

"ALL RIGHT, THIS SOUNDS LIKE A GOOD COMBINATION. CAT-"

"Kathrine," I interrupted Zack.

"Kathrine will poison our enemies as they close in on us, while Jack and Andrew start shooting as soon as they're in range. Kelly will intercept monsters that get close enough to fight. While you might assume that few if any monsters will get through, I promise you that many will. Monsters have fewer internal organs than animals, which means they can take a lot more punishment before falling," Zack stated.

Zack then took a deep breath. "We have two things to cover, mostly reminders. First, Balltown is home to Killjoys. They're a breed of monster that live in the forest, and they go absolutely nuts when radio waves are transmitted inside the dungeon. I need you to double-check your cell phones. They either need to be off or using a verified dungeon app to cut off all transmissions."

I nodded as myself, and everyone else, double-checked their phones. I had mine off, no real need of it in the dungeon. The rest were in the same boat, so it was an easy double-check. Still, it made me more comfortable.

Killjoys were a type of monster bird known for swarming and attacking any radio source. It wasn't so bad if you weren't the idiot with the radio. But otherwise it was pretty bad.

"Second is a guild policy. I'm sure everyone already knows the policy, but I need everyone to pull out their suit's memory cards."

I raised an eyebrow and just stared him down. To my surprise, it was Kelly who moved first. The hell was I supposed to say to this? SC had laws preventing anyone from requiring "assumed recording devices" to be shut off

inside a dungeon, for the comfort of dungeon Divers mostly. Though it did help, ever so slightly, with the enforcement of crimes in dungeons.

Zack was next. "You don't need to worry about anything, everyone in the guild goes through an efficient background check, this is just a show of trust. We don't need these things to ensure we trust each other."

I just continued staring. Andrew pulled the hem of his pants to the side, showing he had removed his memory cards before arriving. That's a thought. Much like my armor, the backpack I chose was a step up from the bottom barrel. So it had its own set of cameras. I could probably remove my memory cards from my armor without anyone noticing I still had a way to record.

Jack shook his head. "I'm not removing mine. Never felt entirely comfortable without the cameras."

Zack smiled. "I understand, but think of it this way. There's no need. You're with your family here. No need for comfort. We're all weak our first time into the dungeon. Do you really want a record of that to exist? Especially with the current view that you don't have any way to control the use of that recording?"

Jack seemed like he was wavering, especially with Kelly removing the last of her backup memory cards from the hem around her ankle. She had something to put in. "There has never been a lower rate of crime against persons. There really isn't a need for the recordings."

Jack sighed and moved to remove his memory cards as well. What the hell was I supposed to say or do? I was in no way removing mine. Not with these idiots all doing it. I couldn't be dishonest about this, but I had every intention of uploading the video to the Dungeon Mapping database. Just in case I needed it for legal reasons.

Everyone turned to me. Shit, now I felt like I was on the defensive. "Not happening."

"Why?" Zack asked.

"Because the majority of interpersonal crimes happen in a dungeon. Theft of loot is the most common problem, by an order of magnitude, but it's hardly the only crime that happens." I tried to keep my voice level and calm but I was talking a bit loader than normal, so a deep breath was necessary.

"As I said, we're all family. You have nothing to fear from us."

"Except that I sacrifice to new gods, and at least Kelly here worships a deity who has beef with my gods. So at least one major cause of violent altercations is evident in this group. I don't expect a problem, the vast majority of people never have one. But the vast majority of people also have personal recordings," I pointed out while gesturing to the Emergence Cross hanging around her neck.

Kelly shuffled uncomfortably. "I'm not going to attack you. That would be silly in a dungeon. Also Jesus isn't 'a deity,' he's the word who formed our world. The only native, capital 'G', God."

"I agree, that it's silly to attack people, but that doesn't change the fact that even the most trusting of people see the advantages of having recordings of everything," I said, trying to remember a report I had read weeks ago. "I don't remember exactly where I read it. But even nudist colonies are adding decorative pieces of clothing that don't conceal anything but do have recording equipment."

"That's a cynical and depressing train of thought, that you can only trust your family if they're aware you're recording things," Zack said.

"I trust my family even if I'm not. Hell, I even trust my roommate that much after living with her for a few years. But that's hardly the point, and even if I trusted you guys that much, that says nothing about the rest of the teams in here," I shot back. "What happens if we get into a fight with someone else?"

"A small possibility that we shouldn't take as being evidence that we should act like savages," Zack tried to counter.

