were exhausted from listening to Chep.

Haruki didn't know why she was so motivated.

He couldn't understand what was going on with the revived Chep.

"Well, Lady Rhea! You may be tired, but you'll end up with a hunched back if you keep being slouched like that!"

Rhea's stalk was all curled because of the shrill voice that hadn't stopped talking inside the dungeon.

"This thing is yours, right Karen? So you should be the one who takes care of her, too, right?"

"Uhh..."

“Are you calling me a thing!?”

Haruki glanced at Chep, who had raised her voice from Karen’s pocket.

“Waaah!?”

Immediately, she started to shiver and squirmed back into the pocket.

Still, after a short while, she would glance back from her hideout.

“(glancing) — Eeek!?”

Whenever their eyes met, she would scurry back into the pocket.

It’s as if she couldn’t catch Haruki’s drift.

Karen looked at Haruki with eyes that screamed “Help me!”

However, the bracelet that contained Chep’s soul belonged to Karen.

— I suggested throwing it from Kamui Rock, but you didn’t, so please deal with it and take care of it until the end.

Haruki stared at Karen and Rhea, who seemed even more exhausted than himself, with warm eyes.

There was a chance that Chep might have changed in some ways other than just her size and the fact that now she lived in Karen’s bracelet.

Haruki took out the Skill Board, and...

Chep (0) Gender: Female

Skill Points: 3 → 26

“ ... ”

Haruki was so shocked that he froze.

— This useless thing got all of the points from the battle even though she never did

any of the fighting!

— What a freeloader!

Having nearly died during the fight with that black knight, Haruki didn't find it amusing at all that Chep had gotten all of the points.

— Should I just allocate them all on useless skills without her knowledge?

Haruki maliciously stared at Chep.

“Huh...”

However, Chep now lived inside Karen's bracelet.

Just like Esta and Rhea for Haruki, Chep's skill was directly linked to Karen's fighting and survival abilities... perhaps.

Maybe.

Haruki, who had never seen her actually fighting, was not that sure about that.

For the time being, Haruki decided to put points into her Shamanism skill.

Shamanism was a rare skill that no one else had at the moment.

— Though it feels even less of a rare skill simply because Chep has it...

He decided to pass up on her rarest skill, “Princess”, for now.

[Princess: Grants the ability to squirm away from certain death.]

Haruki believed that it is thanks to this “Princess” skill that Chep survived this time.

In the scenario where Chep should have died, she ended up “possessing” Karen's bracelet.

As she took refuge in the bracelet, a light-blue jewel was created that filled a hole in it.

From this, Haruki theorized that the bracelet was a type of magic tool that had the

ability to contain spirits.

“By chance”, Karen had obtained that bracelet from a gacha ball.

Karen, who was wearing the bracelet “by chance”, was near Chep, who was “by chance” about to disappear.

This could be the result of the ability to “squirm away from certain death”.

There might have been some kind of synergy with Karen’s “Luck” skill as well.

Still, if this effect could be achieved with a Princess skill at level 1...

Who knows what would happen if that skill were MAXed?

If it’s what it takes to save Chep’s life, could it even bring about the Earth’s destruction?

The mere thought sent a shiver down Haruki’s spine.

Retreating to Karen’s bracelet should be enough if it’s just to save Chep’s life.

Haruki had no intention of touching the “Princess” skill.

Skill Points: 26 → 2

— Shamanism < − > → < + 2 >

└ Shamanism 1 → 7

└ Shamanism Compatibility 1 → 7

└ Shamanism Manipulation 1 → 7

Although he could have put points into her Vitality, Strength, Agility, or Technology trees, Haruki couldn’t imagine Chep on hand-to-hand combat.

He wasn’t sure what Shamanism did exactly, but if it could be used from Karen’s pocket...

There would be no companion more reassuring than her.

— But for now, you're just a freeloader.

— Please make yourself useful during our next dungeon exploration.

Before putting the Skill Board away, Haruki checked the log.

<< Successfully subdued the Lesser God “αρχη” (Arche) >>

<< Special quest cleared >>

<< Quest reward: 10 Skill Points >>

According to the log, that knight was actually “Lesser god αρχη”, but he had no way to be sure of that.

But the knight certainly had enough combat power (aside from Technology) to remind him of Shigure.

Even if the knight hadn't been this “Lesser god αρχη”, its true strength had been a force to be reckoned with.

Haruki had already indirectly noticed when he checked on Chep's skill tree, but he had been awarded 10 skill points for clearing the quest.

Though there were many places he still wanted to allocate those points, he was grateful for having received so many this time.

Haruki squinted at the last line shown on the log.

<< Obtained Skill: Divine Energy>>

“Divine Energy...?”

Was that a skill that would allow him to attack by releasing his energy?

Haruki opened the skill tree to see if it was an offensive skill.

Skill Points: 0 → 10

— Special

└ Growth Acceleration MAX

└ Taming 2

└ Divine Protection MAX

└ Divine Energy NEW

Just as the log stated, there was a skill called “Divine Energy” on his skill tree.

But it was under the Special section.

If it had been under the Technology tree instead, it could have been an offensive skill, like Masatsugu’s “Holy Sword”.

A bit discouraged, Haruki tapped on the skill.

The details of “Divine Energy” appeared on the screen.

[Divine Energy 0: Grants a strong presence MAX:5]

“A... At long laaaaaaast-!?”

Trembling with joy, Haruki’s voice echoed through the dungeon.



[The beginning] The contents of the gacha balls 231 [Of the end]

992 Name: Anonymous who doesn’t get any rare items

Hey hey hey!

Now a huge fight between adventurers has started!

What are we going to do about it!?

993 Name: Anonymous who doesn’t get any rare items

What’s the cause of it?

994 Name: Anonymous who doesn't get any rare items

That adventurer who was proud of his SSR item

The guy who complained about spending millions and only getting normal-rarity items got the jump on him

995 Name: Anonymous who doesn't get any rare items

What's that guy thinking about? Was it a real-life fight?

That's... not like it's going to change anything, will it? Lol

996 Name: Anonymous who doesn't get any rare items

That normal-rarity guy...

I guess I can sympathize with him though lol

It seems like it's a pretty big deal, isn't it?

Speaking of other adventurers

Bacon and Masatsugu have started to move

997 Name: Anonymous who doesn't get any rare items

Huh?

Then something big's coming, right?

Does it have anything to do with punishing an evil lord or something?

Or even worse... are they going to ban the gacha balls?

998 Name: Anonymous who doesn't get any rare items

Ah

999 Name: Anonymous who doesn't get any rare items

Hm, what's wrong?

1000 Name: Anonymous who doesn't get any rare items

The last gacha ball that normal-rarity guy opened

A monster came out of it!!

1001 Name: Anonymous who doesn't get any rare items

I don't think I'll be able to post here anymore



PDF by: traitor#ZEN