



# Modern DUNGEON Capture Starting with BROKEN Skills



NOVEL

02

Written by  
Yuuki Kimikawa

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cruelGZ

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OMORI CITY  
GOVERNMENT WORKER

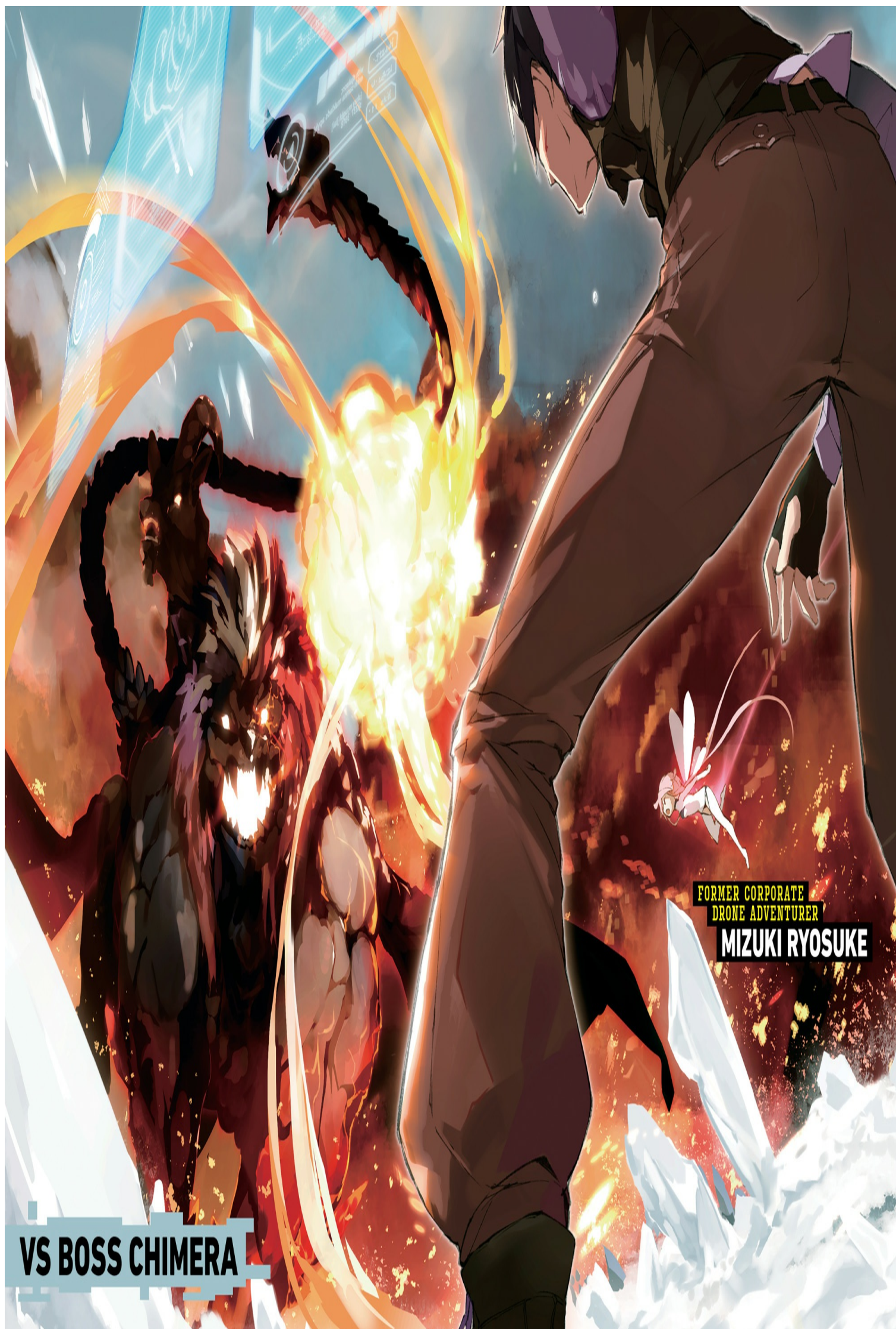
## TACHIBANA MAKI

Tachibana-san shook as I  
gave her my stab-proof vest  
to wear—all the clothes on her  
upper body had melted away.

"I-I-I-I-I-I-I  
thought I  
was going  
to die..."







FORMER CORPORATE  
DRONE ADVENTURER  
**MIZUKI RYOSUKE**

**VS BOSS CHIMERA**





A full-page illustration of a blonde anime-style girl with a halo, wearing a red bikini and grey armor. She is holding a sword and looking shocked. The background is blue with rain and a rainbow.

*"Why am I  
fighting in  
this perverted  
cosplay  
armor?!"*

**ELITE BRITISH ADVENTURER  
CAPTAIN OF REA**

**CAROL**





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WRITTEN BY

**YUUKI  
KIMIKAWA**

ILLUSTRATED BY

**CRUEL GZ**



*Seven Seas Entertainment*



KOWARE SKILL DE HAJIMERU GENDAI DUNGEON KOURYAKU Vol.2

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Illustrations by cruelGZ

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PUBLISHER: Lianne Sentar

VICE PRESIDENT: Adam Arnold

PRESIDENT: Jason DeAngelis

ISBN: 979-8-88843-464-2

Printed in Canada

First Printing: May 2024

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1





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## Prologue:

### The Melancholy of Tachibana Maki

**T**ACHIBANA MAKI WOKE UP EARLY TO THE RI-RI-RI-RING of her phone alarm. She reached for it from her futon, tapped the screen to silence it, and then dove under the covers and closed her eyes. Five minutes later, the alarm's *ri-ri-ri-ring* started up again—a result of the snooze feature. Finally, Tachibana Maki got up.

“Ugh...”

Her voice was weak in the gloomy, dark room. Tachibana Maki was twenty-four years old, had low blood pressure, and was absolutely *not* a morning person. In fact, she was terrible with mornings, desperately and despairingly so. But still she had to go through the daily ordeal of waking up at six each and every morning. To her, it was practically torture, a routine that slowly chipped away at her mental health.

“So sleepy...”

She went over to the gap in the curtains and glared at the delicate rays of aurora-like sunlight pouring in with frightfully sleep-deprived eyes. It was definitely morning. There was no denying that. She sighed heavily, tying up her long hair that grew down to her lower back, before sluggishly dragging herself to the sink. It felt like lead flowed in her veins instead of blood.

*“In today’s video, we’ll be looking at three adventurers who are super craaaaaazy!”*

“Ugh...”

Tachibana’s lazy morning routine involved brushing her teeth while watching YouTube videos on her tablet. She brushed her teeth as she sleepily watched one of the urban legend videos she’d been getting into recently.

*“Third up: Mizuki. Now, Mizuki’s a mysterious Japanese adventurer who came*

*out of nowhere. He got his start appearing in a certain high-school-aged YourTuber's video on Shinobu's Channel. Kind of a problematic video, but apparently the name you hear on the tape is Mizuki. There are even rumors he had something to do with the recent Horimiya Group bankruptcy..."*

"Huh."

Tachibana paused the video partway through, took a shower, and started doing her makeup.

*"According to speculation, this Mizuki guy used an unknown ability that doesn't exist in the U.S. skill database. Intelligence agencies across the world are scrambling to find intel on him."*

The amusingly edited video neared its end just as Tachibana changed into her suit and finished her morning routine. She had a little time before she needed to leave the house, so she sat on her bed, put the tablet on her lap, and watched the end of the video.

*"So those were my top three super-crazy adventurers! Did watching the video make you want to be an adventurer too? Did it make you virgins want to get wild with Shinobu-chan♥? Remember to like and subscribe! See you!"*

She shut the folding tablet cover with a *clap* and threw it onto the bed where it landed with a dull *thud*. The tablet was thin, precise in its design, and had cost her just under forty-thousand yen. It made a pathetic sound as it fell atop her messy, disheveled futon. There had been a time when she was more of a go-getter and thought she might use the tablet for work and other things. Now it was a YouTube machine, and the weird stylus that'd come with it was stashed away somewhere she couldn't find.

Tachibana did a final check of her bags and left the house, getting into the used car she'd bought for her commute.

"I don't want to go to work," she mumbled to herself. She sighed, collapsing onto the steering wheel.

A thought popped into her head. *Maybe I wouldn't need to wake up so early if I became an adventurer.*

*I wonder if I'd be able to get rich quick that way. But how do you become an adventurer in the first place, anyway? If I remember right, you're supposed to buy some skills, raise your level, do all kinds of training. I hear it takes at least ten-million yen to get started. Even with all that time and money, only a handful of people actually make it as working adventurers. Apparently, it's harder to become an adventurer than a doctor or a super-popular celebrity. Hah... It's not happening. Of course not. Regular people just have to knuckle down and work. They have to wake up early every morning and slowly build up their savings with their monthly salary.*

*I mean, I know all of that.*

She turned the engine key to start her car. *Vroom.*

It was about twenty minutes to her workplace, Omori City Hall.

\*\*\*

"You haven't found someone yet, Tachibana-kun?"

In the Crisis Management Task Force office, Tachibana dripped with cold sweat.

"I-I'm sorry... I, um..."

"I've been told you still haven't found one." The office manager hit her with the question. Cold sweat continued pouring down her forehead, worse now than before.

"I haven't...found anyone yet..." Tachibana said.

"You do know when the announcement is, don't you?" her manager prodded.

"N-next week, yes."

"Then what are you going to do about it?" His tone was oppressive.

Tachibana's heartbeat skyrocketed. She found it hard to breathe, unable to

properly get air into her lungs. Her throat tightened, and it felt as if she only had a few millimeters of windpipe left. *Oh no. I can't breathe.*

"The top brass is coming all the way from Tokyo for the announcement. If they arrive and you're the only one without a partner..." The office manager tilted his head at her.

Tachibana's legs trembled, her knees buckling on the spot. "Hyaah..."

"Are you all right?" the manager asked.

"Ah, I'm s-sorry..." Tachibana said. "I j-just started hyperventilating a l-little..."

He paused. "Again? Fine, forget it," he said. "Come back when you've calmed down."

"Okay... I'm s-sorry..."

Tachibana left, looking like she was about to throw up. She clung to a nearby wall as soon as she made it out of the office and held her breath for a moment.

"Haah... Hgh..."

Her back curled as if she were hunched over in a crouch. One hand went to her stomach, which churned violently, as she tried to focus on her breathing. Quiet, slow, and steady—she exhaled. *Deep breaths. Deep breaths. Deep breaths.*

She breathed in deeply from her diaphragm and pushed all the air out once more, concentrating intently. "Haah... Haah!"

The hyperventilating slowly ceased as she went through the emergency damage control routine she was so used to performing. Air came in easier, and the suffocating pain dissipated. Tears were still in her eyes when it was over. She wiped them with the sleeve of her suit jacket as she waited for her breathing to return to normal.

It was a problem with her constitution—Tachibana's breathing was immediately thrown off whenever she felt overwhelming mental stress, making her hyperventilate. It had been this way since she was young. At this point, she



was an expert at calming herself down.

“Guh... Ugh...”

Her respiratory system was finally cooperating. Tachibana swayed as she got to her feet and made her way down the hallway at a slow crawl, one hand on the wall.

My legs are heavy. My chest hurts. I’ve got that weird taste in my mouth. Ah, I hate this. I don’t know what to do. I want to die. I don’t know what to do. I don’t want to die. I want to quit.

\*\*\*

“Is that so...? Yes, I understand. Thank you so much for taking the time to speak with me...”

*Click.* Tachibana pressed the receiver back into place and held her head in her hands. *It’s no use. I’m just not finding anyone, no matter how many places I try.*

She looked over her list for the next person to call. The roster of licensed adventurers living in Japan had scrawl all over it in yellow and red ink. The names in yellow had refused her once. A red line struck through a name meant she had been rejected a second time. Anyone on the list who didn’t actually have a license had been scribbled out in black.

She briskly picked up the receiver and tried to input the number for the next call, but she crumpled to the desk the next moment as though she had broken her neck. A sob escaped her.

“Ugh...”

The pressure was stifling, and a helpless kind of impatience set in.

*If this is how it’s going to be...maybe I should just find a random adventurer, one who doesn’t even fit the requirements. No, that won’t work. I’d have to find someone else after the fact. And if I can’t switch them out properly, things might get bad enough to make the news. This is a big, nationwide project; I can’t invite just anyone to the announcement. Only, I may not have a choice anymore.*

Tachibana then had a realization. She'd heard stories of unbelievable government gaffes on the news. The people featured in the reports were sloppy. They made you wonder whether they thought they were doing the right thing or simply believed they would never get caught. *So, this is how those news stories get started, huh? It's like I'm trying to get myself featured on one of them.*

"Tachibana-san?"

The voice came out of nowhere. She looked up to find a man in a navy-colored suit with a pleasant smile on his face.

"Ah, um... Kawatani-san. Is something wrong?" she asked.

"Have you still not found a partner?" said Kawatani.

She swallowed her words. *Do you really need to ask?*

Kawatani Makoto was Deputy Head of the Omori City Hall Crisis Management Task Force Office's Dungeon Management Division. No man who could keep a navy suit looking that clean or well-ironed belonged anywhere near a countryside city hall like this one. He had graduated from Keio University and went straight to Kasumigaseki—a career man through and through. He had apparently been sent all the way from the Ministry of Environment's Caves Department's General Affairs Division up to Omori City.

This wasn't a demotion in his case, though—it was to handle the sudden appearance of the Omori Dungeon. Tachibana's relegation from the prefectural office to the local city hall placed her in a situation somewhat similar to Kawatani's.

"Not much to be done about it though, eh?" said Kawatani, his smile warm. "There aren't many adventurers in Japan who meet the requirements the higher-ups gave us."

"Yes," Tachibana said. "I'm calling everyone I can, but I haven't had any luck yet..."

“Not to mention, the adventurers who do meet the requirements are already busy, and they make enough money that they don’t need to bother dealing with difficult work like ours. The guys further up the chain really don’t understand the conditions here on the ground,” Kawatani explained.

“Yes, I think you’re right...” Tachibana smiled and laughed politely.

“Everyone else has already found a partner.”

She paused. “Yes.”

“If you’d like...” Kawatani suddenly sidled up to her, whispering in her ear. She could smell his aftershave—it might have had a nice scent, but the experience as a whole was unpleasant. “I could use my connections to find you a partner, Tachibana-san.”

“Huh...? You wouldn’t mind?” Tachibana asked.

Surprised, she studied Kawatani’s face, which was right in front of hers.

*I thought he was just some asshole from Kasumigaseki... I mean, he can be really mean sometimes. But now he’s going to help me?*

Tachibana’s eyes widened. Kawatani grinned at her.

“Of course not,” he said. “We’re a team. I’ll help you out.”

“Ah... Th-thank you, then! If you could... B-but I only have until next week!” Tachibana exclaimed.

“I know. I’ll make sure to have an adventurer for you by the start of next week.”

“Th-thank you...!” She flushed, feeling grateful.

Tachibana looked inside herself, ashamed of the part of her that had hated Kawatani. He wasn’t just some boastful, elite university graduate with wristwatches, suits, and leather bags. She knew the way he looked at her had been untoward at times, but her bust and butt were bigger than average. She could hardly blame men for looking.

*I owe him a lot... Really.*

“Not that this is in exchange or anything...but I’m really going to have to push my contacts to get this through. May I ask you for a favor in return?” Kawatani asked.

“Y-yes! Whatever you need!” Tachibana said.

“Good. Make sure you’re free tomorrow night.”

Tachibana hesitated. “Night? Err...”

“Don’t play dumb, Tachibana,” Kawatani said. It felt like the temperature in the room dropped two degrees. “You do know what I’m getting at, don’t you?”

“Eh?” Tachibana squeaked.

“Look. It’s a mystery why you were even assigned to my team. A useless lackey from a prefectural office gets to work on a vital national project just for showing *up*?” He glared at her, his eyes cold. Tachibana felt her throat closing up again. “Who do you think will take the fall for you when you screw up? It’s not going to be the division head or the head of the office. It’s going to be me. That’s the whole reason I’m stuck here in the middle of nowhere. You *do* get that, don’t you?”

“Ah... Y-yes...” Tachibana stuttered.

“I’m saying I’m going to be taking the shirt off my back for you. I’m surprised you’re still accepting your paychecks when you can’t even find a single adventurer to work with you. I just want you to take the shirt off *your* back for me, too, if you know what I mean.”

Kawatani smirked at her, the corners of his mouth twitching upward, creases forming on his cheeks. There was a glimmer of evil there, something so filthy that even the most expensive cleansers could never wash it out.

Tachibana met him with complete silence. Then, just like that, his cheerful smile returned.

“Just kidding! It was only a joke, really. Don’t take everything so seriously.”



He left, the soles of his leather shoes tapping against the floor as he walked down the hallway.

“Oh, but if you *are* up to the task,” he said as he left, “I’ll get right on it. Contact me over Lain if you change your mind!”

Nausea welled up within Tachibana, the signs of panic setting in.

**\* \* \***

Tachibana sat in one of the city hall bathrooms, furiously tapping at her phone.

*Damn it. Damn it. Damn it. Damn it. Damn it. Damn it. Damn it. Damn it.*

*Damn it. Damn it. Damn it. Damn it. Damn it. Damn it. Damn it. Damn it. Damn*

*it. Damn it. Damn it. Damn it. Damn it. Damn it. Damn it. Damn it. Damn it.*

*Damn it. Damn it. Damn it. Damn it.*

*I'm going to order one of those mobile recording devices and sue him for sexual harassment. I'm going to take him down in front of everyone, mark my freakin' words!*

*Damn it. Damn it. Damn it. Damn it. Damn it. Damn it. Damn it. Damn it.*  
*Damn it!*

*But then what?*

*There's no way I'll ever be able to find an adventurer to be my partner. I won't be able to stay with the Crisis Management Task Force. Not just that, I might be kicked out of my job at city hall altogether. I thought I'd at least get two years of peace after I left that prefectural office. The higher-ups there bullied me to no end, brought me to the verge of depression... Just when they moved me to this quiet little place in the countryside, a dungeon just had to appear in Omori City! I didn't even know what a dungeon was! Then I got transferred into this new dungeon department they slapped together just because I had a shiny job title at the prefectural office. I was made a task force member to enforce the government's new dungeon business policy.*

*The plans are so messed up, too. There's no way some politician's whims aren't behind the whole thing...*

"Haaaaaaaaaaaaahh..." Tachibana gave a long sigh, curling up into a ball on the toilet seat.

*What do I do now? It's not like I've got anything to lose. It's the epitome of easier said than done, but there's no alternative.*

"I *seriously* can't do this anymore..." she groaned. Suddenly, Tachibana's phone screen caught her eye. "Huh?"

It was open to the dungeon access application page for the prefectural branch. A new name had just appeared on top of the list requesting access. She tapped the screen to confirm it was real.

The adventurer's name was Mizuki Ryosuke.

# Chapter 1:

## Dungeon Life, Starting with a Deep Breath

### 1

ONE OF THE CONTROLLER'S STICKS SHIFTED FORWARD with a resounding *thunk*. It wasn't a finger that pushed it but a kick from someone's leg. A person typically used a controller with their hands and fingers, not their legs—except in special circumstances. In this case, those special circumstances involved the player being a fairy, not a human—and a palm-sized fairy, at that.

The human-sized game controller was far too big for her, so she had to stand upright on top of it, wildly stomping on the buttons and kicking the control sticks in order to use it. It was, in fact, an incredibly logical input method for a being of her size.

“Aaaall riiiight! Nice! I'm way too strong! Strike?! Average hitter?! Tenacious hit! I'm unstoppable now! Witness the demonic batter, consuming all the pitchers in his paaaath!” Coach Kessie, my fairy roommate, screamed happily from atop the Ploystation Four controller.

She was using her legs, which were relatively long in proportion to the rest of her, to deftly maneuver the controls. The tiny fairy was completely obsessed with the team-building scenario mode of *Passionate Logical Pro Baseball*.

“What's that ability?” I asked. “Is it strong?”

“It's not just strong, Zukky-san! I'm putting together the strongest starting lineup of all time! I've won the Koshien tournament! Oh ho ho! Gyah ha ha ha ha!”

“Good for you,” I said.

I didn't really know what was going on, but I was happy to see that Kessie, my fairy roommate, was happy. I didn't play baseball games, or many games in

general, really. My mind was filled with thoughts of Kessie's butt wobbling back and forth, and the fact that she wasn't buck naked, unlike when we'd first met. Now, she wore the special bodysuit that Carol and REA had made for her. While it was an upgrade for Kessie, not getting to see her bare ass every day was a slight decrease in my general quality of life. That being said, it was basically like a school swimsuit or underwear, so Kessie was still easy on the eyes.

"Huh?!" Kessie said. "Why are your thoughts so hopelessly creepy?!"

"Get used to it," I answered. I'd long since accepted her mental wiretap on every last thought in my head.

"We're finally getting to a point in living together that all the parts we hate about each other are out in the open, aren't we?"

This was everyday life for me, Mizuki Ryosuke, and my fairy roommate, Kessie. She was always like this.

Several weeks had passed since the commotion caused by Horinomiya Akihiro's setup. Carol and REA decided to stay in Omori City to continue exploring the Omori Dungeon. Shinobu was still suspended from school but was considering uploading to her YourTube channel again in the near future.

Horinomiya Akihiro's Horimiya Channel was going strong. He appeared in videos while handling some administrative tasks for REA. There was a recent video he made with the title "Just a Video of Horinomiya Eating Katsudon" which had gone totally viral for some reason. He ended up making lots of compilation videos, eating loads of different foods and weirdly came into his own as a foodie YourTuber.

My neighbor, Heath, had been missing in action since last week. When I asked Matilda about it, she told me he was off visiting some foreign country. It was for an investigation, apparently, not a trip home. As usual, so much about him was still a mystery to me.

*Ding-dong!*



“Oh?” I stood up at the sound of the doorbell.

*6:40 p.m. Why’s someone visiting at this time?*

“Kessie, hide for a second, will you?”

“R-r-roger that!” she said. “I’m gonna leave the game open. Don’t turn it off, okay?”

“I know. I won’t.”

*Whoosh.*

I took out Skillbook as I headed into the hallway, remembering Carol’s warning: “Your Skillbook ability is valuable. Priceless, even.”

We’d had the chance to talk after the Horinomiya Akihiro fiasco.

“Someday, someone’s going to realize you have it,” the strongest adventurer in all of Britain had said to me. “Maybe they already have.”

Carol’s facial expression hadn’t changed all that much. The golden-haired girl of sixteen looked like a doll, but the expression she’d fixed on me was hard and stern. Perhaps, those looks were a key part of her success as the young leader of a kind of mercenary band.

“We’re on guard, but you need to watch out for yourself, too, Mizuki. In unexpected situations like these, they’ll always use surprising means to get to you. Those you pass walking the streets at night, people delivering packages, acquaintances, friends, family... You should operate under the assumption that all of them are going to try to come for that broken skill you have. What? This...? This is a marriage registration form. I’ve got all the necessary documents on both the Japanese and British sides. All I need is for you to sign.”