"It's also stupidly unlikely that this dungeon will break. But that doesn't mean the government is likely to reduce the funds for defenses. The damage that could be caused makes it enough that we should be careful. Like any rational, civilized being," I shot back. I knew I was getting angry. But what the fuck was wrong with this shit?

"Your anger is proof that you know your arguments are without merit. Relieve yourself of this burden," Andrew put in.

I glared at him. "My anger is because some idiot thinks that putting people in unnecessary danger is somehow a good thing. The dungeon is dangerous enough. No need to make it worse."

At that point, things just went downhill. I was accused of reacting purely out of irrational fear. And I kept pointing out that nothing in modern society made the presence of recording devices unusual or weird. They then argued that it showed I didn't trust them to protect me in the dungeon, and I then pointed out that the drop in criminal rates was directly proportional to the number of cameras recording things. "Trust but verify" being the motto.

The activation of a PA system letting us know the dungeon was opening soon interrupted Zack, and we got

in line to enter the gate. I refused to remove my recordings, and they couldn't legally do anything to force the issue. The line slowly moved forward, bringing us into the fortress. On top of the walls tons of weapon mounts were visible, clearly intended to slow down the monsters that might be attempting to break out. The walls themselves were six or seven feet thick, the insides armored with smooth metal fitted together so perfectly I couldn't see a single seam, likely to keep it from being climbed by monsters.

Getting off the wall was handled by going down a reinforced scaffolding that held a stairway. The signs warning of explosive devices showed how they prevented monsters from using them to get out of the hole.

The really scary part was that this kind of fort had never held out against a dungeon break. Despite the dungeon entrances being small and having tons of firepower, they were expected to last only long enough for the surrounding countryside to evacuate behind the local city walls.

The area inside was large, much longer across than a football field, though I didn't know the exact size. Right in the middle of the clearing was the entrance into the dungeon. A boulder, at least six feet tall, stood in the clearing, looking like it had been sheared right off something larger, with a dead tree leaning against it. Right underneath the two was a hole, visible thanks to a ladder sticking out of opening. Everything within twenty feet of the rock was covered in grass and mushrooms, exactly the same as the first pictures of the entrance. Given everything else around it was dirt, it didn't seem like a mistake.

Down the ladder we went, and we had to continue single file through a narrow cave. At one spot early on I

had to take off my backpack and turn sideways, but after that it started widening quickly. After five minutes underground the person in front of me pointed up and I followed their finger. I could see the morning sky starting to get brighter. Another five minutes and we were walking down a canyon with sky overhead, with enough space for six people to walk side by side shoulder to shoulder. Our experienced babysitter led us on, deflecting questions until we were in the dungeon proper.

I could see the end of the canyon walls, but we found ourselves in a bottleneck. Zack sighed. "Listen up, keep an eye and ear out, sometimes you'll find Cliff Huggers hanging out around here, and they may attempt an attack if we all bottle up here. I'll push through, follow closely."

We did so, constantly finding gaps between groups as we attempted to squeeze through. Though we had to scramble to follow the more experienced guild member, I couldn't blame anyone for stopping as we broke free of the canyon. The view was far better than I ever expected. The last clouds were hanging on the horizon, so the sun wasn't blinding, but it sparkled off the sea, just visible at this extreme distance. Closer to us there was a forest that must have blocked off vision of the shore line.

The rolling green of the forest was cut off by the local terrain, called the Scraggs. Small shrubs dotted the area, as well as many boulders that appeared to be made from a variety of different rocks. Thanks to scraggly bushes dominating the local plants, there wasn't much to look at.

It was hard to believe all of this was underground, or that the sun we could see wasn't the real sun. Why it lined up with the big one outside was an ongoing debate, and one with no real way to settle the matter.



I knew that between the cliff at the end of the Scrags and the forest was a large plain. Probably hidden by the cliff edge. The cliff had to be stupidly tall to hide the entire plain echo system.

It was hard to believe that the shore was eighty-seven miles away, and the dungeon went past the shoreline. though no one had survived more than even a single mile out, as the monsters in the sea, or on the islands, were a class beyond even the most powerful ones on this side of the shore. The dungeon walls were fifteen miles away, making this dungeon a strip of mountain side thirty miles wide and over eighty-seven miles long. I don't remember the height, but the sky and sun were definitely false, and the top was miles up at minimum.

I was fairly certain it was that knowledge that made an indescribable shiver of fear run down my back. I couldn't believe this had occurred naturally, even with the system which appeared so suddenly. Suddenly the crazy conspiracy theories didn't seem so crazy. Though I seriously doubted the Freemasons had anything to do with this.