



「はじまり」にまつわる七つの物語

SEVEN STORIES ABOUT "THE BEGINNING"

CHAPTER 5: NEW GAME (SUZUKI SUZU)

TRANSLATION: NARU-KUN / K-PROJECT WORLD

"New features for "Jungle"?"

Sukuna repeated what Hisui Nagare had said.

As always, at the secret base of "Jungle". Iwafune was drinking, Yukari was busy with beauty treatments, and Kotosaka was taking a nap in a birdcage. Sukuna, who was playing a game, paused and looked at Nagare.

"Why a new feature now?"

"Lately, we've noticed a decline in the number of active users. We're considering implementing measures for users below G rank."

"Hmm...? Okay."

"I'll leave that to Nagare-chan."

"Me too."

The executives responded indifferently. Nagare blinked once and then said softly,

"You're not very interested in listening... Well, okay. I expected it. Here's the feature I'm going to implement."

At that moment, a hologram appeared in the air.

The words "Meta Jungle Alpha Version" appeared. The seven-color gradation made Sukuna tilt his head as he spun around.

"Meta Jungle... What is this?"

"We've developed a new game app as a new feature for "Jungle". It's still in alpha, but it's a MO action RPG with total immersion."

Sukuna's eyes widened in surprise.

"Total Immersion! Are you kidding me?! I've never heard it was possible with current technology!"

"By sending electrical signals to the brain using paranormal powers, it puts you in a hybrid state between wakefulness and REM sleep. It's the same state as a lucid dream, but by linking it to a game program, you can immerse yourself in the game world."

He sucked in his breath. Sure enough, Hisui Nagare is the "Green King", the "King" who controls electricity and networks. And the brain is also a network made up of electrical signals. With his powers, perhaps even Total Immersion technology is possible.

And then, Iwafune raised his hands in surrender.

"Sorry, I don't understand. What's this total immersion thing?"

"It's a technology that allows you to enter a virtual reality world without losing your five senses. Simply put, it means you can enter the world of a game."

Nagare answered simply, but neither Iwafune nor Yukari seemed to understand. That frustrated Sukuna.

"It's the kind of amazing technology that only comes from science fiction! They say it will take decades to become a reality! Entering the game and actually fighting dragons and demon kings, that would be the best!"

Sukuna stood up and leaned his face closer to Nagare's.

"Please, let me play! I just want to enter the game world, even if it's just once in my life!"

"Of course. I told you everything so you could try it out."

The arm attached to Nagare's wheelchair pulled out several earpieces.

"When you're ready, put this device on your head. It will start automatically..."

"Yes!"

Without a second thought, Sukuna snatched it from him and put on the headphones.

"Ah, Sukuna, wait a moment..."

Nagare started to say something, but the headphones were already on. Light began to fill Sukuna's field of vision.

Sukuna shouted, his heart pounding with excitement.

"Well then, let the game begin!"

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Before he knew it, Sukuna had landed in another world.

It was a desolate wasteland of reddish earth and sand. A cliff rose before him. A rudimentary torch was attached to the sheer rock face, and a cave yawned beneath.

He looked down at his body. He was wearing simple cloth clothes and rough leather shoes. Sukuna clenched his fists repeatedly and stomped the ground, muttering excitedly.

"Wow...! This is quite a dive!"

His hands and feet felt almost the same as in real life. By now, perhaps his sense of taste and pain had also been reproduced. As Sukuna searched for a suitable rock, several figures greeted him from above.

Iwafune, Yukari, and Nagare. They were all wearing the same clothes as Sukuna.

"Sukuna, please listen to the end of my story."

"You're right. That's why we had to chase you."

"That's typical of you, Sukuna-chan."

All the adults lectured him, but Sukuna's excitement didn't stop there. He apologized with a big smile.

"Sorry, I couldn't resist! So, Nagare, where can I get some weapons and armor?"

"I don't see any regrets. It's a shame."