*Gulp.*

I kept Skillbook activated in one hand and silently pressed my eye to the peephole. A brown-haired woman stood on the other side of my door. She appeared to be hesitating over something, her eyebrows knitted.

*Early twenties, maybe?*

Her long hair grew down to her backside and was tied up behind her head in a ponytail. She had double eyelids, drooping eyes, and clearly defined facial features. She looked distinctly unwell, casting a shadow over what would otherwise earn her a pretty good score for her face.

*But, hey, if I'm being completely honest here...*

The very first thing that caught my eye was her chest. The slim jacket she wore only made it more evident how furiously her boobs strained against it.

*She must be a size E. Or an F, maybe? Those are some giant knockers.*

*Is this a honey trap? An unfortunate-looking girl with huge titties is on the other side of my door. Of course alarm bells are going off. But if this a trap, why does she look so timid?*

*None of this makes sense. Is she a door-to-door salesperson? Is she one of those religious proselytizers? Some sort of pyramid scheme? Or it could be something else I haven't even thought of. Should I pretend I'm not here?*

I slowly pulled the Blaze card from Skillbook. *Might as well open the door. If this is a trap, I'll use Blaze to blast her away.*

I turned the lock and opened the door. The well-endowed lady in the suit flinched in surprise. She looked at me open-mouthed.

"Ah!" She froze up, saying nothing further.

*Looks like I'm going to have to throw her a lifeline.*

"Uh... Can I help you?" I asked.

Her mouth opened and shut. Through her nerves, she somehow managed to string some words together. "I-I'm from the prefect—I mean, from Omori City Hall. My name is Tachibana Maki," she said with a bow, then peeked up to look at me. "Are you Mizuki Ryosuke-san?"

I paused. "That's me, yes."

*“Ahem. I’m sorry for not calling to schedule this meeting. I found your address from the Omori Dungeon access application page and came as soon as I could...”*

The woman, who had called herself Tachibana, nodded her head quickly and continued to quietly mumble. “I-I really am sorry that this is so sudden... I truly apologize for coming on such short notice.”

*Might be a personality thing. Can she not stand to hold her head in the air for too long?*

Every time she bobbed her head down like a woodpecker, her bulging breasts swayed with the motion.

“So... You’re from city hall,” I said. “What is it you need from me?”

*“Ahem, well, you see... Ah, the thing is... It’s quite hard for me to say, in fact,”* Tachibana-san mumbled just a little too quickly, panic in her voice.

I couldn’t tell whether it was the nerves or not, but her whole body trembled the entire time.

*Those voluptuous breasts... Ah, no, I can’t. My eyes keep going back to them.*

“Right... What is it?” I asked.

“Ah... *Ahem*, well!” Tachibana-san tried to get the words out. She straightened her back and opened her mouth. “Haah! A-ah, I-I-I! I’m here to—?! Haah! Haaaahh?!”







“C-calm down! What’s happening?!” I exclaimed. “Seriously, what’s your deal?!”

\*\*\*

And so, with Tachibana-san hyperventilating, I invited her in for some tea. I waited for her trembling and chest pounding to calm down. As I tried to fill the dead air by sipping my tea, I heard a high-pitched, echoing voice intruding on my headspace.

⟨*Zukky-san! Zukky-san!*⟩

Like a left hook to my internal thoughts, Kessie started talking to me telepathically from inside the cupboard, trying to figure out what was happening.

⟨*Who’s the big-titty, unfortunate-looking-but-kinda-hot brunette-san sitting out there?*⟩

⟨*Just because you put “-san” at the end doesn’t mean you can use whatever adjectives you like to describe someone.*⟩ I replied to her in my head, managing to communicate much more easily than I’d previously been able to. I’d gotten used to speaking telepathically with Kessie, and while I’d needed to switch my brain into conversation mode in the past, I found I didn’t need to anymore.

⟨*You’ve really gotten used to this, haven’t you?*⟩

I never stopped thinking as I previously did, communicating purely and freely inside my head. As a result, my fairy roommate took up residence inside my mind whenever she felt like it—though I did feel that was a bit of a problem in and of itself.

⟨*It’s so comfy inside your head, Zukky-san!*⟩

⟨*Don’t think I’ve ever gotten that compliment before.*⟩

As Kessie and I talked inside my head, the aforementioned large-breasted, self-professed government employee Tachibana-san opened her mouth to speak. “Ah... *Ahem*, so...actually, I... Umm... I came here because I have a favor

to ask of you, Mizuki Ryosuke-san...”

“Right. What can I do for you?”

“W-well... You see... Err...”

Tachibana-san managed to get that far. Then, she quickly moved to kneel beside the table and bowed to me, her head pressed all the way to the floor.

“W-w-will you...b-be m-my dungeon advisor?!” she asked.

“Dungeon...?” I trailed off.

⟨Add-buy-sir?⟩

I furrowed my brow. I’d never heard the term before.

I couldn’t help but feel guilty pleasure at having a woman with such ample curves bow to the floor in front of me.

⟨Zukky-san, are you okay? Your head is at least forty percent more contaminated with sexy thoughts than normal.⟩

⟨That’s not true.⟩

⟨Is she your type?⟩

⟨Well, if you really want to know, I’m a boob guy.⟩

⟨Gotcha.⟩

“I-it’ll just be for a little while! Also, um! You only have to sit next to me. That’s all I need!” Tachibana-san glanced up at me from her prostrate position, desperately pleading. “I’ll do all the annoying office work! I’m only asking you to allow me to use your name. That would be enough! This won’t burden you. The government will reward you for this! They’ll pay up! Will you please consider my offer?!”

“Uh, just calm down for a minute first.”

I soothed her for a moment, giving her the chance to stop hyperventilating. She appeared on the verge of tears, sitting up straight with her legs folded

beneath her. Her fists were clenched tightly but placed neatly on top of her knees.

“I-I’m sorry... I really am sorry... This always happens when I get nervous...”

“Right, I get it. It doesn’t bother me,” I said.

Tachibana-san was about to cry, clearly emotionally unstable, so I kept my voice calm to avoid intimidating her. I felt less like someone who was being asked for a favor and more like a therapist.

“So, this dungeon advisor position... What is it, exactly?”

I was able to draw out an explanation from Tachibana-san, a process that took some time.

The last time I’d been down in the Omori Dungeon was with REA when we discovered the Blessing of Eil. The boss ogre variant we stumbled upon clearly wasn’t on the same level as the other monsters around it, so Carol and REA sent a report to city hall after our exit. They explained that the depths of the Omori Dungeon were currently in an incredibly dangerous state and recommended that the dungeon not be opened to all adventurers. In fact, when Carol went back into the Omori Dungeon recently, she was told she wouldn’t be permitted to go into its depths.

*It would’ve been easier just to seal off the whole dungeon, but that didn’t happen.*

Carol’s report ended up attracting international attention to the Omori Dungeon rather than discouraging further exploration. There were stories of a terrifying boss waiting near the entrance to the depths that had taken out the strongest adventuring party in all of Britain in mere moments. There was also the discovery of an incredibly rare item, only the second such find in the world. The situation was unique, unprecedented even, and the dungeon’s difficulty level was clearly out of whack.

Governments around the world were interested, as were dungeon-related



industries, and they all began making moves to be the first to conduct further exploration and research in the Omori Dungeon. The existence of the dungeon in Omori City was affecting not just the city itself but possibly all of Japan. The country might be able to take a position at the cutting edge of global dungeon research. In short, sealing the place off wasn't a realistic option because the dungeon was subject to both national interest and international speculation.

"This was such a sudden change, you see! It was decided that a new *dungeon advisor* system would be implemented, an organization for licensed adventurers..." Tachibana-san continued explaining.

"Then...that's what you want me for?" I asked.

"Yes! I'd really like you to come on board!"

"Uh..."

*This sounds like it's going to be trouble. If anyone but Tachibana-san were sitting here in front of me, I'd politely ask them to leave at the first opportunity.*

*«What if Tachibana-san didn't have such bodacious bazongas?»*

*«I'm not that mean.»*

*«Sounds like I'm right on the money.»*

"In any case, why are you here asking me *tonight*? Why is this all so sudden?"

"A-ah, well! I'm really, *really* sorry about that, actually..."

I kept comforting Tachibana-san, as it seemed leaving her with her own thoughts for longer than a minute caused her to panic. I asked her to explain the situation.

"W-well, you see... I don't really know why I'm doing this myself..."

As for what she said next...

*«Right then. It's time for Kessie-chan to explain! I'll be going through Big Boobie-san's verbal explanation, translating her thoughts, and wrapping all of it right up for you in a big bow!»*

«Take it away, Kessie.»

«This big-titted-but-kinda-unfortunate-looking-but-kinda-hot-chick Tachibana Maki-san didn't always work at Omori City Hall. She used to be an employee at the Hokkaido prefectural office! Then, she got transferred to Omori City a few months before the Omori Dungeon appeared and you moved here, Zukky-san. A newbie among newbies!»

«But then, like,» Kessie continued, «even though she was just a regular employee at the prefectural office, she suddenly got assigned to the newly established position of cave management official! This was a big surprise to her. A shocking development that shook heaven and earth! A mysterious HR decision on a seismic scale! Coincidence, fate, and incredible timing all converged to make this city hall job an administrative inevitability, y'know!»

«Right then,» Kessie said, keeping right on going, «on to why this happened! What was the reason, the cause? Our huge-titted friend, aka Tachibana Maki, was actually pretty high up in the pecking order at her old job, so this emergency situation catapulted her straight into the crisis management task force. Then, with the profile of the Omori Dungeon rising, she had her position raised, raised, and raised again! Restructuring! Reshuffling! Transfers! With the staff shortages at Omori City Hall and all the unusual clamor and confusion, Big Boobie-san was suddenly incorporated into a career guy's team from off the island! And that's the HR domino effect that led Tachibana Maki-san to be named one of the country's very first cave management officials!»

«Finally. Nice work, Kessie!»

«Please, it was nothing, really! Feel free to call me Hanashika Kessie III from now on. Oh ho ho!»

«Third generation? Who had the name before you?»

«Thank you and good night!»

After that thorough explanation of Tachibana-san's history from Kessie—who seemed to understand the entire thing—I went ahead and asked a few

questions about the parts I didn't get.

"This 'cave management official' position you mentioned... What is it, exactly?"

"Well, to put it simply..."

According to the government, a cave management official was an on-site director for dungeon management activities. They were intended to be deployed on a trial basis to Omori City, with the swirling Omori Dungeon at its center, as well as other prefectures with dungeons. Four cave management officials had been assigned to Omori City and ordered to partner up with licensed adventurers to act as their "dungeon advisors." Dungeon advisors were meant to give practical advice on the operation of dungeons while providing direct, immediate solutions to the many problems and operational issues that might arise.

"I don't mind having this new position, of course. It's just that a cave management official needs a dungeon advisor to partner up with, and I'm the only one currently without one! I've had to search and negotiate on my own. I've been asked to bring a licensed adventurer along, even if they're just a placeholder advisor!"

"So that's me?" I asked, folding my arms. "But there *are* other adventurers in the country. It doesn't have to be me, does it?"

"A-ah, well... Not just any adventurer will do! There are minimum requirements that a dungeon advisor has to meet!"

"But I only just got my license. I'm a beginner, no matter how you slice it."

"Oh, but you *do* meet the requirements, Mizuki-san. There was some very big monster you defeated, wasn't there?"

"Ah..."

*The boss ogre variant, huh? I mean, she's right. I'm the one who finished it off, but it'd be more accurate to say that Carol and I just barely brought it down*

*between the two of us. Apparently, the record shows that I defeated it all on my own.*

“I took another look at the dungeon access history. It’s very close, but you just barely make the minimum requirement, Mizuki-san. All the adventurers prior to you have turned me down. You’re my last resort. I would really appreciate it if you accepted!”

“Right. Well, I get what you’re saying.” I sipped the tea I’d made for myself, wetting my throat before giving the obvious answer. “I’ll consider your proposal. Can I give you my answer at a later date?”

“Under normal circumstances, I would be more than happy to give you time, but...” She frowned, her forehead soaked with cold sweat. “It’s...n-next week! There’s going to be someone really important coming from Kasumigaseki! It’s some kind of announcement for the appointment of new cave management positions. I was asked to bring my dungeon advisor to the event! I’d appreciate it if you could decide quickly, if you can. I’m really sorry to be so forward with you, but my hands are tied!”

“You’re telling me to decide right now?”

“I’m really, really sorry! But if it’s at all possible, can you? I’m so sorry! Honest!”

With that said, Tachibana-san prostrated herself once more. I didn’t feel like stopping her and watched her go down for a second bow.

*This is entirely too sudden, and she’s being real pushy about it, but... Looking at Tachibana-san, I couldn’t help but remember my own time as an investment banker, chasing down my strict sales targets. I used to work just as hard to meet those sales goals every month. I came up with sales whenever there weren’t enough. If I didn’t, I faced getting completely screwed by my boss. There was even one time I drove myself mad with stress and made up sales out of thin air. Obviously, my boss found out and screwed me to hell in the end anyway.*

Tachibana-san started to remind me of my own grand exploits, making it

harder to dismiss her out of hand.

*Not to mention, I'd feel awful just turning her down with a "Sorry, can't do it" with her bowing all the way to my floor like this... She's kinda pretty, and she's got a great pair, so I can't turn her down just because I don't want to deal with the stress.*

«You're like, totally making your decision based on those huge tits, aren't you?»

"Pl-please! I'd really appreciate it. If you could just lend me your name and attend the announcement, that would be more than enough! Anything after that, I...I guarantee I won't inconvenience you any further!" Tachibana-san said. "Oh, *hurk*—"

*Huh? Is she gonna puke or something?*

"*Ohhgf...*" Tachibana-san retched.

"Wait, wait. That way! Bathroom's that way!"

Tachibana-san held her hands over her mouth, and immediately rushed off when I pointed her to the bathroom. Once she was gone, I heard a terrible noise. She'd thrown up due to her nerves.

*I don't think I've ever made a woman throw up just by meeting them. She's pretty beautiful and has those big 'ole boobies, but her unique skills "Hyperventilate" and "Throw Up" kind of ruin the whole thing.*

"Ah..." I moaned, feeling helpless. It was then that Kessie fluttered over, coming out from her hiding place inside the cupboard.

"Zukky-san, Zukky-san. Why don't you just let her use your name for now?" she said.

"You think I should?" I asked.

"I mean, I feel bad for her! I tried reading her thoughts, and she's not hiding anything from you. She's just a girl who's, like, seriously on edge."

“Well, if you say so...” I said. “I suppose I can at least attend this announcement and give her my name.”

I scratched my head and sighed. Tachibana-san came back from the bathroom, unsteady on her feet as she stumbled back into the room.

“I-I really am so sorry for causing you so much trouble... I-I don’t want to be more of a burden...s-so I’ll be leaving... I’m sorry...”

“Ah, no, wait. I get it, Tachibana-san. I’ll let you use my name. Go ahead and do the paperwork.”

“Huh? Are you sure?” she mumbled in disbelief.

*If I don’t say yes, she might die on the spot.*

“Just as a temporary thing, though. You’ll still look for someone else to take my place, right?” I asked.

“Y-yes! I will!”

“Then I suppose I can at least lend you my name...”

“Th-thank you so much! Thank you! Really! Truly! Thank you! I really am so sorry!” Tachibana-san babbled.

“Don’t worry ’bout it!” called Kessie.

Tachibana-san started to cry, head lowered. “I-I’m so tired that I’m even hearing voices now,” she said. “Ha ha... R-really, th-thank you. How can I ever repay you?!”

“Don’t worry about it. I mean it. Let me know if there’s anything else you need.” With that, I grabbed Kessie, who still flitted about beside me, and immediately stuffed her under the table to hide.

“Mgh!”



**B**EFORE I KNEW IT, IT WAS THE NEXT WEEK, AND I was participating in the announcement ceremony—either for the good of the country or the good of big-bosomed Tachibana Maki-san.

The ceremony wasn't at Omori City Hall but the same Omori City Hall Environmental Facilities Department Division Regional Hall, Sakuradai Regional Hall (or just Sakuradai Hall) that I'd once visited when applying for my Adventuring license. It had been a while since I'd worn a suit. With permission from Tachibana-san, I'd asked to wear a face mask the whole time I was there, pretending to suffer from a cold. When we met outside the hall, Tachibana-san ducked her head down the moment she caught sight of me.

"Mizuki-san! Th-thank you so much!"

"Sure," I replied. "We gotta help each other out in times of need, right?"

"As soon as this is over," she said, "I'll take your name off the temporary list..."

"Uh, sure, I'd appreciate that."

*Hey, if going to one announcement ceremony is all it takes to save these big boobs, it's hardly a heavy price to pay.*

I waited a moment for Kessie to interject before realizing I'd left her at home. She was watching some weird VTuber DigiPro Koshien tournament livestream that her favorite VTuber was participating in.

*Kessie doesn't exactly have a lot of free time on her hands. She's busy working her way through all the content of the material world. Makes me feel weird not having her around, even if it's strange to have someone constantly calling you out on your thoughts.*

"Really, thank you so much for taking the time and energy to come here today!" Tachibana-san said.

"Let's go inside, shall we?"

I gave her a little encouragement and we walked into the hall together. The place was filled with a variety of government workers from the city and the prefectural office. I also noticed a few people who seemed to be higher-ups.

As Tachibana-san led me to the waiting room, I heard voices behind me whispering.

“Check it out. Looks like Tachibana actually brought someone.”

*Huh?*

I turned around, but I couldn't pick out whose voice it had been.

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Several people sat in the waiting room. They all seemed to be other employees waiting for the ceremony to start, and every one of them appeared more capable than Tachibana-san. *I bet they actually are better, too.*

Those who were dressed quite unlike government employees and didn't sport the typical haircut, looked to be dungeon advisors—the licensed adventurers. Some of them I'd even seen before in TV specials. One in particular, a wild-looking man with an even wilder ponytail, leaned so far back in his seat he looked almost rude.

*Who is that guy again? I'm sure I've seen him on TV, but I can't remember his name. I think there's an animal kanji in there somewhere. Isn't it a fairly uncommon name, too? In any case, the government called these people up. Makes sense that some of the more well-known adventurers have answered.*

I took a seat against the wall alongside Tachibana-san, but realized I was thirsty the moment I sat down.

“Mind if I go get a drink?” I asked.

“Ah?! A-are you thirsty? I'll go and get you something!”

Tachibana-san started to get up from her chair, but I stopped her with one hand on her shoulder. “It's fine. I'll go.”

“No! I should be buying your drinks, Mizuki-san...!”

*What is she, my personal assistant?*

I shot down her protests and left her in the waiting room, heading to the vending machines. The selection wasn't good—it was the kind of vending machine that made you sick and tired the more you stared at it.

*How do they make these drinks so utterly unappealing? There's practically an art to it.*

As I tried to make a decision in front of the old machines, someone came over to talk to me.

“Nice to meet you,” he said.

“Sure, you too,” I replied.

The man walked over and stood beside me in front of the machine. “My name is Kawatani. I look forward to working with you.”

His suit was prim and proper, hair neatly sectioned thirty percent to the left, seventy to the right. He seemed to want a handshake.

“I'm Mizuki. Same.” I greeted him, but this Kawatani guy just kept talking.

“You're Tachibana's dungeon advisor, aren't you?”

“Guess so, yeah.”

“Did you sleep with her?”

“Huh?” I was taken aback, so much so that I ended up replying a bit aggressively. “The hell are you talking about?”

“Nothing. I'm just curious.” Kawatani gave me a flippant smile and leaned his face close to mine. “Between you and me, I never figured Tachibana would ever be able to bring in a licensed adventurer, y'know?”

“What are you getting at?”

“I mean, c'mon. She's kinda weird, isn't she?”

*She's a bit different, yeah, but I don't want to agree with this guy.*

"At the prefectural office," Kawatani continued, "she got bullied by one of the nasty higher-ups. It made her sick, really impacted her mental health. I hear she got sent to Omori City Hall as a kind of relegation."

"But now she's on this big new government project, right?" I asked.

"There's no way she'd actually be trusted with this work. She's being set up to fail here, forced to quit," he said.

"What's up with that?"

My drink rolled to the bottom of the machine with a *clunk*. I'd settled on a weirdly shaped can of coffee.

"Cutting off the weak to save the strong, a lizard cutting off its own tail. It's a well-known saying," Kawatani said.

"I don't know what the hell you're getting at."

"This new cave management official and dungeon advisor system is just some house of cards the panicked politicians rushed to set up. The internal structure of this thing is a mess, ready to collapse at any moment. They're making us set up a framework, but it's just a matter of time until issues start popping up. I hear the papers are already starting to work on their stories."

"What does that have to do with Tachibana-san?" I asked, opening my can of coffee and taking a sip. Kawatani went with a smaller one, a sugary screw-top drink.

"Whatever problems reckless schedules and readjustments cause, we end up foisting all the blame on her. That's what she's for. You know how politicians have those scandals, and in the end, the secretary takes the blame for the whole fiasco? We're the *lizard*. She's the *tail*. See?"

"How do you know this?"

"Practically speaking, I'm the leader here." Kawatani laughed mockingly. "So, do you understand the situation now?"

“I don’t know a damn thing,” I said. “You mind leaving me the hell alone?”

“Perhaps I could just ask you to go home,” he replied. “I’ll deal with the mess here.”

I was clearly not getting through to him. I suspected I might be stuck in one of those *Sukatto Nihon* episodes where they recreate scenes featuring stereotypically evil bosses, and the thought was making me lose touch with reality.

“Why should I do that?” I asked.

“I’m asking you if you comprehend the situation. We’ve loaded Tachibana up with all these problems, and it’s going to be an issue for us if she manages to solve them. She’s the scapegoat to cover our asses. I plan on having her make a big mistake today, you get me?”

It was then that I realized it. *He never intended on letting her find a licensed adventurer that met the government’s standards in the first place. That’s why Tachibana-san hasn’t been able to find a partner.*

“Having a completely puzzling adventurer such as yourself here poses a bit of an issue for us. We set these conditions so she’d be entirely unable to meet them. With you arriving as her mysterious helper, well...this isn’t how it was meant to play out.”

*I don’t exactly know what kind of conditions the adventurers need to meet, but I suppose the official record does say that I’ve defeated a boss ogre variant in one-on-one combat, participated in a joint mission with REA from the U.K., and helped recover the incredibly rare item Blessing of Eil. On paper, I must look just about as one-in-a-million as you can get.*

“Not to mention that this really isn’t your place. Nobody here knows who you are. I bet Tachibana came crying to you. Or maybe you’re just here because it feels good to be on a national project. Seems likely that Tachibana visited you at night. Did you screw her? I bet it was good. She’s got the looks and the body.”

“I don’t know what the hell you’re talking about,” I said.

“I suppose that makes two of us.” He winked at me, then turned back to the waiting room. “Do whatever you want then, why don’t you?” he said over his shoulder as he walked away. “Either way, there’s no place for you here. You’ll be causing your own demise.”

I watched him go, then took another sip of my coffee.

*Well, I am happy he told me I could go home. But letting that asshole continue to drool over Tachibana-san would piss me off, too. I’ve gotta see this Sukatto Nihon episode all the way to the satisfying conclusion.*

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When I got back to the waiting room, the first thing I saw was Kawatani sitting in its center. He faced Tachibana-san, who sat against the wall. There hadn’t been a chair there before, meaning he’d moved it deliberately to position himself in front of her. I sat next to Tachibana-san with my coffee, and Kawatani started talking again.

“Come to think of it...” He lazily draped an arm on the backrest of his chair and gave me a little grin. I could see he wanted to ask me something, but I ignored him for the time being. “Mizuki-san, was it? How long have you had your adventuring license?” Kawatani asked.

“Ah! W-well in fact, Mizuki-san has...”

“Look that up yourself,” I cut Tachibana-san off as she began to explain. “I got my license here in Omori City. You can start by checking your own records.”

“Man, you’re a dick.” Kawatani smirked at me. “Do you know who my dungeon advisor is?”

“I don’t care,” I said.

“He’s the gentleman over there. The top adventurer in Japan, Umayama Bara-san.”

He pointed his chin over to the man with the ponytail—the one I’d recognized



from the TV specials and talk shows.

*That's right, Umayra Bara. Now I remember.*

"Maybe you should have brought someone a little better with you, Tachibana."

"Seriously, what's your deal?" I snapped.

The two of us were about to explode. But Tachibana-san hesitantly poked her head in between me and Kawatani before the battle could commence.

"Ah... M-Mizuki-san agreed to come on such short notice... I know he's busy, but he's really made an effort to be here today. So, I-I don't believe that talking to him in that manner is..."

"What, Tachibana? You got a problem with the way I'm talking?"

"As I was s-saying, I don't think that speaking badly of Mizuki-san is really..."

"Hah. I don't know how I'm supposed to care about the opinion of a worthless employee like you," Kawatani scoffed.

I stood, the chair clattering beneath me. I moved in front of Kawatani, looking down at him where he sat. "You like picking fights with people, don't you?" I asked.

"I have no intention of fighting with you. However, allow me to mention that the individual sitting over there is the vice-chairman of the Japan Association of Adventurers. That one there is the chief of J:SEARCHER, a party of adventurers that also operates internationally. The other one sitting next to them is also quite the individual. Who are *you*, by the way?"

"Former investment banker at Showa Securities Investment Bank, Mizuki Ryosuke. You got a problem with that?"

"Can't you see you don't belong here?"

"Nope. And Tachibana Maki-san's the one who called me here," I said. "By the way, that haircut does a crap job of hiding your bald spot."

Tension spread through the waiting room.

*It's just a stupid dig at him, but hey, maybe this guy really is balding. Back when I used to work for my old company, I'd gloss over these kinds of guys even when they did piss me off. But right now, I'm an adventurer singing the praises of unemployed life. It seems like I've really let my guard down when it comes to avoiding brushes with the law.*

Just then, there was a *clack* as the waiting room door opened, and a cheerful voice broke in.

"Hello! Sorry to keep you waiting!"

I looked toward the voice and froze. The man wore a dark green suit made of thick cloth—the formal dress uniform of the JGSDF—and looked to be in his mid-thirties. Numerous medals and little rectangular badges were pinned to the left side of his chest. *I think I recognize him from somewhere.*

"Man, I'm sorry, guys. Another meeting went long, y'see! Oh, hmm? It's you!"

"Ah... You are...?" I tried to remember the man's name as he briskly strode toward me.

"Your name...Mizuki-kun! Mizuki Ryosuke! I remember you. We met outside the Omori Dungeon!"

"Y-yeah! Thanks for your help back then!"

"It's Himata. Major Himata. Do you remember me?"

"Of course! Wow, I never thought we'd meet again in a place like this!"

He went in for a handshake, and I took it—his palm was rough and hard. There was a shock, and a strange sense of joy sending shivers up my spine. *I was so pissed off a minute ago... Where did all that anger go?*

Himata was the elite JSDF officer who had helped me outside the Omori Dungeon when I was struggling with loading my weapon, just before REA and I were about to enter on Horinomiya's orders. We had only spent a couple minutes exchanging a few words, but strangely, I remembered him.

*In all honesty, I'd completely forgotten, but seeing his face made it all flood back to me.*

"I knew you'd be here. Good to see you again!" he said happily, showing me his pearly whites as we shook hands. Now that I got another look at him, Major Himata was built like an army man, and he had the face for it, too. His skin was pulled taut around his face, likely due to low body fat. He had looked a bit younger to me outside the dungeon, with the brim of his military cap pulled down over his eyes, but now I saw he was older than I'd first thought. *Just under forty, I think.*





“I hear you really pulled your weight down there! That government gun came in handy, eh? Ammo placement worked out well when you were reloading?”

“Y-yeah! Thanks for your help there. If I may ask, Himata-san...what are you doing here?”

*Wait a minute. How does he know so much about what happened down in the dungeon?*

“I’m a JSDF guy, see?” he grinned. The lines of his smile were as deep as the Mariana Trench. “We’re the ones dealing with all the weapons and other stuff that has to get down into this dungeon, so we’re working in tandem with Omori City. You’re here as a dungeon advisor, right, Mizuki-kun?”

“Yes, on a temporary basis, at least.”

“I knew it! Someone got to you before me! I’d have chosen you as my advisor if they had given me the chance!”

He leaned back and gave an exaggerated guffaw. It was as if his every gesture held a powerful strength, like getting caught by one of his arm movements could easily injure you. *This intimidating physical presence... It’s almost like I’ve felt this way once before... I can’t remember where, though.*

“Well, then! It’s good to see you! Who’s your partner?” he asked.

“Tachibana-san. She’s over there.” I gestured toward her.

Himata saw Tachibana-san sitting her chair against the wall, stunned. He approached her at a speed that went from zero to sixty.

“Nice to meet you, Tachibana-kun. I’m Major Himata of the JGSDF. I look forward to working with you from here on out.”

The grand gestures were gone as he greeted her formally and politely. He was sturdily built and intimidating. Upon seeing that he wanted a handshake, Tachibana-san shot up from her chair and timidly took his hand.

“Y-yes! I look forward to working with you as well!” she said.



“Can I consider you the chief of this new operation, then?”

“E-excuse me?” Tachibana-san eyed him with confusion, making the major roar with laughter again.

“Ha ha ha! Don’t be so modest. If you’re partnered up with Mizuki-kun, you must be the top dog here, right?”

“Huh? Ah, well...” Tachibana-san muttered.

“Anyway, Mizuki-kun!” Himata looked over at me and grinned again, his mouth twisting as he showed me his teeth. “You’re joining REA, aren’tcha? I’ve got connections, so I hear most of what’s going on. Let me in on the details, won’t you?”

A different kind of tension ran through the waiting room at Himata’s words. I heard a confused “*Huh?*” from Kawatani behind me.

*Uh, right. So this is how they’ll react to that news. Seems like I’ve accidentally strayed back into the land of recreated clips featured on that Sukatto Nihon TV show and this is the big finale.*

### 3

“**H**A HA HA!” KAWATANI’S DRY LAUGHTER ECHOED through the waiting room. “I wondered what you were talking about... REA, is it?” He folded his legs, clearly amused. “What is this REA? The REA Chitose Outlet Mall?”

“REA stands for Royal Executive Arms. What? You’ve never heard of the strongest adventuring party in all of Britain?” Himata’s voice was stern, putting Kawatani down immediately.

“Huh?” Kawatani froze.

Himata looked at him sideways, then peeked over at me. “Hey, Mizuki-kun. Who’s this split-fringe guy with the godawful jokes? Who the heck said anything

about a shopping mall? I sure hate it when unfunny guys are too damn full of themselves to know when to shut up.”

“Ah, Himata-san—I mean, Major Himata.” I pulled on his sleeve and led him out of the waiting room. He seemed slim due to his height, but he was pretty muscular under that dark green JSDF uniform. It took a fair bit of strength to pull him away.

*If he didn't want to leave, I don't think I'd be able to get him anywhere.*

“Himata-san,” I whispered to him once we were outside. “About the REA thing... Would you mind not mentioning that in front of other people?”

“How come? REA’s the whole reason you’re here, right?” he said.

“No, that’s not it at all. And I don’t intend on joining REA at the moment,” I replied.

“You aren’t joining them?” Himata looked confused. He was so lively and energetic; his facial expressions were very forthcoming. “It’s like you’ve been scouted for Real Madrid, and you’re turning them down. Not just that. Doesn’t their captain, Carol, want you personally?”

“Well, I guess that’s true.”

“Then why turn them down? Are your parents sick or something? Is there some big reason you can’t leave Japan? Don’t let it get to you, Mizuki-kun! I’m sure your parents don’t want to stand in your way, not when their son is accomplishing such great feats!”

“No, that’s not what this is. Listen! I never wanted to be an adventurer!” I butted in as Major Himata started to lecture me, going down his own imagined path of my parents’ objections.

*Just how much does this guy know about me, anyway?*

“Y’know, these kinds of chances only come around once in a lifetime. Some people don’t get them at all. You sure you’re doing okay?” he asked.

“W-well...” I said, “you could say I’ve got a lot on my mind.”

“Indecision will be your downfall. Only dead fish go with the flow,” he said.

“Who are you quoting?”

“You got me. It’s a bad habit of mine, quoting people like I made up the words myself. I think it was a British guy who said that one. Or a French one.”

“Well, I’ll be sure to keep that in mind,” I said. “The split-fringe guy, by the way... I think he controls that new department.”

“How come it’s the know-nothing nitwits who end up in charge?”

“I gotta ask. How *do* you know so much?”

“I know a lot of people. That’s how,” Himata said.

*Still, isn’t there a limit?*

After convincing Himata, we returned to the waiting room. I sat down next to Tachibana-san.

*I feel like everyone’s staring at me...*

Kawatani, the other government employees, and the private adventurers brought in as advisors all looked in my direction, unable to believe what Himata had just told them. Tachibana-san glanced at me uneasily, confused by the strange atmosphere that had settled around us.

“Ah... Is the mood in here my fault? Did I do something wrong?” she whispered.

“It’s fine. You didn’t do anything,” I replied. “The people around me have just been getting a bit too excited lately. It’s my problem, not yours.”

Himata came to sit next to us. I met Kawatani’s eyes, and he immediately looked away, pouting. “REA? It can’t be,” he muttered under his breath. “A Japanese adventurer in a party like *that*? Impossible. There’s no precedent... Not yet, at least...”

Himata stared at Kawatani and smirked. “No way’s been found to say goodbye to idiots and cops yet, eh?” Himata murmured.

I didn't really understand what he was getting at, but it was *definitely* a quote from somewhere.

\*\*\*

The announcement ceremony was attended by important-looking bureaucrats and the kind of politicians you usually only saw on TV election specials. All I ended up having to do was sit, stand, listen to some congratulatory speeches, and clap when appropriate.

*So this really is just a head count then, nothing serious. No problem if everyone turns up, but a huge problem if anyone's missing. This event hasn't actually served any real purpose. It's ridiculous.*

Kawatani managed the proceedings during the ceremony.

"Thank you so much for this important opportunity and for allowing us to take on these vital roles... Of course, dungeons are the future of our nation, Japan... They are a new, rapidly growing field of science, and..."

Kawatani played it smart and confident, but there was something awkward about his speech. He kept glancing over at me as he spoke. *I noticed, even if he didn't realize he was doing it. I wonder if this is how women with big boobs feel when they attract attention... This is what it's like for Tachibana-san, I guess.*

When Kawatani's speech was over, he called the next speaker up. "Now, I'd like to hand things over to Major Himata from the Ministry of Defense."

Major Himata stood at the invitation.

*Major... He'd be at the same rank in foreign militaries, right? Or are their majors equivalent to our colonels, and our colonels like their majors? I don't really know the details.*

I saw a woman sitting next to him who looked like a dungeon advisor. Himata whispered something to her as he stood and quickly made his way to the podium. Once he was up there, the higher-ups began murmuring, too.

"Himata... Captain Himata of the Great Kansai Caves Disaster?"

“Former S... Then he’s been sent to a command at the eleventh brigade...”

“With the Omori Dungeon situation... I heard the JSDF Joint Staff called him here.”

He stood up straight and sharp as a knife in front of the podium, then bowed to everyone present. He fixed the position of the microphone and proceeded to speak so loudly that it was abundantly clear he didn’t need his voice amplified.

“Hello! I am Major Himata of the Joint Staff. I could go through a bunch of formalities, but time is money, so I’ll get right to it! I believe it was Benjamin Franklin who first used the phrase ‘time is money,’ and... Oh, sorry, I was about to go off track for a second there.”

He laughed loudly to himself. His voice was so clear it sounded like he’d been born with a microphone pinned to his chest.

“There is only one thing that I’m here to tell you. We aren’t just the government and the people as separate entities, but the army, government, and the people all as one! All three groups working together! That’s what matters when it comes to managing the dungeons of Japan!”

He was starting to sound like a politician.

“These unexplored areas that we call dungeons are incredibly valuable assets for the future of Japan. We want to help Omori Dungeon grow to be the second New York Dungeon! We’ll research this international phenomenon, cultivate it, and extract its resources! Japan fell behind other nations in this respect, but it will now take the lead once again. To do that, we’ll need to bridge the barriers that have stood between us and come together as one! The administration and the Joint Staff have made a decision, and that’s what I have come to convey to you all!”

Himata stopped after that line, and suddenly looked directly at me. He smiled, just for a moment.

“I hereby announce the first combined dungeon field test training exercise!”

he declared. “The JSDF, government, and the people, all mobilized to build and improve on genuine, practical dungeon operational capabilities! We’re also going to establish better cohesion between our branches. If I may be so bold, I’d like to publicly announce this exercise to everyone here today!”

The crowd suddenly became uneasy. This ceremony was meant to be a formality with nothing of note happening at all. Himata’s announcement had taken a hammer to the proceedings.

“A combined...dungeon field test training exercise...?” Tachibana-san mumbled to herself beside me. I followed Himata with my eyes as he made his way from the podium.

Now that I think back, maybe that had been the critical point for everything that followed. I stepped into the Omori Dungeon, faced down the dragon, met with the fairy Kessie, obtained a rare skill, and got caught up in an incident involving a YourTuber named Shinobu. I was practically forced to participate in a dungeon clearing with Carol and REA by a businessman named Horinomiya. I could have freely given up my skill at any of those points, cut ties with everyone I’d met, and left the adventuring world.

But now, I couldn’t help but think that it was that very instant when the cogs began to turn, putting everything in motion—an irreversible super-express train from which I was unable to disembark.

## Chapter 2:

# How Come You're Suddenly a Butt in the Wall?!

### 1

**“T**HIS COMBINED DUNGEON FIELD TEST TRAINING exercise sounds like the perfect opportunity for you to test out Skillbook.”

I was home, sitting at my desk with my phone pressed to my ear. Carol was on the other end of the line.

*“They got in touch with me, too, actually. They want me and a few members of REA to participate as advisors.”*

“Was it through a guy called Himata, maybe?”

*“How did you know that? Do you know him?”*

*I figured as much.*

*“That’s beside the point. It’s a live training exercise against already-captured monsters. You’re going to be allowed to test some state-owned skills as well as your own, so you’ll have to take part.”*

“I think so too.”

The combined exercise was supposed to involve training in an area modeled to look like a dungeon, as well as training for a scenario where escaped dungeon creatures might need to be dealt with in the streets of Japan. Apparently, participants would be allowed to borrow state-owned skill assets to use during the exercise.

“I’ve already been given a list, but there’s a skill that isn’t on it that I want. I’m gonna buy it to try out during the training.”

*“Good. You’re still planning on selling Skillbook, aren’t you?”*

“Yeah. I’m not cut out to be an adventurer.”



*"I don't think that's true."*

*It is. I'm not a good match for this world. These people called adventurers delve into dungeons, but it's not a fun, frilly RPG. Everyday combat means putting your life on the line. It's like working for a private military company.*

My plan was to test out Skillbook during the training, find out as many details about it as I could, then sell it during or after the exercise.

*I'm just a regular citizen. The weight of this super-rare skill is too heavy for me to handle. I'll never be able to get my peaceful life back as long as I have this broken ability with me.*

*"Even if you do end up selling Skillbook, why not join REA for a while? Things might get messy for you after the big deal goes down. If you're by my side, I can keep you safe. You might also change your mind once you've experienced a little of our world."*

*"I'll think about it."*

*"I'm watching you. Skillbook is just a tool. When there was a crisis, you were the one who was able to bring out its true worth, nobody else."*

"Thanks," I said after a moment's pause. "If you're going that far, I suppose I should at least pay you a visit."

*"Think it over. By the way, why did you block me on Lain?"*

*"Because you kept sending me nudes."*

*"Those were only to give you a full reference of what I look like from the front and back."*

*"Lewd pictures, yeah. That's what I mean."*

*"I want us to be on the same page prior to our marriage. I was providing you with necessary information, nothing more."*

"Say whatever you want, but you're still underage! Japanese law would kill me for having those pictures."

I hung up the phone, grabbed a beer from the fridge, and sat down at the living room table. Kessie was sitting on top of the table as always, eating a crushed-up Country Ba'am cookie from a little plate and watching TV. Nothing special was on, just the usual midday fluff shows. I started watching with her, and after a while, noticed a little [news flash] caption at the top of the screen.

"Hmm? A news flash?" I said.

"I wonder what's happening," Kessie said.

I waited for the caption to scroll further along, eating cookies with Kessie.

**Hokkaido police confirm an Omori City cave-dwelling creature possibly escaped in early hours of yesterday morning.**

"Huh," I said, "seriously?"

"An escape?" Kessie said.

I picked up my phone and checked the news there, too.

"What is it? Did something happen?" Kessie asked.

"Apparently a goblin might have escaped from the Omori Dungeon," I replied, scrolling through the news article.

"Huh? Isn't that super serious? How did that happen?"

"It's under investigation," I explained. "Also, it says it's just a possibility."

"So there might be a goblin just chillin' in the streets somewhere? That's super-duper dangerous, right?"

"If this is real," I said, "then it's *real* messed up, yeah."

*Like having a bear wandering around town. But hey, the details are still unclear, and there's no solid information out yet. No point worrying about something that might not even be happening.*

“By the way, did you get in touch with Heath-san?” Kessie asked.

“Nope. He’s still out,” I said.

“I wonder where he went.”

“How would I know?” I ate another Country Ba’am cookie. “Hey, I’ve been meaning to ask. Do you not want me to join REA or something?”

“Hmm? Why do you say that?”

“It’s just kind of a vibe you’re putting out.”

“Well... Uh, not really. Like, how do I put this? If you, like, got really busy, Zukky-san, then... I don’t want things to get weird between us. Like, maybe we wouldn’t be able to watch TV together anymore... I want things to stay as they are, is all!”

“I don’t think things would change that much. I’ve got a clear goal in mind now, too.”

As we spoke, the doorbell rang. I opened the door to find a young girl with black hair cut into a neat bob. It was Shinobu. She raised one hand in greeting, and the other to show me a cloth with something wrapped inside.

“I made way too much on purpose. Do you want some?” she asked.

“Doesn’t count as making too much if you mean to do it,” I replied.

I took the cloth. It felt like something heavy was inside.

*Thanks...but I sure hope you haven’t laced this with anything. You haven’t, right? Nah, I mean, she took the time to bring this to me. It’s incredibly rude of me to assume that. But then again, this is Shinobu we’re talking about...*

Shinobu giggled as if she’d read my mind. She was always wearing a hoodie with Tshirts that always seemed to be open at the chest for some reason. She dressed so edgy that it was like she was fully outfitted to kill virgins.

*She wasn’t wearing any of that when I bumped into her at the convenience store the other day. Back then, she’d had on a sweatshirt she clearly wore*

around the house and a thigh-length skirt, her legs bare underneath. She'd been wearing high-top sneakers and worn-out white socks as well.

"Don't worry, I haven't put anything weird in it like some yandere from a horror movie," she said.

"The thought did cross my mind. Thanks."

"Just don't open that one container you can't see inside of. The one with the little hole in it, I mean," she said. "Can you put that one facing your desk, or maybe the living room?"

"Sorry, I'm giving this back."

"I'm kidding. Anyway, I'm thinking about uploading videos again soon. Watch them, okay?"

"You're still at it, eh?" I asked.

"I'm doing it in a family-friendly way this time. I'll just keep rising in views like a rocket, loved by everyone whether I do anything or not. I want to be like HIBAKIN-san, you know?"

*Go ahead and try. Pretty bold of you, given that video of you getting stripped naked by those goblin attackers is still getting views, likes, and comments on all those foreign porn sites.*

It seemed Shinobu had avoided bullying at school and succeeded in finding a secure position within her class. *They must realize it's not worth going after someone with the sway to spread videos around, especially when she's actually willing to do it. Kids are smart these days.*

So that was how my day went. The first combined dungeon field test training exercise was almost upon us. I sat talking with Kessie about this and that as we ate. We left the TV tuned to the evening news. It was exactly what you might expect to see, aside from that potential goblin escape incident. Not really paying much attention, I enjoyed some of Shinobu's home cooking with my beer. *Man, she's a pretty good cook.*

*“Next up tonight...”*

*“There are reports that an individual without a passport may have boarded a passenger plane to the United States. According to the airport...”*

*“In light of the recent rise in incidents involving statted adventurers, the U.S.... The government has announced measures in order to... In recent days... A Los Angeles police officer was... When interviewed, he had this to say...”*

*“I shot him in the head. No doubt about that. His head flew off, brain splattered everywhere. But he didn’t die. He was dead, but he wasn’t. I remember the flashing, like red fireworks. They never told us about those kinds of skills in training. I panicked. That’s when the one in black...”*

## 2

**T**HERE WAS SOMETHING I HAD TO DO BEFORE training began. I got in my car and drove over to Tachibana-san’s place to pick her up. Her apartment was near the center of Omori City and seemed a little higher end, with the building being newly constructed and clean looking.

*I bet she gets this place a bit cheaper thanks to her government job rent allowance. She came here all the way from Sapporo, too; they might have even helped pay for her move.*

**Mizuki Ryosuke: I’m here. [read]**

I messaged her that I’d arrived, and a tag immediately popped up saying that she’d seen it. Five seconds later, her apartment door opened. Tachibana-san was in her everyday clothes, evidently assembled from a fast fashion place like UNIKURO in the safest colors she could find. Under her arm, she held a big sports bag. It looked like she was preparing for a three-day trip somewhere.

“Hello, Mizuki-san! Thank you so much for coming today!”

“No problem. Do you mind sitting in the back?” I asked, opening my window.

She opened the rear door, slid her duffel bag inside, got in, and fastened her seatbelt. Only then did she notice that there was someone in the front passenger seat.

“You’re Tachibana Maki?” Carol had her arms crossed, and there was an intimidating air about her.

“Huh?” Tachibana-san’s eyes opened wide, stunned at the sudden threat from the golden-haired sixteen-year-old girl. “Y-yes, I am...”

“I’m Carol. Carol Middleton, captain of REA.”

“Royal E... Eh?”