Nagare sighed, and Yukari tilted his head slightly.

"What's the purpose of this game?"

"The genre is a hands-on action RPG. Your goal is to level up, collect equipment, get stronger, and defeat the final boss, the Demon King. You'll already have your starting equipment, and weapons will automatically appear upon entering combat."

As he explained, Nagare pointed to a cave.

"This is 'Dungeon 000'; the name isn't decided yet because it's an alpha version, but we're thinking of making it the first dungeon users visit."

"So, we're going to conquer a dungeon. Great, how exciting!"

Sukuna smiled and moved forward excitedly.

"Ah, Sukuna. If you come a little closer..."

Before Nagare could finish speaking, a roar echoed from the depths of the cave.

A giant, slimy body emerged from the darkness. His copper-colored skin was covered by a thin layer of cloth around his waist. Blood pooled in the club he gripped in his right hand, and steamy breath escaped from his fanged mouth. The monster was modeled after a Japanese demon, but for some reason, it wore sunglasses.

Above the monster's head, the words "Kamamoto, Vanguard of the Flame" appeared.

"The enemy monster's design is inspired by a real person."

"It's the first boss! Go for it!"

At the same time as he shouted, a scythe appeared in Sukuna's hand. It was the same type of weapon he uses in the real world. Before he knew it, Yukari was standing next to him, holding a sword.

"That's right. First, let's see what you can do."

"Whoever lands the finishing blow wins, Yukari!"

With a belligerent grin on his face, Sukuna ran toward Kamamoto at full speed.

A few minutes later.

The four of them lay dead in the desert.

Kamamoto roared victorious and returned to the cave with a satisfied expression. Sukuna, face down, muttered in frustration.

"Hey, Nagare! What's wrong? You died in one hit!"

Nagare, lying on his back, replied.

"Kamamoto's attack power is high. It would be an instant kill for a level 1 stamina."

"I was dodging the opponent's attack and suddenly couldn't move."

"You ran out of stamina. When your stamina bar runs out, you can't evade for a while."

"I was standing there and suddenly died!"

"Iwa-san, you were hit by Kamamoto's area-of-effect attack. Observe the opponent's movement and dodge at the right time."

"It's your first time, so there's no way you could tell!"

Iwafune's protest, which sounded like a scream, was met with Nagare's simple reply.

"So you'll have to die and learn from it."

(I see.), Sukuna thought.

"It's a deadly game...!"

"Yes, I agree. I've adopted a format known as a high-difficulty action RPG."

And then the surroundings went dark. After a while, Sukuna and the others reappeared a short distance away. Their health had returned to full. They were back.

Kamamoto's roars could still be heard from the depths of the cave. If they got closer, they might fight again.

But...

Sukuna raised his index finger.

Just as he expected, a window similar to Nagare's appeared. Strength, Speed, Stamina. A familiar set of parameters, plus a map and an occupation tab. He opened the occupation tab at random, and this was what it said:

Sukuna: Level 1 Occupation: Unemployed.

"I'm unemployed!"

He shouted without thinking, but Nagare glared at him coldly.

"Sukuna started the game before I could explain anything. This is a game where you normally start by creating your character. Kamamoto isn't an opponent you'd face at level 1."

"Uhh..."

Sukuna was speechless.

Nagare was right. There was no doubt he was excited about his first full playthrough, but this was a "game". Only by reflecting, challenging, and surpassing yourself can you fully enjoy the pleasure of the game.

"...I understand. Well then, let's start with character creation."

Iwafune spoke suspiciously.

"Hey, what the heck is this "Charamake" thing? I don't play video games, so I have no idea."

"Leave it to me, I'll teach you everything!"

Sukuna yelled loudly and thumped his chest.

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Thirty minutes later.

The HP bar finally depleted, and Kamamoto, the Flame Vanguard, collapsed in the desert, groaning in pain.

Breathing heavily, Sukuna looked up at the words "ENEMY DEFEATED" floating in the air.