“I’ll be accompanying you and Mizuki on the dive today. No information found during today’s mission can ever be made public. Is that understood?”

“Y-yes...” Tachibana-san mumbled.

“Stop trying to scare her, Carol,” I scolded, finding myself unable to just sit by and watch. Carol looked back at me, upset.

“I didn’t scare her,” she protested.

“She’s just a regular person. Kessie said so, too.”

“I’m not giving her special treatment.”

“That’s not what I mean.”

*This is no good.*

Carol had opened her heart to me, but she was still a bit discriminating when it came to others. When I saw flashes of enmity sent toward Tachibana-san, I remembered how cold and harsh the girl had been to me when we first met.

Tachibana-san shook in fear at the pressure the mysterious young foreign girl exuded. “Um... I don’t really understand what’s going on here.”

“Ah, look, Tachibana-san,” I said. “This girl is from Britain. She’s a famous adventurer, and she’s going to help us in the dungeon today. I’m sorry I didn’t tell you earlier. She’s a bit secretive.”

“An adventurer? Th-this young girl?!”

“She might not look it, but she’s super freakin’ strong. Stronger than me.”

“Let me make one thing clear, Tachibana Maki,” said Carol, leaning around into the back seat and pointing directly at Tachibana-san. “Mizuki and I are getting married. There’s no room here for you to weasel your way in. Get that through your head.”

“Huh?!” Tachibana-san cried out. “You’re getting married to a little girl?!”

“No, I’m not. Carol, stop saying things people will misunderstand!”

“Where’s the misunderstanding?” Carol asked. “You stared at my naked body for ages, and now you’re acting like this?”

“Huh?! You mean you were looking at this teenager?!”

“No, I wasn’t! It’s just a misunderstanding!”

⟨*You’ve sure got it tough, Zukky-san!*⟩

The voice came from Kessie, who’d taken up permanent residence in my head and my shirt pocket.

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The day’s goal was to stat Tachibana Maki.

*As for what statting involves...*

⟨*Right then, leave the explaining up to Kessie-sama!*⟩

⟨*Thanks, Kessie. Go ahead.*⟩

⟨*Statting is a strange little phenomenon that happens when Earth-born humans are exposed to the laws of the dungeon! Humans that stay in dungeons for a certain amount of time have all these otherworldly concepts of HP, MP,*



*abilities, and skills implanted in them! Of course, a boring old city hall employee like the unfortunate-looking and jumbo-jugged Tachibana-san doesn't have any stats just yet!>*

*«That's right. You're right, on so many levels.»*

*«With this new national management system, she's apparently going to be an important kind of managing director down there in the dungeons! Now that she's been hired, that non-statted bod of hers is a problem... What was the problem again? I forgot.»*

*«Well, as a rule, advisors are always with their partner adventurers. As long as Tachibana-san stays with me, she doesn't actually need to be stattd.»*

*«Then there's no problem?»*

*«This is kind of like a media strategy.»*

*«Media strategy?»*

*«You know, like that cybersecurity chief who got caught out on not being able to explain what a USB stick was. The government wants to avoid a repeat of that, so cave management officials have to at least be stattd before they can receive the title.»*

*«I don't know what a cybersecurity chief is, but okay!»*

The Omori Dungeon was still under construction, but there was a new changing room ready to use. I got changed into my dungeon-clearing gear and chatted to Kessie inside my mind while I waited in the hall for the two women to emerge.

Inside the dungeon construction site, I noticed a few police-looking types I'd never seen before. *They're probably here after that news report of the potential goblin escape. Apparently, they're even thinking about temporarily sealing this place off. New entry applications are suspended for the time being. Luckily, we got ours in early.*

As I side-eyed the police officers, Tachibana-san came out of the women's

changing rooms. She was wearing a simple, navy-blue tracksuit that was easy to move around in, from the looks of it.

“Do you think this will be okay?” she asked.

“No problem at all,” I replied. “We’ll be doing all the combat. Or rather, Carol will.”

“Is Carol-san really that strong?” asked Tachibana-san. There was doubt in her eyes when she glanced over at me. “She looks like a normal girl to me... Maybe fifteen, sixteen years old?”

“Despite how she looks, Carol’s the strongest party leader in all of Britain.”

“REA, right. I’ve heard a little about them from the others at the office. I never thought she would be so young, though...”

“I suppose everyone thinks that about her at first,” I said.

“Well, now that I look at you...” Tachibana-san said, taking in all my tactical gear. The outfit made me look like an airsoft guy or maybe even a mercenary. “You really are an adventurer, aren’t you, Mizuki-san?”

“I’m not *much* of an adventurer, but yeah, I am.”

“If I wasn’t here with you today, you’d be raking in the cash down there. This really is a lost opportunity for you, isn’t it? I’m so sorry. I don’t know how I can make it up to you...”

“Ah, don’t worry about it. This adventurer deal isn’t what you think it is. We applied for today’s dive to get some practice and confirm a few things. We’re not here to make money.”

*Today’s goal is to practice using Skillbook, investigate how it works, and nothing else. We aren’t going down there to pick up bags of skills and items to make a killing like Tachibana-san seems to think.*

“Please, don’t let any of that bother you,” I said.

“I don’t quite know what you mean, but thank you,” Tachibana-san said.

Carol emerged from the changing rooms. “Sorry to keep you waiting, Mizuki. Let’s go,” she said, walking straight toward me, her flat chest puffed out.

“Wait a second, Carol.”

“What’s wrong?”

“You bought some new armor, huh?”

“What of it?”

She tilted her head at me. Carol wore a set of bikini armor, which was completely different from her previous set of gear. It was more like an erotic bathing suit than armor—red and white, and sort of shaped like a school swimsuit... *Is that really even armor?*

She still wore rugged pieces of actual armor on her arms and legs: gauntlets and greaves. The rest? Her chest, shoulders, and crotch were exposed, private parts only hidden by decorative red strings. The strings stretched across her body in an over-designed, stylish cross that went around the nape of her neck. They barely covered her nipples and nothing more.

“Just to let you know, it’s not just cosplay armor this time around,” Carol explained with a boastful snort. “This is real gear from down in a dungeon, and it gives me buffs when I wear it. It’s not just revealing—it’s revealing *and* practical.”

“You couldn’t find anything practical that wasn’t so obscene?” I asked.

“But you’d rather it be obscene, wouldn’t you, Mizuki?” asked Carol, pulling lightly at the strings of her armor with one finger. The region from her chest down to her stomach was covered with a bright white cloth, which was surrounded by the strings that hid her nipples and crotch.

“I might as well ask... What kind of buff does that armor give you?”

“It increases my attack and movement speed whenever I feel embarrassment,” she explained.

“How are you going to get it working? You don’t have a sense of shame!”

“That’s just hurtful.”

“Sorry.”

“Oh, also, it’s made so that when I get all sweaty, the cloth turns see-through. The more I move, the more it turns transparent, and the more I get exposed. The armor itself helps me get embarrassed faster.”

“Again, what’s the point if you can’t feel shame?”

“Again, that stings.”

“Adventurers really are amazing...” said Tachibana-san, gazing intently at Carol’s perverted set of gear.

“Nope, this is just her. Don’t go around thinking all adventurers are like this.”

“You’re treating me rougher and rougher, Mizuki,” Carol said.

*‹Is bikini armor not your thing?›*

*‹It’s not really my thing, but it’s hot, sure.›*

*‹Well, good for you for being honest!›*

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After we finished the entry procedure, myself, Carol, Tachibana-san, *‹and me!›* headed down into the dungeon. I was fairly used to dungeons by now and didn’t feel any special excitement or nervousness about going into one. *Feels like going to the convenience store. Well, that’s an exaggeration, but I’m about as comfortable here as I am going to a store I don’t visit all that often.*

For the time being, we stayed in a dark cave near the entrance. We didn’t stray too far inside while we waited for Tachibana-san’s stats to come through. Carol and I watched my digital wristwatch count down.

“Statting takes anywhere from three to five minutes,” she said.

“Almost done then, I suppose. Try not to get so close to me, Carol.”

“Why? I was just looking at your watch.”

*Even if you were just checking the time, a young blonde girl wearing super-pervverted dungeon gear rubbing her body against me is too much stimulation for me to handle.*

Meanwhile, Tachibana-san stood around waiting. She looked uneasy and a bit unsure of what she should do.

“When I get stattd, is something going to happen? Does it hurt?” she asked.

“No, it’s nothing like that,” I said. “You’ll be fine.”

“Wait around, and it’ll pop up. You’ll see,” Carol said.

“P-pop?”

The idea of something popping out of her made Tachibana-san’s anxiety worse. Suddenly, a stat screen appeared with a *pop* right before her eyes.

“Whoa?! It p-popped up!”

“All right, you’ve been stattd,” said Carol, peeking over at Tachibana-san’s stat screen. “Let’s see now. What’ve you got?”

I felt like stats were private information to some extent. But despite wanting to protect Tachibana-san’s privacy, I was curious, so I went with Carol to take a look.

⟨*Curiosity!*⟩

⟨*That’s right, Kessie.*⟩

“Wh-what do you think...?” whispered Tachibana-san warily as we looked over her shoulder.

***Level 16***

***HP 13 MP 1***

***Strength 7 Stamina 25***

***Wisdom 19 Intelligence 37***

“Three attributes in the single digits. Below average,” said Carol bluntly.

“But her Stamina’s higher than mine,” I pointed out.

“Huh? My Stamina’s better than yours, Mizuki-san?”

“Yep, sure is.”

I had decided to focus on the basic strategy of protecting my life when choosing where to distribute my ability points, and I’d put them all into Stamina. Even so, Tachibana-san’s base value was better than mine currently was.

*She’s always hyperventilating and turning pale, so I’d figured her Stamina would be super low. I guess not.*

“A person’s Stamina value isn’t about how tough their body is,” Carol explained. “The sum of all kinds of different things about Tachibana Maki are factored into that number, including her physical characteristics.”

“Huh? My physical characteristics?”

Tachibana-san looked confused, but glancing at her chest, I felt like I understood the secret behind her excellent Stamina stat. She had massive tits. *Are those E cups or F cups? Maybe even higher?*

Added to that was the fact that Tachibana-san was tall for a woman. Her proportions were on par with any model. Put her in a bathing suit, and nobody in the world would suspect she was just a regular government employee working at a city hall. Readers wouldn’t bat an eye at her being featured on the cover of some hot swimsuit magazine. *I wouldn’t even blink. I’d want to see that.*

Her hips were sexy, and her ass was curvaceous, too. *She really does have an*

*incredible figure... I guess huge honkers are an asset when it comes to conquering dungeons.*

*Carol, on the other hand...* I let my eyes slowly trail over to her flat chest. There wasn't anything that could really be done about it, since they were still developing, but Carol's breasts were on the smaller side. If Tachibana-san had softballs, Carol had ping-pong balls.

*She's become such an incredibly powerful adventurer, even with this disadvantage...*

I felt my respect for the young Carol Middleton rising even further.

"What are you looking at, Mizuki?" Carol asked.

"Ah, nothing. I'm not looking at anything," I said.

"You were comparing, weren't you?"

"No, I wasn't comparing *anything* to *anything*."

"I won't allow it."

"Sorry."

I pulled myself together, and the two of us took a closer look at Tachibana-san's stats.

"High Charm score, though," mumbled Carol as if she'd suddenly realized something. "Her other numbers are low, but there's a skewed kind of potential in these starting stats."

"You're right. Charm's at 29, huh?"

*My Charm's only at 15. Hers is almost twice mine.*

"What does Charm do, exactly?" I asked.

"Your Charm stat affects the power of Charm skills," answered Carol. "It affects things like brainwashing, hypnosis, provocation, and inspiration."

"Sounds scary."



“It is. Charm skills are capable of directly affecting a target’s actions and thoughts. They’re some of the most heinous skills around. One of the most basic Charm skills, Hypnosis, can take control of a target for one turn.”

“Control?” I asked. “What does that mean?”

“Just what the word suggests. The caster controls the target’s mind and can make them do whatever they want. The skill can cause groups to fight and fall out with each other, or even have a target commit suicide where they stand.”

“That’s way too strong, isn’t it?”

“That’s why it’s so nefarious,” said Carol, looking directly at me. “It’s also why the level and ability point requirements for Charm skills are so steep. There aren’t any simple skills like Blaze that only require basic level requirements to use. Charm skills are very dependent on your ability points; they don’t work properly if you don’t have enough points for them, even if you do meet the level requirement. That’s why few people use them.”

“Then a Charm stat of 29 is...”

“It’s exceptional for a starting score. It’ll be useful for her in the future if she chooses to raise it.”

Carol and I continued to talk about Tachibana-san’s stats, completely leaving Tachibana-san herself behind in the conversation. The praise of her starting stat values, though, got through to her. Then, doubt suddenly struck me.

⟨Hey, Kessie?⟩

⟨Hey, hey! What’ll it be?⟩

⟨These Charm skills... They interfere with a target’s mind, right?⟩

⟨That’s the deal, yep.⟩

⟨Is this telepathy of yours a kind of Charm skill then?⟩

⟨Hmm? Nope.⟩

⟨Oh, I see.⟩

*«My thing is less a skill and more of a unique ability because of my race. Like how rhinos have horns and birds have wings. Oh, and interfering with someone's mind and telepathy aren't the same thing.»*

*«All right, gotcha.»*

*«But I suppose they're similar on a functional level, so I should be able to detect all kinds of things about Charm skills.»*

"So, does 'surprisingly good' mean that these are okay stats, then...?" asked Tachibana-san hesitantly.

"They're good," I said. "Really good, actually, depending on how you look at it."

Carol took her eyes off Tachibana-san's stat screen and looked directly at her. "Tachibana Maki. Will you join us at REA?"

"Huh? REA? Me?"

"Yes. I think we could benefit from a Charm skill user."

The direct job recruitment from the strongest party in Britain was completely out of the blue, and Tachibana-san didn't seem to really understand what she was being asked. Her eyes spun with the shock.

"She can really join REA? It's that easy?" I asked.

Carol shook her head. "It's not easy, but Tachibana has potential for growth in the rare field of Charm skills. You don't often see ability point spikes like hers. It'll take several years to develop her skills, but I'd love to get you to commit now."

"Huh...? Y-you aren't joking? You seriously w-want me to join?" asked Tachibana-san.

"I don't make jokes," Carol said, her voice flat. "How about it, Tachibana? Feel like being recruited by REA? You'd have to put up with an annual salary of forty thousand pounds during your training, but once you're in the dungeon team... I can offer you a hundred thousand minimum."

“Pounds? Umm, what would that be in yen...?”

“Do you know the rate, Mizuki?”

I started doing the calculations in my head. *I used to be an investment banker, after all. I’m not that bad at currency conversions.*

〈*Would you like Kessie-sama to assist you?*〉

〈*Please don’t talk to me while I’m doing math.*〉

〈*Aww.*〉

“I don’t know the current rate,” I said, “but forty thousand pounds should be around five million yen, and a hundred thousand would be ten million yen. Plus a few hundred thousand in change.”

“Huh?! That much?! Really?!”

“Really. Interested?”

“Mizuki-san, uh... Is this one of those prank camera show things?”

“Nope. Carol’s dead serious. She’s really offering you that salary.”

“Hmph. What’ll it be, Tachibana?” Carol asked. “It’ll mean abandoning your position as a government employee. But you’ll consider it, won’t you?”

“O-of course! Please allow me to think it over! Thank you!”

### 3

**N**OW THAT TACHIBANA-SAN WAS STATED, IT WAS safe to say that our main goal for the day had been accomplished. The plan had been to head home, but with the discovery of Tachibana-san’s unexpected talents, we decided to progress a little further into the dungeon. Carol had a tendency to get overly attached to the things she found in dungeons, and it looked like that tendency of hers was kicking in.

〈*I want to get home and watch TV!*〉

*«Then why did you come along in the first place?»*

*«I went back and forth on it... And now that I'm actually here, I regret coming!»*

*«Well, this isn't going to take too long. Sit tight and wait.»*

“Listen up, Tachibana. We’re in the shallow part of the dungeon now. I guess you could call it level one. There aren’t any seriously threatening monsters up here, and almost everything you find will either be a goblin or a slime. You can take everything out on this level with modern weaponry like handguns. There’s no need for skills.”

“R-right. I see!”

As we walked, Carol gave Tachibana-san an overview of what a dungeon clearing entailed. Tachibana-san had turned out to be more talented than expected, and Carol seemed to have taken a liking to her.

*It's like all that animosity from this morning never happened. She really is picky with people, and it can be hard to keep up with the huge swings of her opinions.*

“A goblin’s weakness is magic, and slimes are weak to fire. That said, you don’t really need to think too much about their weaknesses when you fight them. Only boss slimes pose a real threat without any fire attacks to defeat them. If you don’t have an effective way of attacking a boss slime, it’s best to run away from them. However, they do infrequently drop rare and valuable items called level crystals. If you do have the means to beat them, I’d make it a priority.”

“Understood!” Tachibana-san nodded at Carol’s explanation, taking notes on a memo pad. She looked just like a student who was eager to learn, and Carol seemed just as enthusiastic about teaching her. As for myself, I walked behind the two of them in silence.

I felt left out, plain and simple. Carol only tended to get close to me and the other members of REA, and I was right at the top of her list of priorities. I

couldn't deny feeling a little sad at being ignored in favor of Tachibana-san. I felt like a student who'd been the teacher's pet, experiencing the exact moment the teacher realized she liked another student better.

*⟨But you've still got Kessie-sama!⟩*

*⟨That's not really the issue here.⟩*

*⟨Hey!⟩*

I was in a complicated state of mind as I walked, and without much else to do, I spent the time looking at Carol's butt. The back of her new bikini armor was kind of a thong but with more of a V-shape to it. It didn't do much to hide Carol's taut, heart-shaped butt and ultimately did nothing but make it look sexier. Carol's ass was, simply put, marvelous.

*⟨Aren't you more of a boob guy than an ass man?⟩*

*⟨That doesn't mean I dislike butts, does it?⟩*

*⟨Oho.⟩*

We came across several goblins in the caves, but Carol instantly annihilated all of them with her sword. She stood over one of them in the aftermath, poking at the corpse with the tip of her sword and explained more of the details to Tachibana-san.

"Tachibana, this is a goblin. Ever seen one before?"

"No... This is my first!"

"They're small, but you can see how muscular they are. They've got one-point-five times the muscle mass of a chimpanzee, and they're even more dangerous than they look. Without skills or a firearm, no ordinary human could beat one of these. They tend to live in groups, so if you find one, you'd best assume there are at least another three somewhere nearby."

"Understood."

"Still, down here in the dungeons, goblins are small fry. There are countless

dangers roaming the depths that don't even compare. You can sense the danger of this place... You feel it in your bones, right?"

"Y-yes, I can! Thank you!"

"Right then. I want to fight a slime next... Hmm? What is it, Mizuki?" Carol suddenly turned and started talking to me. "Something wrong?"

I shrugged in response. "Nope, nothing."

"You've been quiet for a while now. Are you sick?"

"Nope, I feel fine."

"...Oh, huh. I get it."

She approached me with a mischievous grin that really made her look her age.

Now that she was closer, I saw that the combat had made her sweat a little. The cloth on her armor was starting to turn see-through. *Must be that mysterious sweat-absorbing feature she mentioned.*

"You're upset that I'm talking to Tachibana so much."

"I'm not. Go ahead. Keep teaching her."

"Hmph. Say whatever you like, but I can see it in your eyes. It's cute. Should I be giving you more attention? Then again, you've been treating me like crap lately, Mizuki. You brought this on yourself."

"I wasn't bothered by you ignoring me. I'm bored. That's all. I have nothing to do."

"Are you upset with me? Hmm... Want to kiss and make up?"

"Stop teasing me, damn it. Let's get going already, right Tachibana-san?" It was then that I realized Tachibana-san was no longer standing at my side.

"Huh? Where did she go?"

I looked around and found her immediately. *Well, half of her.*

We discovered the lower half of Tachibana-san's body stuck in the dirt wall of the cave.

Carol, Kessie, and I stood in total silence before the spectacle. While we weren't looking, Tachibana-san seemed to have buried her head and torso into the dirt wall with only her butt poking out.







“T-Tachibana-san?!”

“T-Tachibana?!”

⟨*G-Giant Jugs-san?!*⟩

Our voices rang out through the cave, Kessie’s voice inside my head. Tachibana-san was, ultimately, buried in the wall of the cave with just her rear end and legs sticking out. It was bizarre. She seemed to be sinking into the wall on all fours, her shiny new sneakers twitching.

“Wh-what’s happening?!” I exclaimed. “How come Tachibana-san is suddenly a butt in the wall?!”

⟨*For real! How did this happen?!*⟩

“It’s a boss slime!” screamed Carol. She activated Scale Eyes and scanned the area with her yellow, snake-like pupils. “Damn it! I was so focused on the lecture that I didn’t notice it!”

“What do you mean?!”

“This entire cave is a camouflaged boss slime!”

“What the heck?!”

⟨*Ah! I see!*⟩

Setting aside the fact that Kessie seemed to understand what was going on, I ran toward Tachibana-san, grabbed her legs, and started to pull, trying to drag her out of the viscous wall.

“Gh-gh-gh...!”

She didn’t budge.

*If I could get a rope and throw all my weight into pulling, I feel like I could get her out. I think that’d involve some pretty lethal bone-cracking in different parts of her body, though.*

⟨*Ah, it’s no use! Keep that up and you’ll put her in a wheelchair for the rest of*

*her life!›*

“It’s no good! I can’t get her out!”

“Mizuki, fire attacks! Buff Blaze and use it!”

“Skillbook!”

In an instant, I made the card binder appear in the palm of my right hand. There was no wind, but I could make the pages flutter. The binder opened to exactly the right page—the one that held my Blaze card.

It was only after the boss ogre fight that I had realized I could make my Skillbook move a little without touching it directly. That said, I was capable of flipping the pages and nothing more; I wasn’t able to hold it up in the air or anything.

I took out my Blaze skill card and the Explosive Nature card next.

“Explosive Nature, Blaze! Where should I point this thing?!”

“Uh, the ceiling! The whole cave is a boss slime!”

I held my Blaze card up to the roof of the cave. A great stream of flame shot from my hand like a flamethrower.

*Rooooaaar!*

The flames of my Blaze, increased in power with my Explosive Nature skill, began to lick their way across the ceiling. The cave above us seemed like it was made of rock, but it *rippled*, looking like a pebble thrown into a pond. The ripples spread across the roof and down the walls before finally reaching the floor. As the cave convulsed and writhed with my first blow, I got ready to fire off a second. It was then that the rock showed its true form.

“Squeee!”

“Whoa!”

The echoing cry was shrill as a mouse’s squeak. It ricocheted off the walls of the cave, the geometric shape of the space warping the high-frequency sound.

The giant slime's collective body shifted in shape, hardened, and then turned from ooze to crystal and back again. It seemed to be the slime's way of thrashing about as its body was burned.

"Squeeeeeeeeeeeee!"

As the crystallization and cries continued, Tachibana-san's body was suddenly thrown back up from the bottomless pit that had sucked her in. She was free from the boss slime, but now she was topless. Her exposed breasts bounced and jiggled as she dropped to the floor on her hands and knees.

"Gah! Urgh?!"

"I did it... Hey?! How come you're naked from the waist up?!" I shouted. "Was there some weird liquid in there that only melts clothes?!"

⟨Zukky-san! Look out!⟩

*Clang!*

A sharp, deafening sound went off close to my ear, making me turn around in shock. The group of slimes that made up the boss slime's body had formed themselves into a spear and thrust themselves at me. Carol's sword had saved my life.

"Mizuki! Give it one more!" she cried.

"R-right! Explosive Nature, Blaze!"

⟨Give 'em what for!⟩

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The battle was over.

My repeated blaze attacks completely disabled the boss slime, turning it black as obsidian as it scattered about the area in little geometric crystals.

The cave was silent. Tachibana-san shook as I gave her my stab-proof vest to wear—all the clothes on her upper body had melted away.

"I-I-I-I-I thought I was going to die..."

“That sure freaked me out...but I’m glad we made it through,” I mumbled.

⟨*Super glad, yeah!*⟩

“It really was dangerous,” said Carol. She placed a hand on the trembling Tachibana-san, then clenched her fist and smiled at her. “But good for you, Tachibana. Not many people can say they’ve been half-eaten by a boss slime.”

“R-r-really...? Ha ha...”

“Listen up, Tachibana,” Carol said. “Your clothes melted off because that’s how a slime eats its prey. First, they remove all the impurities like clothes and gear, dissolving them so they can absorb the rest of you more efficiently.”

“I-I see...”

“Once your clothes are gone, the feeding begins. If we’d saved you thirty seconds later, you wouldn’t be dead, but most of the outer layer of your skin would be gone. We’re lucky we didn’t end up rescuing a skeleton.”

“Huh?” Tachibana-san blinked in shock. “It was really that dangerous?”

“It’s okay. In our line of work, this is dinner table conversation—everyday stuff. The more you stare down death, the stronger you become in the face of it. Right, Mizuki? We almost died too, just recently.”

“Huh?” Tachibana-san now looked at me, still blinking in surprise. “You do this every day too, Mizuki-san?”

“Well, she’s right about the almost dying part.”

“There was this huge boss ogre holding me down,” Carol explained, “and he was trying to rape me *as* he killed me. If I died then and they’d found my corpse, it would have been horrifying.”

“You’re going at her a bit hard, Carol,” I said.

“Anyway, this was good experience for you, Tachibana! You *are* joining REA, right? Let’s get some of those details hammered out!”

Tachibana-san averted her eyes and clammed up.

“What’s wrong?” Carol tilted her head. “You don’t look so good. Are you hurt?”

“Ah, no... I’m not hurt. It’s just...”

“What is it? Are you injured somewhere? Let me take a look.”

Carol started touching her all over, using her Scale Eyes analysis skill to check if anything was wrong with her. I stared at them from afar.

*Doesn’t seem like Carol’s quite realized it, but it’s Tachibana-san’s mind that’s hurting. She’s freaked out by how hardcore adventuring life is. It’s a lot more than she expected it to be. That’s a high-paying job at REA Carol’s trying to recruit her for, but I doubt Tachibana-san actually plans on taking it. I can hear her peace of mind shattering from all the way over here.*

*⟨Yep, I hear it shattering loud and clear!⟩*

*⟨I knew it.⟩*

As I stood lost in my thoughts, several crystals of light appeared in the center of the cave.

“Hmm?”

They glowed for a while, then the light slowly faded as they formed into a single crystal.

“Carol, there’s something over there.”

“Oh? Is that an item drop?”

She walked over, bent down, and picked it up. It was a crystal filled with a purplish mist big enough to fit in her palm.

“A crystal...? What kind of item is that, Carol?”

“Whoa, it’s a level crystal!” She shot up and walked toward me with the crystal in one hand, using the other to adjust her string bikini bottom that had slid out of place.

“A level crystal?”

“I already told you. It’s a rare item that boss slimes can drop,” she explained, pulling on the string of her armor and snapping it back into place. “It raises the target’s level when used. These things are really valuable. It’s a lucky drop.”

“It’s an item for leveling up, then. How many levels does it give you?” I asked.

“Depends on the crystal. Purple ones are higher quality, though. This one’ll give around five levels, I think.”

“That’s pretty good. Worth several million yen, maybe?”

“Around ten million. The highest quality gold ones can be worth hundreds of millions.”

“Wow. So that little rock’s worth ten million yen...”

“Hmph. Mizuki.”

“What is it?”

“Want to try using this level crystal on Tachibana?”

“Who, me?!” Tachibana-san hadn’t been expecting the conversation to turn back to her. She pointed at herself in astonishment, her eyes wide.

“You want to use it on Tachibana-san?” I asked. “I don’t mind, but...why?”

“With five level-ups, Tachibana would be able to use Charm skills right away. We’d be able to get her in on the action today.”

“Huh...? No, I, um...” Tachibana-san seemed to sense the direction the conversation was headed in and tried to do whatever she could to reverse its course. “I... *Ahem*. I’m okay, really. You two can use it for yourselves...”

“Don’t be like that, Tachibana. You want to be an adventurer, right? You’re cool with me using it on her, aren’t you, Mizuki?”

“Well, I don’t need it. Do whatever you want with it, Carol.”

“Ah, no, I—! *Ahem*, if I could just have a little time to think, I...I’d feel awful! I couldn’t possibly ask you to use such a high value item on me!”

Ignoring Tachibana-san's spirited attempts to delay, deny, and defer, Carol took the crystal from my hands and activated it on her. Tachibana-san's body flashed with light and emitted a cheerful *di-di-di-di-ding!* sound.

"Huh...? Did you use it?"

"Yeah. Check your stat screen."

"Ah, right."

She did as she was told, and Tachibana-san's stat screen popped up in the air before her.

"Look, Tachibana," Carol said. "You've gone from level 16 to level 22, a whole six levels. That was one good crystal, huh?"

"Ah... Thank you."

"You've got six points to spend. Put them all into Charm."

"O-okay." Once again doing as she was told, Tachibana-san raised her Charm ability from 29 to 35.

"All right! Good for you!" said Carol, patting her on the shoulder. "I'll get some Charm skills for you, then. At level 22 with 35 Charm, you should be able to use the beginner ones. I'll route the purchase contracts and all the other paperwork through the REA office, so just let me know your address and phone number."

"Huh? A-ah, r-right..."

"Okay! Today was brilliant! Let's go get ramen on our way home, Mizuki. Want to come with us, Tachibana?"

"O-o-o-okay..."

With that, Carol set off walking, leading us home. Tachibana-san looked exhausted.

"Adventurers really do have a tough job," she mumbled under her breath. "I think I'm about to hyperventilate again..."



## Chapter 3:

# Relying on Sheer Magnitude to Win the Day!

### 1

**“COMBINED DUNGEON FIELD TEST TRAINING EXERCISE.”**

*Apparently, these exercises are planned for several different days, mobilizing a few dungeon-adjacent organizations and groups, ignoring the normal boundaries between the army, the government, and the people. Today’s the day—the historic, first-ever combined dungeon field test training exercise.*

Several weeks had passed since the Tachibana-san butt-in-the-wall dungeon incident (as I had personally taken to calling it). I currently sat in the back of a JSDF truck en route to the training grounds. There were around twenty of us participants packed into the back of the truck. It had set off from the closest base to Omori City to make the almost hour-long journey to the training grounds.

The forest roads weren’t well-paved, and the truck rumbled and swayed with each little pebble the tires ran over. Tachibana-san sat by my side, shaken by the road underneath. She looked at me hesitantly.

“Ahem... Mizuki-san?”

“What’s up?”

“Carol-san has been trying to get me to join REA for the past few weeks...”

“It sure sounds like it, yeah.”

The rumbling grew louder, and I tried to keep others from overhearing our conversation. The engine was quite loud, though, so we didn’t need to be too worried about the volume we were speaking at.

“You going to join them?”

“I was thinking maybe I might...want to turn her down...”

*Well, figures. Almost getting turned into a science-class skeleton really did a number on her.*

“I was actually interested in the idea at first, but thinking about all the dangers, well... Even making ten million yen a year, going through deathly challenges like that on a regular basis...” She gave a dark laugh. “Apparently, Carol-san is under the impression that I’m going to join up.”

“If you don’t want to, why not turn her down?” I asked.

“Well, you’re right, but...after she used that highly valuable item and helped me out in so many other ways, I’m finding it kind of hard to say no to her.”

“But you didn’t *ask* for Carol to use the level crystal on you,” I pointed out.

“Did you hear that Carol-san is working as an external advisor for this training exercise too? She’s participating as a staff member—the side actually running these training exercises.”

“I heard a bit about that, yeah.”

“I knew she was an amazing person, but I didn’t know she was *this* amazing... I really don’t want to end up upsetting her. Don’t want to bite the hand that feeds, you know?”

“Well, if you’re really not up for it, do you want me to pass along the hint?” I asked.

“That would be a big help...”

As we spoke, I sensed the gaze of the obnoxious asshole Kawatani from across the truck. He sat next to his dungeon partner, Umayu Bara. They leaned toward each other, whispering.

*Fine by me, so long as they aren’t up to something. Well, I don’t think there are many people in Japan who spend every day talking about how they’re up to something.*

«Gyah! Your phone's out of battery!»

I heard Kessie wailing from inside my suitcase as the video she'd been watching cut out partway through.

\*\*\*

We carried our bags up to our assigned rooms when we arrived at the training grounds. We were supposed to stay for just over a week, until the last day of the training. I'd expected cramped, military-style bunk beds, but in the end, our lodgings were more like tiny business hotel rooms. Apparently, we were staying in the hotel designated for outsiders and senior officers. Most of the other army staff were bunking in the exact kind of packed conditions I'd imagined.

I sat on the single bed and opened up the biggest, sturdiest orange suitcase I'd been able to find and bring along. The moment I had the zipper open, Kessie zoomed out, spreading her wings.

“Whoa, I'm soooo tired! That truck was so shaky! I had no idea *what* to do after your phone ran out of battery. I should've brought one of those mobile battery packs!”

She made a few circles around the cramped hotel room. The suitcase wasn't filled with my things, but with Kessie's luggage—it was also my way of getting her from place to place. It was a mobile home, in other words, one solely for fairy inhabitants. The inside was fitted with creature comforts like a simple bed, a cushioning handkerchief to reduce the shock of the bumpy road, and Kessie's personal effects. It also had things to keep her occupied like snacks, a smartphone, and a handheld game console.

“Oho? I thought we'd be in the stables. This is quite the place!”

Kessie's wings fluttered as she explored the room. She wore her usual bodysuit, with an extra covering for going out and about. The inner part of the suit was black, while the rest of the tight-fitting outfit was pink and white. The whole design was sporty and futuristic, with fine detailing in black that made it look like a stylish set of clothes fit for a space explorer. The suit also served to

tamp down the constant glow of her body and had holes fitted in the back for her wings to pass through. Kessie had elected against wearing pants, explaining that they would “get stuffy.” Whenever she bent over, her butt was visible through the bodysuit, as if she wore thin compression shorts.





*I guess it's not underwear, so she's not embarrassed to be wearing it. I mean, she did use to fly around buck naked.*

"Hyah?!" After flying around the hotel room's layout, she screamed in realization. "Zukky-san?! Doesn't this room have a TV?!"

"Oh, huh. I guess it doesn't."

"Huuuhh?! Why isn't there a TV in here?! Where is it?!"

"Just watch TV on your phone."

"It's not compatible with TV signals!"

"Oh, right."

"Aww... With no TV, I'll die from boredom... I want to watch my shows! I want to watch *Zenzawa Naoki* and *The Full-Time Life Escapist*!"

"Fairies don't die without TV. You never had a TV in the other world, did you?"

"But now I know the joys of the physical world! Ignorance is bliss..."

"If you'd been born into this world, you'd definitely be hooked on pachinko by now. You're seriously lucky you were born a fairy."

\*\*\*

I changed into the JSDF combat camouflage armor I'd been lent and went to join up with Tachibana-san, who was staying in a separate room, so we could attend the opening ceremony together. At the opening ceremony, we listened to speeches from some high-ranking general (a lieutenant general, apparently). There was another equally important-looking base commander giving a speech as well (he was apparently a major general), and another address from Major Himata (needless to say, a major).

Partway through the proceedings, Carol took the podium dressed head to toe in her medieval knight's armor. The blonde-haired, blue-eyed girl's arrival sent murmurs rippling through crowd, breaking the usual respectful silence of the

JSDF personnel.

“Hello. My name is Carol. Carol Middleton. I serve as captain of the U.K. adventuring party REA.”

Her voice was calm and collected, even when speaking in front of a huge crowd.

“As per the terms of the international dungeon treaty between Japan and the U.K., I will be participating in this training exercise as an observer. I understand most of you may be shocked by my age and appearance. However, these mean almost nothing when you find yourself inside of a dungeon. There is a difference between the common sense of a civilian and that of a dungeon adventurer. We have a unique disposition... I’d like to discuss the kinds of backup combat support we might need in unexpected situations and share our intel on cave-dwelling creatures with you...”

At first, it seemed the crowd wasn’t sure what they were looking at, but with Carol’s bold tone and the content of what she was saying, they gradually started to come around and listen.

*She’s sixteen years old, giving legit speeches like this in front of crowds. So why the hell is she still sending me nude selfies? She’s standing up there all dignified, but she’s still got that perverted set of bikini armor on underneath it all. It’s good at absorbing sweat, so it’s great for wearing beneath armor, according to Carol. Stop using your lewd armor sets as everyday wear!*

After that, the opening ceremony was over, and we were free to go for the time being. As Tachibana-san and I stood up to leave, we saw one of the other participating pairs surrounded by a crowd of people. It was Kawatani and Umayama Bara.

“I’ve seen you on TV! Can I have your autograph?”

“Did you really take down that boss chimera all on your own?”

“You were on *Shabekuri Bond* recently, right?!”



“I saw you on *The Professionals: Top Notch*, too!”

Mostly young JSDF members encircled Umayra Bara, who seemed to appreciate the attention. He had been hailed as a representative of Japan in the adventuring sphere for several years, he was more famous than Carol, at least domestically.

*Those are young JSDF members. They look like they're under twenty, even... They might look up to him, with the unique kind of combat job he's in. They're treating him like he's a member of special forces.*

“Like I’ve said in my TV appearances: I want to use this practical training opportunity to give lectures on the use of skills and methods of dealing with cave-dwelling creatures,” replied Umayra Bara.

Kawatani broke in, trying to keep the crowd in check. “Excuse me, everyone. Umayra Bara-san is a busy man, so if you have business with him, please have your superior officer pass a message along to me. I *am* his partner, after all.”

“Now, now, Kawatani-kun. I don’t mind,” Umayra Bara said. “Training hasn’t even started yet.”

“That’s not how this works,” replied Kawatani.

That said, the two of them didn’t protest too much, standing triumphantly among the crowd. As Tachibana-san and I walked past and watched the spectacle unfold, Carol strode toward us. She pushed through the throng of people, her armor clanking as she walked.

“Mizuki. Tachibana. I finally found you.”

“Hey, Carol. Nice speech,” I said.

“Really? Hmph. Speeches are my specialty.” Carol’s serious adventuring expression turned into a girlish smile as she looked over at Tachibana-san. “Have you had time to look over the contract, Tachibana?”

“Ah, no. I-if I could just have a little longer...”

“Okay. I want to get you on board as soon as possible, though. We’ve already

brought in the Charm skills for you, so I want to hand those over when you've got the time."

"R-really?"

"Really. Mizuki, let's go over our operations with Tachibana when you're free."

A tall JSDF officer walked over to us as Carol spoke. His back was straight, his legs were long, and numerous medals were pinned to his chest. The lines that formed when he smiled were deep, and his military cap was pulled down over his forehead. It was Major Himata.

"Yo! Mizuki-kun. Tachibana-kun, Carol-kun."

"Hello, Major Himata," I said.

Carol turned to face him as well. "Captain Himata. It's been a while."

"Long time no see, REA captain Carol-dono. We last met at the Omori Dungeon, no? It's been even longer than that since we last spoke." The corners of his mouth curled sharply as he smiled. "Oh, and I'm a major, not a captain. Take a closer look at my rank."

Major Himata pulled on the collar of his uniform and showed her the metallic rank insignia pinned to his shirt—two golden lines with one star above them. Apparently, that was the mark of a major.

"Oh," exclaimed Carol quietly as she gave him a polite smile. "I have this strong image in my head of you as a captain, that's all. I'm sorry, Major Himata."

"My rank doesn't matter much, honestly. Whoever exalts himself will be humbled, right?"

"Who wrote that one?"

"A Jewish guy, I think."

"So...how do you two know each other?" I asked.

Carol and Major Himata seemed awfully friendly.

“I’ve traveled the world for a few different dungeon-related observations and meetings,” answered Himata. “I think I first met Carol-kun at a military meeting in the U.K.”

“That’s right. It was last summer, I think,” said Carol.

With the direction our conversation was taking, I noticed the gazes of the crowd starting to drift over in our direction.

“Hmm? That major... He’s talking to that girl from REA... What was her name again?”

“She’s really strong, isn’t she...?”

“I think she’s a dungeon advisor. Does anyone know who she is?”

*Well, even if we do attract a bit of attention, it’s restricted to the people at these training exercises.*

I noticed a few members of the crowd moving toward us, looking on curiously as Carol and Himata spoke. It was Kawatani and his dungeon partner, Umayra Bara.

“Major Himata, Carol Middleton-san,” Kawatani greeted them both, smiling gently at us.

“I believe this is the first time we’ve met, Carol-san. My name is Kawatani Makoto. I work in the Dungeon Management Division of Omori City Hall, as the young, effective team leader of our operation.” Kawatani reeled off his customary self-introduction, not looking at me or at Tachibana-san even once. “I look forward to working with both of you throughout this training exercise.”

“Sure. Me too,” said Carol, putting on a smile for show, then immediately inclining her head at something she’d heard him say.

“Wait. Did you just call yourself the *leader* of the Dungeon Management Division, Kawadani?”

“It’s *Kawatani*, and yes, I am essentially performing that role at present. I’ve long heard stories of your reputation as captain of REA, Carol-san—”

“So,” she continued, cutting him off, “you’re Tachibana’s superior then, Kawadamaru?”

“It’s *Kawa tani*. On paper we are at the same level, but in terms of standing, I do occupy that position, yes.”

“This is convenient timing, then,” Carol said. “There’s actually a chance that Tachibana’s going to be leaving her job at city hall in the near future. Not for sure, yet, but keep it in mind, will you?”

“Tachibana’s leaving her position?” Kawatani looked confused, like he didn’t quite understand what he was being told.

Tachibana-san, who was standing beside me, let out a little moan.

“What do you mean?” asked Kawatani. It seemed to be a lot of information all at once for him.

“Tachibana’s currently being headhunted by my party. I want her in REA,” Carol explained.

Kawatani gave a dumbfounded “Huh?” in response.

Carol placed a hand on Tachibana-san’s back. “Your subordinate here has a unique talent for adventuring. We’d like her to join our ranks, but I know we’ll be taking her from your team, so I thought it best to make sure you were aware of the situation. This really was good timing, eh, Tachibana?”

“Huh?! Ah, well, *ahem*... The matter isn’t completely settled of course, but... yes!”

“What?!” exclaimed Major Himata in shock. “Tachibana-kun, you’re joining REA too?!”

“Ah?! W-well, I just sai—”

“Wow, that really is amazing! I mean, I was wondering why you were

partnered up with Mizuki-kun, but that explains it! I'm glad I was here to hear that! This has been a really fruitful meeting." Major Himata took Tachibana-san's hand like he was trying to steal it from her and shook it, laughing loudly all the while. After it was done, he looked over at me.

"Right then, Mizuki-kun." He turned to face me and went in for another handshake. "The practical training exercises against the cave-dwelling creatures starts first thing tomorrow. I want to see that strength of yours. Please, I'd love to see how you took down that boss ogre variant."

"Hmph. Mizuki's going to meet your expectations, Himata," Carol said. "He is my *husband*, after all."

"I'm expecting big things from a talented woman like you, too, Tachibana-kun."

"Tachibana's going to meet your expectations, Himata. She is one of my *future subordinates*, after all."

A murmur ran through the crowd. Tachibana-san and I stood at attention, then shrank in humble acknowledgement.

"Is this getting a bit out of hand?" asked Tachibana-san.

"It took you this long to notice? Things are *way* out of hand."

## 2



I HAVE A FEW THINGS TO REPORT, AND SOME EXPLAINING *to do as well*. First, *Shinobu began posting videos on her YouTube channel again, as she said she would. Her first was a video titled "Top Ten Things That Happen When a YourTuber Blows Up."* She explained in the intro that she was going to start posting again, and then went into what happened after her dungeon incident went viral online. The comeback of Shinobu's Channel was so big it even made it to Yafoo news.

*Here are some of the comments:*

**Yogiren** 1 day ago

Take at least a year off, freak.

Show tits.

 120  89

Display 30 replies 

**Key-eye-nu Reeves** 18 hours ago



Put this on my second monitor while watching the Xtuber video, makes awesome fap material.

 65  12

Display 40 replies 

**Owari-kachou** 1 day ago



Stay healthy. Please post a video every time the blood pumps through your radial artery.

 20  14

Display 5 replies 

**Oriental TV Moving the Japanese Archipelago 1 cm for each Subscriber** 23 hours ago

Welcome back!!!!

 1  9

*Well, good luck, Shinobu, I thought.*

*Second, an explanation regarding my level.*

*Since I was the one who directly defeated the boss ogre, my level went up by two, from 19 to 21. I put all the ability points I got from that level up into stamina, meaning my current stamina is at 22, up from 16. A pretty big jump, but my overall stamina's still lower than Tachibana-san's. Those huge tits are something fierce.*

Third, I'll discuss some skills I'm going to be borrowing during training. Here's the list:

- 1. BLAZE: deal 4 points fire damage to target. Damage over time: 3 (burning).***
- 2. EXPLOSIVE NATURE: for 2 turns, double the power of all fire magic.***
- 3. GOBLIN ASSAULT: for 1 turn, all your melee range physical attacks deal +3 additional damage.***
- 4. HAND IN HAND AMPLIFY: for 2 turns, all buff effects applied to you are doubled.***
- 5. PHASE: for 1 turn, you are immune to all physical damage.***
- 6. DISABLE: for 1 turn, block the effect of one of a target's skills/magic.***

*That's the list. I borrowed all the skills I could get, right up to the allowed limit. With the three I already had on hand, that brings my total up to six. The one I'm most interested in is number four: Hand in Hand Amplify. It's a unique skill that buffs other buffs, and I'm hoping it'll have some explosive synergies when I stack it with Skillbook.*

*I also picked up Phase and Disable, two skills I thought looked interesting. Phase doesn't turn me invisible or anything, but it does make me completely*

*immune to all physical damage. Skillbook doesn't really grant me much in the way of defensive skills, so this might be the key to protecting myself in battle.*

*Disable is an interesting sort of defensive ability as well. It doesn't make a target's attacks ineffective—it nullifies them entirely. No matter how powerful an enemy's skills are, I can put them out of action by using Disable... And if I'm able to cast Disable using Skillbook, I should be able to do that with just the wave of a card. I want to test everything out during the training exercise.*

It was the day after the opening ceremony in the JSDF base. On this second day of training exercises, we were scheduled to face cave-dwelling creatures. In other words, monsters, and in real combat situations, too. I wore the boots and camouflage armor given to me. The JSDF uniform had plenty of pockets, so Kessie had her choice of places to hide.