"Y-You finally defeated him...", Yukari pointed out with a giggle.

"Sukuna, just barely."

Sukuna glared at Yukari angrily, but, to his irritation, he couldn't respond. Unlike Sukuna, whose HP gauge had dropped below 10%, Yukari's hadn't decreased at all. Being a

complete dive, a player's reaction speed is important. Since understanding the stamina system, Yukari hadn't been hit by an enemy attack even once.

"Hey, can we revive now?"

"Yes, let's do it, Iwa-san."

Meanwhile, Nagare and Iwafune were rolling on the ground again. Everyone had leveled up and chosen their professions, but Nagare, who was a rear guard, became a mage and Iwafune a priest, and they were knocked out with a single blow. Iwafune is hopeless, but it's disconcerting that Nagare, the game's master, was attacked.

A win is a win, though.

After Kamamoto disappeared, a treasure chest appeared on the ground. Sukuna approached it excitedly.

"Now, as for the loot..."

Opening the treasure chest, several gold and silver treasures caught Sukuna's attention. However, Sukuna isn't interested in money. The most fun part of a game is getting more powerful equipment.

"Great! I'll grab it!"

What Sukuna picked up was a giant scythe. For frontline classes (Sukuna is a warrior and Yukari is a swordsman), powerful weapons are an item that should be prioritized above all else.

Yukari also stuck his initial equipment sword into the ground and pulled a sword from the treasure chest.

"A haiku, a fairly straight sword... a close-up, I guess. I don't like straight swords, but hey, it's prettier than this stick."

Sukuna looked back at the two who had revived.

"What will you and Iwa-san do? There are a lot of wands!"

"I don't really know, so I'll leave it to you."

"Oh, yes. And Nagare?"

But Nagare didn't respond. He was staring at the menu screen, thinking about something. Sukuna frowned and called out again.

"Hey, Nagare! What's up?"

Nagare raised his head and blinked repeatedly as if he'd just woken up.

"Uh, yes. It's no problem. I'll choose a suitable wand myself."

".....?"

His reaction was, if anything, suspicious. Nagare was the only "Jungle" player at the same level as Sukuna, and yet he showed no interest in the items.

Well, Nagare is the developer and knows everything about this game, so maybe he's not as enthusiastic as he is. Thinking like that, Sukuna raised his scythe and pointed at the cave.

"Well, whatever! Let's go!"

Looking back...

He should have realized it at the time.

"Dungeon 000" was a dangerous area with magma spurting everywhere.

Red-skinned demons, like smaller versions of Kamamoto, roamed the area and attacked as soon as they found you. They had little control, but their individual attack power was very high, and Iwafune died four times before reaching the second boss.

The second boss was Yatagarasu. He was a difficult enemy who excelled at quick attacks thanks to his great speed. However, he couldn't match Yukari's reflexes, and Yukari defeated him after several attempts.

Sukuna commented, "Don't put a boss on the back burner that Yukari can barely defeat with his speed."

The third boss was Kusanagi of the Remnant Dust. He was a formidable enemy who used fireballs at long range and flaming whips at close range. With Iwafune and Nagare's support magic mitigating the damage, Yukari and Sukuna launched simultaneous attacks and somehow managed to defeat him.

Sukuna commented, "That's why he's so harsh!"

And then there's the final boss of "Dungeon 000", the "Royal Beast of Flame."

This boss, in the form of a red-haired young man, possessed immense offensive power, and with a single blow, Sukuna was on the verge of death, and Iwafune was brought to his instant death. In return, he had many opportunities and was defeated relatively quickly; but the problem was what happened next.

A phoenix appeared out of nowhere, revived him, and attacked again like a flaming lion.

The Flame Lion had many moves that were difficult to predict, so not even Yukari could react. The group was annihilated more than forty times, and it took them five hours to defeat it. When the Royal Beast disappeared with a roar, Sukuna was the only one left alive.

Sukuna murmured breathlessly.

"Finally... I defeated him!"

"Congratulations. You're amazing, Sukuna-chan."

Yukari, arms crossed, spoke in a refreshing tone.

"Oh, is it over? I died so early, so I was bored to tears."

Iwafune, pinned face down to the ground, said in a muffled voice.

"You did well, Sukuna. Let's move on to the next phase."

Nagare, sprawled out, said this, and Sukuna responded with wide eyes.

"There's no way I can do that?! Let's take a break!"

"Understood. Let's resume our actions in five minutes. Iwa-san, Yukari, please revive."

With that, the three corpses suddenly disappeared.

Sukuna sat down and sighed deeply.

A feeling of dull fatigue washed over him. But it wasn't unpleasant at all. The satisfaction of finally defeating an undoubtedly strong enemy made the fatigue pleasant. Thinking he could sleep well that night, Sukuna raised his index finger.

He scanned the menu screen.

A feeling of unease crept through him.

He checked the various tabs in order: Status. Items. Skills. Profile.

Options...

Thoroughly, thoroughly. No matter how hard he tried, nothing changed. "It" didn't appear anywhere.

Finally, with Nagare leading the way, the dead returned.

"Sukuna, have you finished collecting your loot? If so, let's move on to the next stage as soon as possible..."

"Nagare. How do I log out of this game?"

Nagare stopped.

Through the window of his index finger, Sukuna observed Nagare's expression. The "Green King" was calm and serene, always acting with precision and equanimity, like a machine. However, Sukuna knew Nagare had emotions, even if they weren't shown superficially.

Sukuna thought that what was vaguely visible on his expressionless face was "impatience".

Iwafune couldn't help but intervene.

"What's wrong? Is there a problem?"

Sukuna replied calmly.

"I've been looking at the menu for a while, but there's no option to log out. In other words, I can't find a way to log out of the game."

"What? You can't log out? No, you can take off your headphones..."

"Who's going to take them off? Aren't we all asleep in reality?"

Yukari spoke softly, and Iwafune's expression turned serious.

Everyone's gaze was fixed on Nagare.

Nagare remained as expressionless as ever. But he wasn't making eye contact with anyone.

"To tell you the truth, I just realized. Or rather, I just remembered. I was so absorbed in the parameters and behavior of enemies, and the level design of dungeons and courses, that I forgot to add a logout option."

"Well, then, how do I log out of the game...?"

Iwafune's reasonable question unsettled Nagare.

"There's no way out of the game from the inside."

"Eh?!"

Iwafune dropped his staff and approached Nagare.

"W-what do you mean?! What are we going to do?!"

"Please calm down, Iwa-san. At this point, of course. This game is designed to end automatically upon completion. In other words, you can end it upon completion."

Yukari asked calmly.

"I wonder how long it will take us to complete the game?"

"Right now, we're at about 20%. It's already been ten hours since the game started..."

"By simple calculations, there are 40 hours left. But..."

Yukari moved his palm excitedly. He tilted his head.

"In the real world, we can't even hydrate ourselves. The "rule of three" states that it takes a person three days to die of dehydration."

"We're on complete rest, so it should be better than surviving. But even so, if we get dehydrated, who knows what effects it might have here?"

Nagare nodded vigorously at what they said.

"Yes. Either way, there's only one thing we can do. We have to finish this game as soon as possible. Let's move on."

Sukuna, Yukari, and Iwafune's gazes pierced him.

"You're right, but I don't know. It infuriates me greatly."

"Nagare-chan, I think you should start by saying "I'm sorry"."

"Maybe I made a mistake raising you... Anyway, Nagare, let me punch you when you come back to reality."

After saying that in unison, the three began to walk away.

Nagare, left alone, cleared his throat and followed them.

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And now.

The four of them, Sukuna and the others, embarked on adventures in various fields.

"Dungeon 001", at the bottom of a dark, damp valley, colorless shadows stalk you.