‹Kessie? You comfy in there?› I thought to myself as I walked down a hallway in one of the buildings on base.

‹Not bad at all! Way better than your jeans! It's so spacious in here!›

‹Well, good.›

I climbed a staircase and saw Kawatani's dungeon partner, the adventurer Umayra Bara, at the top. He was about to make his way down.

Umayra looked a little rough around the edges to begin with, so the camouflage armor suited him. He was in his late forties but looked far younger, showing no sign that his age affected him.

*I hope I age like he does, I thought to myself. I bet he's going hard on the antiaging stuff.*

I tried to pass by with a nod, but Umayra Bara stopped me.

“You. I've something to ask you about,” he said.

“Yeah? What can I do for you?”

“This talk about you joining REA. Is it true?”



"I don't currently plan on joining them," I said.

*That's not a lie.*

"What about the chick?" he asked.

"I'm not sure that's happening, either."

*I'm also not lying about that. Tachibana-san was up for the idea at first, but she's currently terrified by the dangers of adventuring life. I figure there's a good chance she never ends up joining REA.*

Umayra Bara smiled at my answer, looking relieved.

"Of course not. You and that woman joining REA... I thought it might be some sort of joke."

"Well, it sort of was, I suppose," I said. I felt the sharp tone in his voice but chose to ignore it.

*Can't go through life getting hung up on every slight that society throws your way. Not even superheroes set out to battle all the evil in the world.*

"I've heard a lot about you, Mizuki-kun," said Umayra Bara. He leaned in close to the staircase's handrail, putting his weight on it as he spoke to me. "They say you took down an electric variant boss ogre all on your own."

"Well, that's not exactly what happened," I answered. "That does seem to be the official story, though."

"I see. There was a time when they treated me like that, too."

"Excuse me?"

"That's what this is, right?" he asked, looking down at me like he knew everything about me. "They're lifting you up, aren't they? Putting you on a pedestal?"

"What do you mean?"

"The market for adventurers is huge in scale; these kinds of things happen all the time. Some management agency starts trying to force an actress who isn't

cute enough into the market or gets an idol a big movie deal when they can't even act. Happens every day, yeah?"

"Uh..."

"The media did the same thing to me a long time ago. I mean, like, just my face on the screen is enough to get people watching," he said, gesturing to his own face. His rugged features did draw the eye, and he might have even found himself in a group like the Soul Brothers if he was a little younger. He was, to be honest, exactly how the public pictured adventurers.

"I caught the eye of the TV stations, and they started selling me as the number one adventurer in Japan," he explained.

*Huh, so that's how that happened. Interesting.*

"But I've seen the specials about you. You have a large number of skills on hand, don't you?" I asked.

"The station prepared all those for me. There were hardly any adventurers in Japan back then, so I had free rein. I could do whatever I wanted. Hey, they helped me out, and now I'm all grown up and working as a pro adventurer. But you've got the same deal as I did, right? Which station are you with? Who's your producer? I might know them."

"Well, actually, that's not quite how it happened for me..."

"Look, don't worry about it. I know. You've got REA on your side, and you're the next generation's star, yeah? That REA captain, she's the real deal. Pretty as hell, too, that Carol. Get her on TV, and she'll be popular. No doubt about it."

*He's seriously misunderstanding the situation here. That said, the scenario he's thought up is way more realistic than what really happened. It's ironic that I'm actually a former investment banker who came across a dragon in my very first dungeon, ended up roommates with a fairy, happened upon a completely broken skill, saved a high-school-aged YourTuber girl, was assigned a secret mission by the company president of a huge corporation with the strongest*

*adventuring party in Britain, defeated a super-strong boss ogre, and then got recruited by that very same adventuring party.*

*So, yeah. Umayya Bara's story sounds way more plausible than how my life has actually played out. I might even be able to avoid trouble in the future by just pretending the TV station deal is what really happened to me.*

I gave him a wry smile that silently said *"Well of course that's the deal, but I can't go around talking about it publicly now, can I?"* and shrugged in reply.

"I knew it," he said with a laugh, zipping past me on the stairs as he descended. "Let's exchange contact details later. I bet we can help each other out."

I didn't answer him, shrugging again.

I went up the stairs to the second-floor room that my partner Tachibana-san and I had been assigned. Apparently, all the dungeon advisors and their partners had been given separate waiting rooms to get ready in.

*«Hey, Kessie.»*

*«Hey, ho! What can I do for ya?»*

*«That Umayya Bara guy just now. He wasn't thinking anything weird, was he?»*

*«Not particularly. I don't think he was lying, either.»*

*«Gotcha. Thanks.»*

*«Oh, and Zukky-san?»*

*«What is it?»*

*«I'll let you know if I pick up on something. If I don't say anything, you can assume everything's okey dokey, okay?»*

*«That's convenient. Thanks.»*

*«You're super welcome!»*

As Kessie and I talked, I arrived at the waiting room door, opening it to find

Tachibana-san standing there in her underwear.

“Uh...”

“...Ah.”

⟨*Oh?*⟩

Tachibana-san was facing to the side, wearing purple underwear and socks. She was in the middle of taking off her T-shirt. A bit of her bra was exposed as I walked in. I'd had a few opportunities to see breasts recently, but Tachibana-san's really were especially large.





*I don't really know cup sizes, but maybe she's an E or an F? They look smaller when she's wearing something over them.*

*She's got a slim, hourglass waistline. Her stomach is sculpted with just the right amount of muscle, drawing sensual lines up from her pelvis to her chest. Carol's butt is small and perky, tight and firm. Tachibana-san's, on the other hand, is surprisingly thick. It beats Carol's butt by sheer magnitude. Tachibana's got a slim frame, but the way certain ample parts of her body swell is tantalizing.*

*Wait, what am I talking about?*

*‹What are you making me listen to up here?›*

After looking *far* too intently, I took one step back.

"Uh, sorry," I said.

"Ah. Okay."

I clicked the door shut and leaned back against the wall with a sigh. *I think this is the first accidental pervert scenario I've encountered where my life hasn't been on the line.*

*‹You looked at her for ages in there!›*

### 3

**"A**H... HA HA... I'M REALLY SORRY ABOUT EARLIER..." Tachibana-san apologized with a dry smile. She was standing beside me in the square that had been prepared for our training.

"No, it was my fault," I said.

"Well, I...I was the one who chose to change clothes in there..."

"In cases like these, it's always the guy who's in the wrong."

The camouflage gear that Tachibana-san had been given was one size too

small for her, and so she had been in the middle of changing into a larger uniform. She went to borrow the new uniform as early as she could, and she hadn't expected me in the waiting room so soon.

"I'm so sorry you had to see that," she apologized again.

"No, it's fine, really. Don't let it bother you."

*Yep. Totally fine. Man, she has a slender figure with serious curves where it matters most. It really was awesome to see. I mean, looking at Carol kind of makes me feel like a bit of a criminal, and Shinobu is literally in high school. If we're being real, Tachibana-san's just the right age for me. I got to bear witness to those bountiful breasts of hers in our recent dungeon clearing, but I didn't have enough time then to really take them in. I'm sure glad I got another look today.*

*◁You know I can hear everything you're saying, right?! Zukky-sa—n?!▷*

*I'm used to you being in my head, you should get used to me.*

"Whoa!" came voices from the crowd.

We found ourselves outside of a wide, spacious cage, surrounded by JSDF personnel holding black rifles. Inside the cage was Umayra Bara...and a stone golem lying on the floor. It was near the side of the cage, having just been blown there by one of Umayra Bara's skills.

"Right then, this is how it's going to work." Umayra Bara addressed all of us watching from outside the cage with a pin microphone. "Chimeras are about as numerous in the shallows of the dungeon as ogres are. They have similar stamina to ogres, but each of their three heads has its own separate stamina reserves and different resistances and weaknesses depending on their element. As a result, they're incredibly tough monsters for adventurers to take on solo and difficult to take down with modern firearms."

As Umayra Bara spoke to the audience, the three-headed golem across the cage stood up. He told the crowd that the golem wasn't from the dungeon but



had been made using magic by a government official in order to provide an example for combat.

*So there's a whole specialist position just for making training materials? People have all kinds of jobs these days.*

Umayya Bara didn't seem particularly wary of the three-headed stone chimera golem as it slowly picked itself up. He continued to address the crowd.

"But for an adventurer such as myself..."

It charged for him once more. Umayya Bara waved his hand and activated three skills.

"Icy Blast, Blaze, Shock!"

He read off the magic spells in quick succession, and his three attacks shot toward the golem. His ice, fire, and electric type attacks each hit the respective heads they targeted, and the golem collapsed, rolling onto the grass.

"As you just saw, it is possible to defeat a chimera if you can accurately strike their respective weak points. Keep in mind that firing off so many magic spells at top speed requires high Wisdom. Still, I don't recommend facing these monsters by yourself. Real life chimeras are much faster than that hunk of rock."

There was another "*whoa*" from the crowd. Voices murmured among the applause.

"Man, adventurers really are amazin'."

"Nah, it's only because he's Umayya Bara-san! I couldn't do any of that, even if I *did* have the skills."

"I don't care how many live type eighty-nine rounds you give me. I never want to fight one of those things."

"Y'know, I hear Umayya Bara-san actually beat a boss chimera all on his own."

"Ha ha ha. If you can strike twelve points of total magic damage into a target

in quick succession as I can, then by all means, try to fight one solo. When it comes to such high-level adventurers, however, Japan has almost nobody up to the task, unfortunately.”

More voices raised in admiration.

*Even from my perspective, that’s some serious technique. Carol was the first adventurer I ever saw in action. She’s a bit atypical, so my idea of what an adventurer does might have been a bit off, but this feels like the way real elite adventurers fight. Sure, he described himself as coming from nowhere, put together by the media. The guy was self-deprecating about his accomplishments, but the stuff he’s been through has given him more than enough experience. He sure looks accomplished to me right now.*

*These people who constantly appear in front of others never get bored of putting on a show. Doesn’t matter what kind of people they are or why they’re doing it. I’m sure all of them put in real effort behind the scenes.*

Umayra Bara left the cage and walked toward Kawatani, who looked supremely pleased with himself. It was Kawatani who spoke next, using a microphone to address those around him.

“Don’t worry, everybody. As I explained earlier, these golems are controlled by human hands, so there’s nothing dangerous about them. Think of these golems as your *potential* adversaries.”

Carol beckoned me over from inside the cage as Kawatani continued speaking. She was in there as support staff for the training, watching from the sidelines as the other participants faced off against various monsters and training golems. *Well, I suppose nothing too dangerous can happen when she’s around.*

“Mizuki!” she called.

I walked toward the entrance of the cage.

“I analyzed it with my Scale Eyes,” she said. “That golem has a bit of HP left.

You should try using Skillbook on it.”

“What, me?”

“You have nothing to worry about. I’m here if anything goes sideways,” Carol said, then turned her head to the side and yelled to someone else. “Major Himata! You don’t mind, do you?!”

Major Himata, who stood watching the training exercises with the other JSDF elite officers, turned to Carol, smiled, and gave her a thumbs up.

\*\*\*

At Carol’s insistence, I entered the cage just as the golem stumbled to its feet. Two of its three heads were crushed. Only its left stone head remained.

“It’s got one HP point left. Use whatever you like. Just blow that thing to pieces,” said Carol.

I activated Skillbook and made sure my skills were carded. It seemed that Skillbook could tell what I was doing to some extent, suggesting actions based on my situation. The pop-ups never appeared in combat or emergency situations, but whenever I had the time to think, Skillbook would recommend little tasks I should do.

*Is there an AI in this book or something?*

In any case, I had already carded all the skills I wanted to try out. I tapped the “no” button for the skills I didn’t want to turn into cards just yet.

“Here it comes, Mizuki,” said Carol, standing off to the side.

I opened the card binder to the page where the skills I wanted to test out were located and started to stack.

“Explosive Nature, Explosive Nature, Explosive Nature, Hand in Hand Amplify, Hand in Hand Amplify, Hand in Hand Amplify... Right, then.”

In the corner of my vision, I saw six vertical lines: skill duration timers counting down. The three red lines that decreased the fastest were Explosive

Nature, and the three slower green ones were all Hand in Hand Amplify.

*Explosive Nature is a buff that doubles the power of all fire skills. Hand in Hand Amplify is a buff that doubles the effect of all buffs applied to me. This means I'm doubling three times and then doubling that result another three times with six skills stacked on top of each other.*

I had thought about using this stacking method to power up my Blaze skill earlier, but I wanted to avoid releasing anything too powerful in the cramped, cave-like conditions of a dungeon, so I hadn't put my skills to the test at the time.

*In a wide, open-air space like this, I can stack all the buffs I like, though. Blaze usually deals 4 points of damage, but what's it going to do now? How do the calculations work? Two casts of each wouldn't give me the answer, but this number should.*

I put Explosive Nature and Hand in Hand Amplify back into my card binder and put my finger on my trigger—the magic card Blaze. The mindless golem charged me.

*How's this going to play out?*

I pulled out my skill card and screamed its name at the advancing golem.  
“Blaze!”

A shockwave exploded from Skillbook in an instant.

“Whoooa?!”

⟨Gyah?!⟩

The flames immediately swept forward with the force of the blast, as terrifying as an erupting volcano. The fire was so intense that I couldn't see anything in front of me. It consumed everything in my field of vision, overwhelming me with swirling flames. It was as if ten missiles had landed right in front of me—like the fires of hell coming to Earth, racing to devour the whole planet. The scorching heat lasted several seconds, unlike a regular Blaze spell,

creating whirling winds that raged and then imploded, leaving bursts of flame in their wake.

“Haah...! Haah...!”

I started breathing again—I wasn’t sure when I’d stopped—sitting on the ground where the flames had blown me back.

*I thought that thing was gonna burn me to death. I’d have been scorched to a crisp if I’d tried to cast a Blaze like that in the narrow tunnels of a dungeon.*

As for the path the great Blaze had swept across? There was nothing left. There was no sign of the golem. All the grass in front of me was gone, leaving the charred earth exposed beneath, smoking softly. The iron bars of the surrounding cage had turned red hot with the heat and were on the verge of melting.

I wasn’t the only one who was stunned. Each and every person present stood in shock—both the other training participants standing around the cage and the JSDF personnel, who held their rifles up just in case.

“Mizuki.” I heard Carol’s voice from behind me. “The single highest damage hit ever dealt was by an American named Wallace Chandler. Do you know what his world record was?”

“I...I don’t.”

“Using multiple buff skills and his most powerful magical attack, he managed to hit 87 damage. That’s officially the highest number for a single strike.”

“R-right.” I didn’t turn to look at her, gazing instead at the scorched dirt ahead of me.

“Do you know how many points of damage you just dealt?” she asked.

“I don’t...” I said. “How many?”

“All I did was analyze it with my Scale Eyes skill, so this is hardly an *official* record, but I expected nothing less from my husband.” Carol laughed. “Your attack dealt 144 points of damage. You’re the new world record holder.”

## Chapter 4:

# Do UN Forces Really Need to Get Involved?!

### 1

**M**Y BLAZE SKILL WAS SO POWERFUL THAT IT LEFT everyone stunned. There was, however, one tall JSDF officer who rushed over to the cage at the speed of light as soon as the fires were out.

“Mizuki-kun! What was that?!”

Major Himata had moved toward me with real purpose in his long strides. There probably weren’t many men in the world whose paces were that long. From the angle of where I sat on the floor, he looked like a giant looming over me as he walked.

“Ah...” I said, standing and turning to face him. “I was only aiming for a Blaze that was a bit on the stronger side,” I said.

“That was a Blaze spell?! Basic magic?! You’re telling me that wasn’t a *Frizz* spell?! Gah ha ha! Awesome! Better than I could have ever imagined!” He patted me on the back, laughing heartily. “Where do you hafta put your ability points to make Blaze do *that*? And what was that book thing you were using?”

“Well, that... I’ll explain it later,” I said.

“Don’t forget, okay?! Ga ha ha ha! Holy cow!”

*Ah—ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha!*

Major Himata’s laugh was so clear and loud that everyone within a hundred square meters could hear every syllable.

*He really does laugh a lot. Just how much laughter does he feel like he has to inflict on us?*

“Wow, that was really amazing! Too amazing! I wasn’t expecting *anything* like

that, Mizuki-kun!”

“Ah, thanks...”

He smiled at me broadly, grabbed my shoulders, and shook me in encouragement. His grip was so tight I could again feel how much muscle he packed. It felt more like I was getting swung around by a huge crane truck than a human.

“Himata, Himata! Stop hogging my husband,” Carol broke in, unable to stand idly by and watch. I was finally freed from Major Himata’s grasp.

*Thanks, Carol. I was about to get a concussion.*

Himata shot me a wink after he let go of me, then returned to his post. There was more training left on the schedule, but my big part in it was over for the day. As I trudged back to Tachibana-san, I suddenly heard Kessie’s voice in my head.

‹Zukky-san?›

‹What?›

‹That Himata guy just now. Do you know him?›

‹You don’t remember? He was the one who helped me load all my gear before that dungeon clearing when we fought the boss ogre.›

‹Hmm... I don’t remember that, but...›

‹What’s wrong?›

‹I can’t read his mind, is the thing.›

‹You can’t read him at all?› I stopped in my tracks and looked over at Major Himata’s back as he returned to his position. ‹What’s that supposed to mean? Are there people you just can’t read sometimes?›

‹Hmm... Mmh... Well, I suppose it’s not impossible. But what I’m thinking is...›

‹What?›

*«Maybe, uh... He might have a Charm skill constantly activated that prevents people from interfering with his mind. Something that works kinda similar to my mind reading, so it makes him immune to telepathy, maybe.»*

*«Gotcha. Thanks.»*

*«What should we do?»*

*«I'll ask Carol about it later.»*

It was then that I placed that strange sense of déjà vu I'd felt from Himata. It was the same feeling I had when I met Heath.

\*\*\*

The scheduled events were over by five p.m., and the first day of our training came to a close. I ended up carting Kessie around with me all day, so I returned to my room to leave her to relax before meeting up with Tachibana-san in hers. Carol was already there when I arrived. The plan was to confirm the effects of a certain skill. Tachibana-san's room looked almost the same as mine, except without my luggage, it looked a lot more spacious.

*I would've had a lot more space without Kessie's huge suitcase in my room.*

"All right, here's Mizuki," Carol said the moment I entered the room. She sat on the sofa, already stripped of her outer set of armor, now only wearing the bikini set. I knew I was fighting a losing battle, but I really would've preferred she didn't wear that thing in public—or in general. She didn't need to treat that set of lewd armor like an everyday sweatshirt.

Meanwhile, Tachibana-san still wore her combat gear. I did, too, for that matter.

"Let's get started, then," said Carol.

"Wait a minute," I said, stopping her as she made to get up.

"What is it? Did you bring back the marriage registration form?" Carol asked.

"No, it's something else."



“Damn,” Carol cursed.

“It’s about Major Himata,” I explained. “Kessie told me there’s something weird about him.”

“Kessie-dono? Oh... Sorry, Tachibana, do you mind leaving the room for a minute?”

“Ah, got it,” Tachibana-san said.

She left the room, leaving Carol and me alone.

“So, what’s the deal with Himata?” she asked.

I explained that Kessie wasn’t able to read his mind with her telepathy, to which Carol gave a “hmpf” and nodded, not sounding overly surprised by the revelation.

“It figures. Himata’s a Charm skill user. It makes sense he’d have barriers up against telepathy.”

“He uses the same skills as Tachibana-san, then?” I asked.

Carol frowned and shook her head gently. “They’re skills of the same type but on a different scale. Himata’s famous in the adventuring world. He’s one of the most talented Charm skill users. There’s nothing strange about him keeping some defensive skills up to guard against Charm spells. It’s natural, even.”

“I see. I was just a little put off by it; that’s why I asked. I’ve never met anyone Kessie’s telepathy hasn’t worked on before.”

“Well, don’t worry about it. Himata’s a good guy,” Carol said. “You can count on him.”

“If you say so, then sure. I’ll trust him.”

After Tachibana-san came back, we returned to our original goal—the handing over of a certain skill, and the testing of its use. That said, it wasn’t *my* skill under the microscope this time around. I relaxed on the bed as Tachibana-san received a skill from Carol and listened to a brief explanation about how it

worked.

“This is the Charm skill with the lowest level requirement. It’s called Induce. Is it up on your stat screen?”

“Ah... Yes, here it is.”

“Induce is the most basic Charm skill around. Let’s start with it,” said Carol.

## ***INDUCE***

***Rank B – Level 20 Required***

***Charm Skill***

***Induce a target by making eye contact.***

***Base Effect Duration: 3 turns***

“What does it mean to ‘induce a target,’ exactly?” asked Tachibana-san.

“How do I put this...? It’ll probably be faster if you just try it out.” Carol looked at the bed and pointed in my direction. “Tachibana, use Induce on Mizuki.”

“Huh...? You’re sure it’s safe?” she asked.

“There’s nothing dangerous about it, as long as you don’t try anything weird. It doesn’t bother you, does it, Mizuki?”

“Nah, I don’t mind,” I said.

I became a guinea pig for Tachibana-san’s Induce skill. I sat on the bed as she stood facing me, Carol standing beside her, ready to assist.

“The effect Induce has on someone, to put it broadly, turns a target’s emotions in the direction you want them to go in,” explained Carol.

“So, it manipulates what a target is feeling?” I asked.

She shook her head. “Not *manipulate*, exactly. It’d be more accurate to say it

implants a certain emotion inside of someone, then induces their feelings in that direction... It's just encouragement. It doesn't guarantee the target is going to change their mind or anything. If someone's so sad they want to die, trying to induce them to be happy isn't necessarily going to work. It might make the sadness a little more bearable, or it might have no effect at all."

"It's like a suggestion, then?" asked Tachibana-san.

"That's right. But if someone's got strong emotions in a certain direction already, or the same sort of feelings you're trying to induce, sometimes an Induce skill can really change a person's behavior. Try it out."

"*Ahem...* What emotions should I use?" Tachibana-san asked.

"Let's go with sexual arousal," Carol said. "Do it, Tachibana."

"Wait," I stopped her. "Why does it have to be *that* emotion?"

"Men have strong sexual urges to begin with, so it's an easy feeling to induce. It's also easily measurable. It's a logical choice. Go on, Tachibana."

"Hey, no. That's not the only problem here." I said.

"There are no other issues. Tachibana and I are the only ones here. Do it, Tachibana. Now."

"Wait, Tachibana-san. Pick a different emotion," I said.

Tachibana-san's eyes flitted back and forth between Carol and me in confusion, caught between the two of us.