"Dungeon 002", in a silver mountain range, airships crisscross the sky.

"Dungeon 003", in an imposing royal castle, blue-armored soldiers surround you.

It took them about thirty hours to reach the final boss room.

"Dungeon 004", the last dungeon is a shining golden spire. At its zenith, stood an old man.

Dressed in traditional Japanese clothing, his stern face reflected years of hardship, and although wrinkled, it brimmed with energy.

Sukuna shouldered his scythe and watched the old man intently.

"Is that the Demon Lord, the final boss? He doesn't look strong, but he'll probably launch brutal attacks anyway."

Then, Sukuna noticed something odd about the other three.

Yukari looked nostalgic, while Iwafune looked bitter, looking at the old man. Nagare smiled slightly. His eyes shone with an unusual fighting spirit.

The three began to argue.

"...Nagare, you know. If that old man was going to show up, you should have told him sooner."

"I guess Nagare-chan surprises you like this. I can't believe I'm running into you again."

"I'm sorry, Iwa-san, Yukari. I thought telling you in advance would make you nervous, so I kept quiet."

Sukuna felt a vague sense of detachment. It seemed everyone, except him, knew the old man.

"Who is that old man?"

Yukari replied as he silently drew his sword.

"It's Kokujoji Daikaku. The "Golden King". As far as I know, he's the strongest king."

"The strongest..."

Sukuna sucked in a breath. The word "strongest" carried unfathomable weight when spoken by Yukari, who had found beauty in battle and lived as a swordsman.

Iwafune nodded.

"I've known him since I was the "Gray King". No joke. Though I think Nagare knows him better."

Suddenly it hit him. He'd definitely heard of it. The "Green King" was defeated by the "Golden King"...

"He lost, right? Nagare, against that old man."

"Yes. Kokujoji Daikaku defeated me. Completely."

As he spoke, Nagare continued to advance.

"Kokujoji Daikaku is the strongest King. He'll no longer be a threat in the real world, but on the path we're traveling, a greater threat than him could stand in our way. I want to know if we can defeat him."

"Nagare..."

"Nagare-chan..."

"If it hadn't turned into a deadly game because of you, I would have been deeply moved..."

Nagare pretended not to hear Sukuna's murmured words.

"Then let's go. This is a rematch, with the full power of "Jungle" poured into it."

Since Nagare's words sounded like a declaration of war, the J-Ranks of "Jungle" readied their weapons.

The final battle was extremely fierce.

Just as Nagare had said, Kokujoji was undoubtedly the "strongest" boss. Every attack was lethal, and even a moment of miscalculation could reduce his HP by 90%. If you're unlucky with the behavior pattern, you often die instantly. It was an extremely unreasonable boss, almost a piece of shoddy gaming.

(But...)

After 30 attempts at total annihilation, they finally managed to reduce Kokujoji's HP bar to zero, but no one was happy. It was obvious he would revive, like every area boss up until then.

As expected, Kokujoji got up. He tore his carefully arranged kimono, revealing his muscular body, and launched another ferocious attack. Higher up in the tower, stars streaked across the golden night sky, and the occasional falling star inflicted devastating damage on the party.

(And yet...)

It was fun.

Even after 40 or 50 total annihilations, Sukuna still knew he enjoyed the game. There were definitely opportunities to be seized in the most insane succession of attacks. On many occasions, the support of other teammates saved him, even when he himself could do nothing about it.

Nagare's words were true.

That's a game everyone must conquer together.

And so, the sixty-second challenge...

Sukuna's body flew away after taking Kokujoji's punch. His health disappeared instantly, and the words "YOU DIED" appeared in his spinning vision.

But Sukuna didn't just die. In a draw, the tip of the scythe pierced Kokujoji's chest.

His stun reached its limit, and Kokujoji fell to his knees. With Iwafune's support magic in hand, Yukari seized the opportunity to unleash a flurry of attacks. Kokujoji's health bar quickly depleted. Twenty percent remaining, ten percent...