"Wh-what do I do?"

"Tachibana, do what I told you. You don't want Mizuki to suffer by inducing sadness or fear in him, do you?"

"Well, I suppose not..." she mumbled.

"But if you implant him with joy, he might trip out and say something weird. When the spell's *too* effective, it can make the target drunk, and Mizuki might start blabbing about all kinds of things he'd rather keep secret. That'd be a

problem, too, right?”

“Y-yes, it would...” Tachibana-san said.

“Wait, Carol. This Induce skill’s pretty dangerous, isn’t it?” I asked.

“I told you that Charm skills are the most nefarious of them all, didn’t I? But we’re testing it out in a safe environment, so we’ll be fine. Do it, Tachibana. I’ll give you a hundred and fifty thousand yen as a reward.”

“Huh?! A hundred and fifty thousand yen?!” Tachibana-san exclaimed.

“Wait a minute, Tachibana-san! Don’t let her bribe you!”

“Huh? Wh-what do I do?! I’m sorry, Mizuki-san! Induce: Sexual Arousal!”

“You idiot!” I yelled. “Stop!”

*Ring...*

My ears rang. My eyes met Tachibana-san’s, and the look she gave me seemed to send a signal straight to my brain.

“Uh-uhm?”

I gave myself a once over to get a handle on what was happening to my body. Which was, it turned out, nothing in particular. I looked down at my hands.

*Nope. Nothing out of the ordinary.*

“Well done, Tachibana,” said Carol. I heard her voice melt as it met my ears. I sensed a ticklish kind of allure in the way she spoke. “You mind taking off? I’ll give you an extra fifty thousand yen.”

“Huh?! You mean it?! *Ahem...* I’m sorry, Mizuki-san! Goodbye!” Tachibana-san bowed, opened the door, and left.

“Right then, Mizuki,” Carol said as she sat down on the bed next to me. She slid her slender body toward me until our shoulders were touching, whispering in my ear. “How are you feeling?”

“Fine, I guess.”

“I think that’s because Tachibana’s Charm is still so low. Charm skills are heavily affected by ability point scores, so their power really depends on that number. If Tachibana’s Charm was higher, you’d have been induced in an instant and attacked me by now.”

“It wasn’t very effective then, huh?” I said, putting on a brave face. “I don’t feel a thing.”

“Really? That’s a shame.”

I was lying. I was *absolutely* lying. I was sensitive to every slight movement of Carol’s body, and I felt a trembling deep inside every time I felt her breath on my skin. I wanted to push that slim frame of hers down onto the bed and have my way with her so badly.

“Whoa?!”

“What is it, Mizuki?”

I somehow managed to restrain myself from leaping up as Carol laid a hand on my thigh. Her soft touch felt like lightning running through my backbone and extending all the way out to my fingertips.

“It’s okay,” she said, her voice soft as she whispered in my ear. “I’ll accept every part of you. But if we are going to *do* this...” Carol breathed in my ear. She spoke softly, as if she was playing hard to get. “You’ll just have to marry me, won’t you?”





I felt faint. The arousal and desire within me seemed like it was about to burst free and split me into four distinct pieces.

*What do you mean Tachibana-san's Charm isn't high enough? How is this effect so powerful? How is this skill so damn heinous? I can't take it any longer. I'm just going to push her down onto this freakin' bed. Carol's cute, strong, and will give me her all. Her breasts are small, but her butt is firm and sexy, so why not? I should just marry her. What am I complaining about? This is totally fine, right? She's the one who seduced me, anyway.*

*Why is she wearing naughty armor like that in the first place? That thing only hides the bare minimum. What am I waiting for? I should nail her, just thrust into her and make her scream. Make it so she can't even freakin' stand up during tomorrow's training. No, wait, I—wait a second. Shit. I need to get away right now or this is going to get seriously messed up.*

But something *else* inside me won out. Before I knew it, my legs stiffened up like they were coated in asphalt.

“Don't worry, Mizuki. I don't mind when we tie the knot, so... *Oh?!*”

In an instant, I grabbed her by the shoulders and jerked her down onto the bed. Then I was on top of her, straddling her, pushing her down into the mattress.

“Ha ha ha... Y-yes! Yes, Mizuki!” she cried out.

I was nose to nose with her. She was blushing a deep red, seemingly turned on as well.

*Getting so close to her... Carol's skin really is beautiful.*

I moved in, about to cover her lips with mine.

“Nh...”

Something snapped inside me the moment before we touched. I felt the suggestion implanted within me dissipate and vanished.



Cold dread ran down my spine as all the heat evaporated. The thick fog in my mind lifted, and a clear blue sky opened up.

“Oh?”

I pulled away from Carol, got off the bed, and briskly walked out of the room.

“Hey, Mizuki! Wait!” she cried. “Damn it! Did I run out of time?!”

“Tachibana! I’m never gonna forgive you for this!” I shouted.

## 2

“**T**HAT WAS A CLOSE ONE...”

I returned to my room and collapsed, splaying out on the bed. I’d survived—come back from the brink for the first time since my battle with the boss ogre. I lay face up on the bed, gazing up at the ceiling vacantly.

A fairy fluttered into my field of view. “What’s the matter? Zukky-san... Hmm? You stink. Zukky-san, why do you stink?”

“Huh? I stink?”

I brought my shirt up to my nose and sniffed, but I didn’t detect anything in particular.

“Not body odor,” she explained. “The stink of sex. It’s overpowering.”

“What’s that even mean? You sound like you’re in some erotic video game.”

“Did you get like, mentally attacked while I was here in the hotel room? When feelings get implanted in you, they really stink up your mind, even after they’re gone! Give me a break! I mean, put yourself in my shoes, will you? Our minds are directly linked right now!”

“Ahh, so that’s what this is,” I said, pushing myself up into a sitting position on the bed and looking Kessie in the eye. “You can tell then, huh? You’re amazing.”

“Putting it in human terms, I’d describe it as sort of like a medical, antiseptic

smell. That's what your mind smells like once someone's been using hypnosis spells on it."

"I see. You really do know anything and everything about telepathy, huh?"

"Not that much! This scandalous scent really is overwhelming, though! What happened, huh? You didn't... *Did* you? Did you just go and...? With *who*?"

"I came back from the edge of a cliff, that's all."

There was a *knock knock* at the door. I shot up from the bed and checked my wristwatch. It was 8:17 p.m. *Who's coming by this late? What for?*

I went to the door and realized there was no peephole. I considered just opening it, but the possibility of danger got the better of me, and I activated Skillbook first.

"Coming. Just a minute," I called, drawing my Blaze skill card from my binder and hiding it up my sleeve. I then turned the lock and opened the door to find Major Himata standing on the other side.

"Hey, Mizuki-kun," he said.

"Ah, Major Himata."

He indicated down the hall with his thumb and smiled like a high schooler inviting me out for some shenanigans.

"Want to come for a drink in my room? Got some hot pot, too, if you're down."

\*\*\*

Major Himata's room was designed exactly the same as mine and Tachibana-san's. I'd expected a bit of a nicer one, given his rank, but it seemed like everybody's quarters were identical. He had placed a little gas stove directly on the floor, and a metal hot pot bubbled away atop it. It seemed that the food was already done. Major Himata clicked the heat back on to reheat the contents of the sealed hot pot. He handed me a can of beer that he must have bought at a nearby commissary.

“You good with Asabi?”

“Yeah, thanks.”

“I bought a bunch, so drink up, okay? Hot pot’ll be ready soon,” he said, sitting down on the floor and opening his own beer. We were indoors, but it was a keep-your-shoes-on kind of room. I was a bit hesitant about sitting on the floor without a cushion, too...

*When in Rome, I guess...*

I sat down.

“Cheers,” said Major Himata, holding out his can to me. I knocked my beer against his and took a sip.

“The JSDF members usually make hot pot and have drinks after training like this.” He laughed, loud and happy.

“I see.”

“Can’t be like this during the real thing, of course. But hey, these are just exercises. Not like we’re digging trenches and fighting from morning to night. How ’bout it? Feel like you’re JSDF personnel yet, Mizuki-kun?”

“I guess so.”

“Right then, I reckon this is probably good to go. Here, chopsticks.”

“Ah, thanks,” I said. “Um, Major Himata?”

“What’s up?”

“Did you want something?”

“What do you mean? We’re here for hot pot.”

“Hot pot?”

“Yeah. I just invited you over for hot pot. Do I need some other reason?”

“Ah, right. No. Thanks, then.”

I brought my beer to my lips and waited for a message from Kessie, who hid in my pocket.

*«Huh. It's no use. I can't get into his mind! He's like one of those guys online with a locked account!»*

*«No good then, huh? Well, it doesn't matter. Carol trusts Himata, so maybe I'm jumping at shadows here.»*

Himata's hot pot was simple: spinach and pork layered on top of each other like a mille-feuille cake, packed tight right up to the top. It was a simple meal, but I had no complaints about the taste. It was a real man's dish, one that tasted better precisely because of its simplicity. It wasn't so much *delicious* hot pot as *damn good* hot pot. Major Himata and I talked about all kinds of things as we picked at the food.

"I see. So it's that unknown Skillbook skill of yours that's the key."

"That's right. It's not like I'm an amazing adventurer or anything."

I explained most of the details to Major Himata, drinking my beer while eating the hot pot. Carol had given me her stamp of approval for trusting him. Given his character, I felt that I could, so I decided to tell him about almost everything.

*Not to mention, Major Himata would be my main connection if I do end up selling Skillbook to the Japanese government. Probably best to get him up to speed on that now.*

"But that's one powerful skill. You're able to cast Hand in Hand Amplify, a skill that usually requires level 40. You can fire off spells in quick succession without needing high wisdom, and you're able to stack skills that shouldn't be able to be stacked in the first place. Ignoring level and stat requirements like that... It's like you're ignoring the rules of the system. The thing doesn't consume mana either, right?"

"It doesn't, no. The cards activate when you take them out of the binder."

"That's incredible. Incredibly broken, too." Himata laughed, but also looked to

be considering something. “By the way, that book of yours... It isn’t a unique skill?”

“A unique skill?” I repeated the term back to him.

“Unique skills are so tied up with the people who own them that they can’t be traded away. Carol-kun’s analyze skill, that Scale Eyes thing, is one of ‘em. The ability has already become part of her eyes now, more like an innate ability than a skill, an extension of her vision. I reckon the only way to *give* that skill of hers to someone else would be to transplant her eyes. It’s really unclear how her skill even works in the first place. Anyway, that’s what a unique skill is. They’re incredibly rare.”

“Really?”

“Well, there are so few of them that I can’t blame you for not knowing they exist.”

“I don’t think Skillbook is like that, though. Once these field test training exercises are over and I’ve gotten an idea of how the skill works, I plan on selling it. Skillbook is too much for me to handle.”

“You’re going to *sell it*?”

Himata looked at me sideways. His eyes were unusually sharp, like they were gazing out at me from the dark. An icy chill ran down my spine and clung to my back.

*What the hell? His entire demeanor just changed.*

But the moment after that wave of unease, Himata went back to his usual, cheerful self.

“Right, right! Well, I suppose everyone’s gotta make their own life choices. The greatest accomplishment is just to be yourself in the world, right?”

*Who’s he quoting now, I wonder?*

“Oh, this is off topic, but do you vote in elections, Mizuki-kun?”

*You're right. That is off topic.*

"Yeah," I said. "I mean, not *every* election, but yeah."

"Really, man? That ain't any good," said Major Himata, opening up a third can of beer. "You've gotta go vote. Japan's got a parliamentary system. We the people choose those legislators. You can't be lazy and not go and vote. Get with it, man. Seriously."

"Hah... You're right." I agreed, though I couldn't help but dwell on how annoying the conversation was likely about to become.

*He's not flushed yet, but this might be my sign that he's getting drunk. He was like this in the waiting room before the announcement ceremony, too. Maybe he's the preachy type.*

"While we're sitting here, Japan's falling apart day by day. It's outrageous. I mean it. Those idiots who complain about anything and everything are completely holding up the revolution that we need. The communists complain and complain about weird crap, and pseudo-liberals do nothin' but criticize. They're a bad force in our politics. Japan's slowly getting strangled to death. We keep hesitating on developing our dungeons, and now we're way behind the rest of the world. We need to change. And to bring about that change, we need young people to go and vote in our elections."

"R-right..."

"What do you think Japan needs right now?" he asked me.

"I'm not really sure. Higher voter turnout?" I guessed.

"No. It needs to get socked in the face." Major Himata crumpled the empty beer can in one hand. "The Japanese as a people need big shocks to jump into action. It's the only way. The Mongol Invasion, Perry's black ships, going to war... Whenever that stuff happens, we all come together, work hard, and *move*. What we need is an attack, Mizuki-kun. A huge blow that wakes everyone up in this country... Some big injury to our nation that'll bring us all

into step with each other again.”

“But things like that just don’t happen in this day and age,” I answered.

“You’re right. You’re exactly right,” said Major Himata, laughing. “We have world peace now, at least on the surface.”

He laughed for a little longer, but then the faintly tense, serious air faded, and he was back to his old self.

*Good. I hope this means that political monologue he just went into is over now. Seems like he really does like drinking and talking to people. I can easily imagine him calling his subordinates and coworkers ’round all the time for little drinking parties like this one. It’s not hard to picture his underlings getting lectured about politics on a regular basis, either. I guess he just chose me today.*

I made a move with my chopsticks to clean up the last of the hot pot and heard him mumble something under his breath.

“If there’s not going to be an attack, maybe someone has to do it themselves.”

“What do you mean?”

“It’s nothing. Forget it.”

The rest of the hot pot was finished not long after, and my second can of beer was empty. Himata finished up around the same time. Crushing his can with one hand, he rubbed his stomach with the other.

“That was good beer. Good food, too,” he said.

“Thank you for the meal. I’ll wash these up.”

“Nah, don’t worry about it. Leave it to one of the NCOs. They’ll do it.”

“Oh, I see.”

*I guess there’s a kind of JSDF hierarchy surrounding this stuff.*

Major Himata stood and placed his empty can on a nearby table. “Right, that’s that, then. You off to sleep, Mizuki-kun?”

“I think so.”

“Oh, that’s right. There’s something I want to show you.”

“What is it?”

“Want to take a bit of a walk? It’s not far.”

\*\*\*

We left our lodgings, and after a short walk, Major Himata entered another building that seemed to be a warehouse or some kind of factory. Inside, two JSDF members on night guard duty stood beside a thick door. We were inside a heavily guarded facility. Himata showed them some kind of personal ID and permit. The guards checked his documents, then let us past. Through the doors stood a great iron cage.

A “Huh...?” slipped out the moment I saw it. A strange, three-headed creature slept in the cage. One of the great monster’s heads looked like a lion’s, another the head of a goat, and the third that of a serpent, all of which grew from the same body.

“It’s a chimera,” said Himata, closing the door behind him. “Ever seen one before?”

“Uh... No, it’s my first time.”

To be honest, I’d seen chimeras online and on TV countless times before, but it was my first time seeing one in person. The creature looked like a lion at first glance. After getting a closer look, it was apparent that none of its three heads were merely for show, each breathing with a life of its own. The mismatched nature of it disturbed me; I was physically repulsed. It was nothing like the three-headed training golem. There was a biological weight to the creature’s presence that somewhat overwhelmed me.

“According to Carol-kun’s report, you didn’t see any of these things in the early depths of the Omori Dungeon. Ogres all the way down, eh?” asked Himata, gazing at the sleeping chimera in the cage. “We’ve used drugs and



magic to put it to sleep. This chimera is planned for the real fight on the last day of training.”

“A real fight...?”

“That’s right. We need real, practical training. In the U.S., they use real monsters in their training exercises all the time,” he said. “There’s something else I want to show you.”

I followed Himata as he headed into another room, showing his ID and permit to more guards before walking inside. This new room was smaller than the last, with a display item set up inside it like some kind of art museum. When I got closer, I saw the item was shut up within a heavily secured and transparent safe, completely sealed off in thick glass that looked like it could survive a direct hit from a rocket launcher. Inside the case was a gold, glimmering crystal.

*That’s a level crystal.*

“Ah, isn’t that...?”

“You’ve seen one of these before?”

“Just recently, yeah.”

*Carol used it on Tachibana-san, though I suppose I don’t need to tell him that.*

“That makes this easier, then. This item can force both people and monsters to level up.”

“The one I saw was purple.”

“Purple ones are the third strongest. This is a gold level crystal, top of the class.”

“How many levels would it give you?”

“Around twenty, I reckon.”

*That’s insane. That’s way too many levels.*

“On the last day of the training, we’re going to use this level crystal on the chimera.”

“On the *chimera*?” I repeated in shock. “Are you sure giving it a whole twenty extra levels is a good idea?”

“We’re going to be very careful when we use this crystal, of course. Having this monster go up twenty levels in one fell swoop is going to evolve it into a boss chimera, see? We’re only going to do so after we’ve cut down this guy’s HP to almost nothing. Other safety measures will be in place, too.”

“Do you really need to go this far?”

“Once it’s grown into a boss chimera, infantry weapons are going to be all but useless against it. If the top adventurers aren’t able to face it, we’ll need a recoilless rifle, a tank, or a howitzer. We might even have to finish it off with an air bombardment in the end. We’ll figure out the right way to safely eliminate the boss chimera and get the whole thing on video.”

Himata gave a short chuckle.

“That’ll be the end of these training exercises. We’ll get the video evidence uploaded onto the official JSDF website and use it to shift the way society thinks about dungeons. I want to make them wonder what would happen if one of these creatures were to somehow make it into a city. We need practical training. We need a *revolution*. I’m going to get that idea through their skulls.”

“Why are you telling me all this?” I asked.

“I have my reasons, Mizuki-kun.” Himata said my name, standing tall before me and looking down from on high. “Don’t you want to work for the sake of your country?”

“Excuse me?” I asked, the question reflexive. I couldn’t quite understand what he was getting at.

“You’re a man, aren’t you? You know, the characters you see in the movies, in manga... Those spies who travel the world, special forces operating in secret... You’ve never dreamed about doing anything like that?”

“Well, sure...” I said. “I’d be lying if I said I’d never thought about it.”

“Right? All guys fantasize about that kind of stuff. Joy doesn’t come from doing things for your own satisfaction but from faithfully pursuing meaningful goals. What’s a *meaningful* goal, then? There are different kinds of targets to aim at, but which ones have true worth? What does it mean for people to have perfect, unwavering loyalty to a man in pursuit of a common goal? What’s the nature of that thing, and how can we bring it about?”

Himata talked a mile a minute, but his words were easy to understand, each syllable clear and precise. I felt his voice slowly permeate the inner reaches of my mind.

“Well... I don’t really know the answer to those questions,” I said.

“Then let me tell you. It is the state—patriotism. True goals are those set for the sake of one’s nation, and it is the feeling of patriotism welling up inside a country’s people that spurs them into action. You now have the chance to give this nation your all.

Our country needs your talent, your power.” He grinned. The slim muscles on his face pulled his skin tight, his wide mouth looked like it might split as his face twisted up at the corners.

“Let me ask you again: don’t you want to work for your country?”

### 3

“**S**O...” BEGAN CAROL, WHO STOOD THERE IN HER nightgown. “First, Himata suddenly starts trying to recruit you into some mysterious government organization. Then you get worried about what he’s saying and make a beeline for my room just before lights out. *That’s* why you’re here?”

“That’s about it,” I admitted.

“Mizuki, you ran away from me just a few hours ago, right before we were about to do the deed. Now you sense something out of the ordinary in a cheerful officer like Himata and run straight back here to give me a report?”

“Yep. That’s about it,” I repeated.

“You don’t think it’s selfish that you only count on me at times like these? What am I to you, a toy that can just be tossed away?”

“With the serious mental attack you launched on me today, I think we’re even.”

“You have a point,” Carol said.

“I don’t only rely on you when it’s convenient for me, either. I rely on you *all the time*, whether or not it’s convenient.”

“That’s a problem in and of itself, you know. Are you a freeloader at heart?” asked Carol, making coffee with the hotel room coffee pot. Her nightgown was somewhat sheer. It didn’t have the typical nightwear properties of keeping her warm or covering her up.

Instead, it served only to seductively draw out the lines of her body.

“Where the heck did you get those revealing pajamas?” I asked.

“Online. I thought you’d like them.”

*Is that all this teenager is ever searching for?* I began to seriously consider the necessity of online age restriction filters for minors.

“Do you always wear that stuff?”

“No. I changed when I heard you coming,” she explained.

*I see...*

I felt a kind of danger that I couldn’t quite place after my chat with Himata, so I’d gone straight to Carol’s room. Kessie was in the next room over, playing *Stash Bros.* with Kevin and the other members of REA. *I’m glad they’re all getting along.*

In the end, I asked Himata to give me some more time to think. He didn’t push me any further, only stating that he hoped I would make the right decision and that he wanted to ask me again once our training was over.

“Captain Himata... No, Major Himata. There are rumors that he’s running his own unofficial unit.” Carol placed a cup of coffee in front of me before sitting down with her own. “I guess he was trying to recruit you for that.”

“But why me?” I asked. “I might have a rare skill, but...”

“That rare skill could be worth billions. If he gets you in his unit, and can make use of you... I really do think this is just a straight-up attempt to recruit you for his team. Seems like Himata likes you and knows that I want you for REA. You’re capable. I’m sure he wants you. What are you so scared about?”

“Nah... It’s not that I’m *scared* exactly, you know?” I said, putting on a bit of a brave face. “It’s just like there’s a part of him that’s a mystery to me. He’s always smiling, but it never reaches his eyes.”

“Himata’s former special forces. That’s why,” Carol said.

*Seriously?*

“We talked about a bunch of things today, too. It’s like the air around him changes sometimes. Kessie can’t read what he’s thinking, either... I dunno. It’s unsettling, is all,” I said.

“Did he threaten you to join him?”

“Nah, it wasn’t like that.”

“Did he try to force you into doing anything?”

“We drank together, and he made us some hot pot.”

“Then what are you so worried about?” she asked.

*She’s completely right. But there’s something about him I just can’t let go of. That intense pressure that came over him all of a sudden... It sent chills up my spine, like I was getting stared down by a snake. He creeped me out so badly that I can still feel a cold sweat running down my back.*

*No... I need to stop thinking like this. I mean, if I look back to search the real cause of all my worries, it all comes down to Skillbook itself. I’m just a civilian.*

*Holding this incredible skill isn't good for my mental health. I feel like I'm strolling around a bad neighborhood with a hundred million yen in my wallet, asking Kessie to check on each and every person I meet. In other words, I'm paranoid as all hell.*

Carol sat across from me, glancing over as she sipped her coffee. "Can't blame you for feeling pressured, though," she said. "Himata's over level 50."

"Level 50?!"

*Over level 50... But the world's number one adventurer, Wallace Chandler from the U.S., is level 63... Himata's that close to the highest level in the world?*

"I didn't know there was anyone like that in Japan."

"Himata's level is even higher than mine these days. I was above him last time we met, but he's overtaken me all of a sudden."

"He's really *that* strong then, huh?"