Still on his knees, Kokujoji raised both arms.

Spinning around, Sukuna gritted his teeth. Kokujoji had recovered from the stun and launched a wide-range attack. Neither Iwafune nor Yukari could dodge it due to the stiffness after the action. The golden glow exploded.

Iwafune and Yukari's bodies fluttered through the air like pieces of paper blown by a strong wind. After being annihilated more than sixty times, Sukuna knew without even looking at them that they were both dead.

They still couldn't make it.

Even with all these optimal moves and meticulous strategies, is "the strongest" still far behind?

That question, however, didn't turn into disappointment. A feeling of even greater euphoria filled him. It was the same as when he'd risen to J-Rank. The euphoria of challenging the impossible.

But then it was different. He was even more euphoric.

Perhaps because he wasn't alone. Perhaps because he had comrades worthy of his trust.

And now...

Among those comrades, one of the most trusted was emitting a green glow.

(Nagare...!)

One of the most powerful magic spells for a rearguard mage. It was a transformation spell that burned his own life and turned him into a green thunder beast.

Nagare, now transformed into a beast, dodged Kokujoji's area attack by leaping high. He then shifted his stance in midair. Kokujoji drew back his right fist and looked up at the sky.

Their green and gold gazes met.

The next instant, the two-colored glow triggered another explosion.

The green claw descended like lightning.

The golden fist roared like thunder from the Earth's crust.

A shockwave strong enough to split the world in two rippled through the tower's zenith.

Countless cracks ran across the ground, and dust filled the air. Swept away by the explosion, Sukuna's corpse tumbled.

Finally, the view cleared, and the two Kings appeared faintly.

Kokujoji stood up, his fists pointed at the sky.

At his feet, Nagare collapsed like a rag.

(What...!)

Just as he was about to scream, sharp claw marks appeared on Kokujoji's thick chest.

Golden sparkles spilled from the marks. The sparkles, like proof of life itself, soon enveloped Kokujoji's entire body.

The gigantic body of the "Golden King" transformed into a golden flash and disappeared.

Nagare staggered to his feet, and at the same time, letters appeared above his head.

"KING SLAIN"

"Nagare!"

Before he knew it, Iwafune had gotten up. Sukuna also noticed that he had regained control of his body. Together with Yukari and Iwafune, they rushed toward the battered Nagare.

"I did it. Thanks, everyone."

Nagare laughed weakly and gave a thumbs-up. Sukuna also rushed toward Nagare, laughing...

And punched him in the face.

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"Kwaaaah, I'm glad you're all alive!"

Kotosaka's voice, which seemed on the verge of bursting into tears, greeted the four as they returned to reality.

Kotosaka had apparently been watching over the group, who had been immobile with the device on for about three days. Although he couldn't get them off, he was able to drink water and bring it to their mouths. Thanks to this, Sukuna and the others didn't become fatally dehydrated.

"Your life wasn't in danger. I'm relieved."

"Shut up, Nagare-chan?"

"Do you want me to hit you again?"

That exchange took place while savoring his porridge, but let's put it aside.

In the end, "Meta Jungle" was shelved. It was only natural after the incident, and it was too difficult for it to be a new feature for general users. A game that even someone with reflexes as good as Sukuna or Yukari could complete was no longer a game, but a training

session. It would only cause more users to abandon it. Nagare seemed disappointed, but of course, he had no say.

And now, when it's all over,

Sukuna fondly remembers that adventure.

They overcame difficulties together, challenged formidable opponents, and achieved their goal. It was like a rehearsal for what happened next.

Red, blue, silver. Before them were all kinds of enemies. They joined forces and used their wisdom to defeat them. That process was truly a game. It even seems that "Meta Jungle" was the beginning of those days when they faced hardships alongside their companions.

There was only one thing that made it different from a game, there was no resurrection.

And it was for this very reason that Sukuna remembered that new game with such pain.