"Even with my Scale Eyes, all I can tell about Himata is his level. I used to be able to see his stats...but just as Miss Kessie said, he's probably using some kind of defensive skill to block me. I bet the level difference between you two is what freaked you out and got you all worried. I wouldn't be surprised if there *is* someone after your Skillbook right now, so you're not wrong. I just think you're overthinking it."

"Right..."

"Still not sure?" asked Carol.

"I kinda get what you're saying, but I can't change gears that quickly," I said.

"I know a good way to forget those worries," she said.

"You do? What? Are we going to call up Himata and ask what evil thing he's plotting?"

"Of course not!"

"Don't get childish on me, now."

“Come on, I’ll help you get it all out. I’m going to use Scale Eyes, so lie on the bed face up, will you?”

“You want me to lie down?” I asked.

“Yeah. I’ll give you a full scan. Like a computer program checking for viruses.”

I did as I was told, and Carol climbed on top of me, straddling my waist. She brought her face in close to mine, embracing me as we lay on top of the bed.

“Himata’s a powerful Charm user. If he approached you with some ulterior motive, there’s a very high chance he’s already done *something* to you.”

“Done what, exactly?”

“All kinds of Charm skills can interfere with the fundamental essence of a person’s mind, just like the Induce skill I gave Tachibana. They can suddenly bend your mind in a certain direction and cause you to do things you didn’t intend to do. There are many different possibilities. I’ll go ahead and check if Himata attacked you in some way.”

Carol’s eyes peered directly into mine. I watched as her blue eyes turned yellow, pupils stretching to look like those of a snake.

She was going to analyze me with her Scale Eyes up close, just like she’d done when we first met. The process lasted several minutes. I stayed still, feeling her shallow breathing atop me. Suddenly, she stopped and sighed.

“I have to analyze you a little more closely,” she said, “so I’m going to need to put my tongue in your mouth.”

“You’re finished. You’re *definitely* finished.”

“I can put your mind *even more* at ease.”

“You’d only be making my problems worse,” I remarked.

“Tch.”

“Hey, don’t click your tongue at me.”

I sat up on the bed, a bit dizzy. Having Carol search through every corner of

my mind with her Analyze skill felt a little different from having Kessie poking around in there. It wasn't really pain so much as it felt like someone had just stirred my brains around with a stick. It wasn't back to normal yet, not all the way, and a dull sense of discomfort lingered in the back of my head.

"So, how was it?" I asked.

"Fine. No problems. Himata didn't do anything to you."

"Right. So I was getting worked up over nothing, then?"

"When the level difference is that big, Himata's movements and the changes in his emotions can seem intimidating, even if he doesn't mean them to be. Maybe that's what you felt. I think that's partly why he acts so cheerful all the time."

"Right. I see."

It was only then that I understood how I could feel a little intimidated by a sixteen-year-old girl like Carol. I had a preconceived notion of her as the captain of REA, of course, but the biggest factor was our difference in level.

"I don't think Himata intends on forcing you to do anything, Mizuki... But if you're afraid, do you want to stay with me tonight?"

"No, I'm okay. I feel better. I'll sleep in my own room," I said, getting up from the bed. "You're right, it's probably just our difference in level that's the issue. When he gets talking, he can go off into his own world and say some really weird stuff. I know he's a nice guy, but that just makes it more unsettling. Anyway, sorry for the trouble."

"I'm glad you're feeling better," Carol said. "Don't be shy. Stay the night."

"Nah, I'm going back to my own room."

"There's no need for that. I can make you feel even better if you stay over."

"Nope. I'm leaving."

"Tch!"



“Can you seriously stop clicking your tongue at me like that?”

## 4

THE NEXT DAY’S TRAINING WASN’T HELD IN THE square but in a special facility built to look like a dungeon. The building was tall and deep, shaped like a half-cylinder on its side—apparently, it used to be some kind of warehouse.

The inside was filled with a complex mess of mazes straight out of a survival game. The labyrinth was geometrically designed and put together with barricades. While it was incomplete in places, it was supposed to represent the inside of a dungeon. We were gathered there to carry out a mock dungeon clearing. *And who’s in charge of the proceedings?*

“A-a-ah—h-hello! I’m Tachibana Maki, a cave management official! T-today w-we’re gonna—*ahem*—we’re g-going to be...p-performing a mock dungeon clearing in this facility!”

⟨*She’s tripping over every word!*⟩

⟨*Yeah, I’ve never heard her stutter this bad before.*⟩

My partner, Tachibana Maki-san, tripped up so many times during her explanation that she figuratively spent more time on the floor than standing. A man stood beside her through it all, and it was clear he wanted to lead the proceedings in her place. Kawatani smiled as he waited on standby, but I knew his peaceful exterior hid inner turmoil.

⟨*What can you tell from this situation?*⟩

⟨*Well, Kawatani-san’s position has been taken by Tachibana-san.*⟩

⟨*That’s right.*⟩

While Kawatani was the effective leader at Omori City Hall, it was clear that power was reassigned to Tachibana-san as training progressed. Or rather, it appeared that Tachibana-san was now in a position of overall authority. A

regime change was taking place right in front of us.

There were several reasons for this shake-up, but the number one factor had just taken the microphone from Tachibana-san and begun to speak.

“Hey, everyone! Major Himata here. Hello! We’re almost halfway through our exercises. How are you all feeling?! I reckon today’s training is going to be the most fun of the bunch! Treat it like a survival game, and really give it your all!”

Major Himata was the de facto leader of the on-site JSDF. He had been passing all city hall communications and reports through Tachibana-san exclusively, bypassing Kawatani completely. Given Himata’s position at the top of the JSDF, Kawatani’s power was eroded as the days went on, and it wasn’t hard to imagine he might be ignored completely by the end of the training.

It was then that the second major factor took to the podium, taking the microphone from Major Himata’s hand.

“Hey, everyone. I’m Carol Middleton of REA. Today’s training will be important in understanding some of the basic facts about dungeon clearing. I hope you take an active role in today’s activities and learn as much as you can from the experience. That’s all.”

Carol was the head external advisor present at the training, and had official communication channels with both the U.K. and Japanese governments. In the context of the practical training at hand, her word was highly respected, as she was the leader of the strongest adventuring party in Britain. Carol was directing the training in close cooperation with Himata, and it was obvious when it came to dealing with Kawatani and Tachibana-san as to whom she preferred.

Tachibana-san’s work wasn’t just restricted to serving as master of ceremonies. In truth, she didn’t have much work to do at all. She was here as a formality, representing city hall. Most of the actual training was conducted and managed by organizers in the JSDF. Her real work consisted of being a *contact*.

“Tachibana, some of the guys in group two are absent. Do you think we should join them?”

“Excuse me?! Ah, *ahem*, I’ll ask Himata-san!”

“Tachibana? We’re ready over here! We good to go inside?”

“Ah! I’ll go and ask Carol-san! Carol-san?! Carol-san?!”

“Tachibana, you don’t mean to tell me you’ve already made love to Mizuki?”  
someone asked in English.

“Er, does anybody here speak English?!”

Tachibana-san was surrounded, being bombarded with questions from Kevin and the other burly guys from REA, who were participating in the training as key staff coaches. It seemed as if all of them knew that REA was trying to recruit her and already treated her like a member of the team. This meant that if they had questions, they were all directed at her.

With Tachibana-san forced to take charge of all communications, the other training participants naturally started to assume that she was actually *in charge* of them. In other words, if anyone needed someone higher up the food chain to make a decision or had questions that needed answering, they went to Tachibana-san.

In addition, she appeared much easier to talk to than the beefy British guys of REA, Carol, Himata, or any of the other JSDF elite officers, so the younger JSDF members all passed their messages through Tachibana-san as well. Watching Tachibana-san deal with an endless stream of questions and messages, I couldn’t help but be impressed.

⟨*She’s really coming into her own in this training.*⟩

⟨*She sure is!*⟩

⟨*She did sell me out for 200,000 yen yesterday, though.*⟩

⟨*Seems like she can be like that, can’t she?*⟩

⟨*Yep.*⟩

*But, hey, I thought to myself. She was in a really tough spot back at city hall,*

during Kawatani's regime. I guess her position there is way more secure with all the connections she's making. I don't know how things were before, but I doubt anyone's going to be able to cut Tachibana-san out of her job now like some lizard's tail. I mean, she's got Major Himata on her side, a MoD guy and a big player in the dungeon industry. Not to mention she has Carol Middleton, the strongest adventurer in all of Britain. The balance of power at Omori City Hall has been completely overturned.

"Yes! Yes! I'll contact somebody about that as well! I'll inform Carol-san of the situation! H-haah! Haah! I-I'm hyperventilating! Wait a minute, please! I-I need to calm down!"

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Over the following few days, our training continued. Through a number of mock combat exercises, I came to understand a few things about my Skillbook ability.

*Number one: when stacking buff skills that double the power of another ability, the stacks don't interfere with each other and are added together. For example, stacking a buff skill three times that gives something  $\times 2$  power gives the buff  $\times 6$  power in total. In other words, it's not 3 cubed ( $2 \times 2 \times 2 =$  multiplied by 8), but  $2 + 2 \times 2 =$  multiplied by 6—or double  $\times 3$  times  $= \times 6$ .*

*Meaning, when the skills of the same kind are stacked and calculated, the following formula is used: [base multiplication factor  $\times$  number of times used].*

As a result, I determined that the most efficient way of multiplying a skill's damage was to add another one into the mix.

*After all, when different doubling skills come into contact, they do multiply each other when calculated. This means that stacking four different skills is always going to give me a higher multiplication factor than stacking the same skill four times.*

*For example, let's say I used my Explosive Nature skill—my ability that doubles the power of all fire abilities—four times. Using the [base multiplication factor  $\times$*

number of times used] formula with the same skill, in the end my fire skills would ultimately deal  $\times 8$  more damage than normal.

Explosive Nature,  $2+2+2+2$ , or double $\times 4$  times, gives you a total of  $\times 8$ .

But if I instead were to use Explosive Nature two times, and another doubling buff skill like Hand in Hand Amplify two times, the same skills would have their multiplication factors added together—but the different skills interacting would multiply each other.

Explosive Nature  $(2+2) \times$  Hand in Hand Amplify  $(2+2) = (\times 4) \times (\times 4) = \times 16$  in total.

Casting Blaze, with its base damage of 4, combined with four casts of just Explosive Nature multiplies the damage by 8, which will give 32 damage in total. Two casts each of two different skills multiplies the damage by 16, though, giving 64 damage in total.

At the end of the day, mixing in different skills makes the same number of casts twice as powerful. But with skills that are this explosively strong, the difference between 30 and 60 points of damage isn't that relevant, not when it's enough to turn most normal monsters to ash already. There's not much point in trying to find the highest possible multiplication factor. I don't exactly want to turn Blaze into a nuclear missile. Anyway, simply stacking a regular doubling skill ten times and getting up to a max of  $\times 20$  damage is more than enough destruction for me.

The current maximum multiplication factor I can reach is ten casts of Explosive Nature, ten casts of Hand in Hand Amplify—(double  $\times$  ten times)  $\times$  (double  $\times$  ten times)  $= (\times 20) \times (\times 20) =$  a total of  $\times 400$ . But that's only if I'm able to activate twenty skills in only twenty seconds.

"Skillbook isn't just a skill for putting out crazy amounts of damage, though," said Carol.

We were in the middle of training, sitting on the grass and waiting our turn at the next mock combat exercise. Carol had left the other REA members in charge

of support staff duties. Hokkaido was usually cold. Carol looked a little uncomfortable in her armor under the midday sun. Beads of sweat glistened on the white skin of her neck. She also frequently complained that the dungeons in Britain were much cooler than Japanese ones.

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“Think about it. Skills and magic aren’t just used to attack things. They can buff other people, help them recover... What if you’re able to apply those insanely high buffs to all the other types of skills, too?”

“Well, I suppose that’s another way this thing can be powerful,” I said.

“Not just powerful, *catastrophic*.”

“What catastrophe are you imagining?”

“There are a lot of different possibilities,” Carol said, “but the Charm skills I’m thinking about teaching to Tachibana are at the top of the list.”

“Charm skills, huh?”

“They can be some of the most devious and evil of all. You felt the way it interfered with your mind, right, Mizuki?”

I remembered the mental attack incident and how I just barely escaped having sex with Carol. I tried to mentally work out how the rules of consent applied when the person being attacked consented, but the one doing the attacking didn’t and what exactly the crime was in that situation.

“Charm skills are powerful, but the problem is their duration. That Induce skill that Tachibana hit you with only lasts three turns—thirty seconds total. Apparently, skilled users like Himata can make the effects last longer. It’s only his really high Charm stat and the different buff skills he uses that make that possible,” Carol explained.

“But none of that applies to you, Mizuki,” she continued. “Using Skillbook, you can ignore level and ability point requirements when you use Charm skills. Maybe you could buff your Charm to some crazy-high number by multiplying it

and have skills that last half an hour... You might even be able to manipulate someone for an hour or two. Magic like that should require a high level and consume high amounts of MP, but that isn't a problem for you, Mizuki."

"So, if there is some skill that can double the duration..." I worked through what Carol was suggesting. "Then, by using Hand in Hand Amplify, I could double that up to a max of four hundred times. That means I could buff the thirty second duration of Induce by four hundred times?"

*30×400=12,000. And 12,000 seconds is 200 minutes... So, around three hours?*

"If you'd been under the effects of Induce for three whole hours, we would've screwed like rabbits. I'd have been totally worn out by the time it was over."

"That's a terrifying thought," I said.

"You might even have gotten me pregnant," Carol remarked.

"Another terrifying thought."

"What if there was another multiplicative buff skill similar to Hand in Hand Amplify? That'd change the max damage calculation to twenty times twenty, times twenty... Can you work that out in your head?"

"Three zeroes makes it times eight thousand."

"How many hours is thirty seconds times eight thousand?"

The mental arithmetic was getting annoying, so I took out my phone and opened the calculator app. "About sixty-six hours, so roughly three days."

"If that Induce effect had lasted sixty-six hours, you could've accosted me for three whole days and nights, Mizuki. I'd have been a mess by the end of it."

"An even more terrifying thought."

"I would've *definitely* been pregnant once those three days were up."

"A truly terrifying thought."

*I bet it'd be a disaster if Skillbook ever ended up in the hands of some pervert. It'd probably be just as bad if Carol got her hands on it.*

“But, Carol, this is all just a theory. I don’t think I could actually activate thirty skills or abilities in ten seconds. That puts a limit on how much multiplying I can do.”

“Listen up, Mizuki. These Charm skills that manipulate others... They’re powerful whether they last a day or just a few minutes. Terrifying things can happen. and it’s not just Charm skills that are dangerous. When you add things to skills that aren’t supposed to be possible, you can accidentally cause some really destructive things to happen.”

“Like infinite combos in card games, eh? The ones that get banned immediately,” I said.

Carol peeked over at me. “Mizuki, Skillbook is a rule-breaker. It’s a broken skill that makes the impossible possible. We might need to rethink everything we know about the dungeon world. That skill of yours is more dangerous than I first thought.”

“I’m starting to think the same thing,” I said after a moment of pause.

*I’ve learned a few things about the finer details of how Skillbook works, too.*

- 1. Once a skill has been carded, it can’t be restored to its previous state.***
- 2. Card uses are limited, likely to ten uses. They don’t recover.***
- 3. Effect skills like Chip Damage last for two turns after a single cast. The effect can stack.***
- 4. I don’t need to say the name of the skill or point the skill card toward my target to activate it. Just having it pulled from the binder is enough.***
- 5. Pulling multiple cards out at the same time can activate multiple skills at once.***
- 6. I don’t need to be the one to physically pull the card from its binder to***



***activate it.***

***7. Skills that have been carded can be activated regardless of their required level and ability point requirements. They don't consume MP either.***

***8. Cards that have been skilled are stackable, even if their effects are not typically stackable.***

***9. Skillbook itself has no duration limit and cannot be physically destroyed.***

***10. I can make Skillbook materialize at will anywhere within one meter of my person.***

"Is that about it?"

"Nothing else about how it works?" asked Carol, playing around with Skillbook as I took notes on how the skill worked. Since I'd turned several of the skills I had borrowed into cards, there were now several different skill types in the binder.

"Hmm. So, skills are limited-use, disposable things, then...? It'd be more convenient if the charges came back over time or something," I said.

"No point in wishing for something that doesn't exist. What you've got right now is enough." Carol took a card out of the binder and tried bending it about, examining it from every angle to see if there was a secret function that might activate.

"Carol, put Blaze back in the binder," I said.

"Why?"

"If it's out of the binder, then it's met all the requirements to activate. One weird thought from me, and it will explode."

"Scary stuff. Right, I'll put it back."

"Okay... I think that's enough for now."

*It took a lot of effort for me to figure even this much out. That thing's in the*

*shape of a book, so why the heck didn't they put a user manual or something in the back? Well, at least I know the basics of how it functions now. We have a short break, then there are only a few days left before the training's over. But I'm satisfied with what I know about Skillbook already.*

I felt a Lain message buzz in on my phone.

"Come to think of it, Mizuki..." Carol said.

"What is it?" I asked.

"Tomorrow's a day off. Are you going home or staying on base?"

"Ah... I'll be heading home for the day. I've got things to do tomorrow."

"Things to do?" Carol glared at me. "Don't tell me you're meeting another girl!"

"I don't want to lie to you, so, yes. I'm meeting another girl."

"Whaaa?! What?! What did you just say?!"

"Look, it's nothing weird! It's just Shinobu! She wants to go shopping and asked me to drive her. That's all!"

"Screw you! You don't need to drive *her* anywhere! She's just after your body, Mizuki!" Carol exclaimed. "That's what she's up to! It's an excuse for a date!"

"She's after my *body*?!"

"Are you listening to me?! Make her walk! Or take a bus! How about a taxi?!"

"I already promised!" I protested.

"Ohhhhhh, you *promised* her?! Mizuki, I've devoted myself to you, body and soul! And you're using your time off to go out with another woman?! Huh?! What's the meaning of this, you inhumane freak?! These are crimes against humanity! Do I need to get the UN involved?!"

"Wait a second, Carol! Calm down! I don't even know what you're talking about anymore!"

## Chapter 5: Shopping Mall Dungeon

### 1

“HEY, DID YOU KNOW THAT IF YOU STICK YOUR HAND out of the window of a car going sixty kilometers an hour, the air pressure against your hand feels exactly like a boob?” Shinobu said, putting her hand out the window as we neared the speed limit.

“I knew that before you were even born,” I said. “That’s common knowledge.”

“But there’s something fishy about those kinds of ‘fun facts,’ right? Like, is it actually real? There’s all kinds of stuff in the world we think of as common sense but might not be.”

“Like what?” I asked.

“Like that food tastes best when it’s about to go bad.”

“For the car window thing, I mean, you’ve got a pair, don’t you? Just compare for yourself.”

“Oh?” Shinobu said. “Do you want to test it out, too, Mizuki-san?”

“I still don’t want to get arrested.”

The traffic light turned red, and I slowly pressed the brakes.

“Anyways, looks like the Omori Dungeon’s been sealed off,” said Shinobu.

“Oh, really?”

“Yeah, apparently a goblin really *did* get loose. They’ve shut the whole thing down until they catch it.”

“Do they know how it got out in the first place?”

“Not yet, but it seems like there were signs that someone broke in.”

“Broke in?” I said. “Like a thief or something?”

“I’m not sure, but probably, right? It was late at night and caused a security breach. Apparently, that’s when the goblin got out. But monsters aren’t normally supposed to leave dungeons.”

“Hmm. Well, you be careful not to go walking around on your own, okay? I can’t save you if you get attacked and nobody’s around.”

“Oh? Is that what this is? Are we foreshadowing you becoming my bodyguard, Mizuki-san?” Shinobu asked.

“I don’t have the time for that. Anyway, if I remember right, it’s just the mall you want to go to today, right?”

“That’s right, yep!”

Shinobu wore her usual hoodie and hot pants today, her legs left bare. She had sagging white socks on, and casual-looking sneakers with thin soles. Her light green T-shirt had a low-cut neckline, and she wore a mask of the same color.

“I don’t really know much about all this, but are you sure the mall’s going to have what you need?” I asked.

“What do you mean?”

“You’re buying stuff for YouTube, aren’t you?”

“Yes. So?”

“Don’t you need, like, a consumer electronics place? Going to one of the big places would be a bit out of our way, but we can stop by. Might as well, now that we’re in the car.”

“Ah, I think you’ve misunderstood,” she said, clicking her tongue. “We’re not buying camera equipment or microphones today.”

“Oh, we’re not?” I asked in surprise as we pulled into the parking lot. “I

thought you needed stuff for filming.”

“To be honest, you get all the good stuff online. Consumer electronics places don’t have the best products.”

“Right, I see.”

“We’re going to UNIKURO, GV, places like that,” she explained.

“For what? Clothes?”

“I want to do a video on fast fashion stuff. They’re about to put out new summer collections, so I want to buy a bunch of clothes and film myself wearing some different outfits that match.”

“Aha, I see.” I nodded in understanding. “Sounds good. I mean, all the clothes I wear are cheap stuff like that, too. It might be useful.”

“I know, right? It’s also super easy to slip some sex appeal into those kinds of videos. I can show some skin when I’m putting on the outfits. That video of me is getting shared on a bunch of porn sites, so I think there’s demand for it.”

“That’s a sensible business strategy,” I said. “I’m genuinely impressed.”

I did look up to Carol, but Shinobu’s strength was deserving of respect on a whole different plane of existence.

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Right up until the last minute, Carol wanted to come along on our shopping trip. Since she was close to the training management team, however, there was a lot for her to do, even on our day off. She’d failed to properly adjust her schedule and couldn’t take a break to go out. There were procedural plans for the final day, the placement of staff, security measures... All matters on which she had to attend discussions as an external advisor. Apparently, she was spending all her time in meetings with Himata.

That meant I was dragged off to shop with Shinobu alone; Kessie was resting at home today. She didn’t want to come shopping if she wasn’t going to be able to fly around the stores as she pleased and had plans on locking herself up in

her room and playing games from sunrise to sunset.

*She's busy in her own way, I guess, immersed in all the content the material world has to offer.*

"Mind if I go look somewhere else?" I asked as we stood in front of the UNIKURO store. "I'll be around. Just call me when you're done."

"But why? Let's look around together!"

"I mean, I'm not here to buy clothes."

"Let's go shopping together!" Shinobu exclaimed. "I'll pick something out for you!"

"I'm good, really. I wear white collared shirts year round, anyway."

"C'mon! You're on a date with a cute high school girl, and you want to go off and do your own thing? That's totally not happening!"

"Well," I said, "this isn't actually a date."

"I *will* scream, you know?"

"Why are you like this?"

Shinobu and her complaining won in the end. We walked around the stores together, and she set aside her own clothes shopping for a while as she ransacked the shelves to find something for me to wear.

"This! And this! This too! All right, Mizuki-san! Mind trying these on for me?!"

"Sure, but what about your own shopping?"

"I already know what I want, so I'll go grab everything while you're getting changed."

"Oh, right. Okay then," I acquiesced.

I tried on the clothes that Shinobu picked out for me. She had chosen a dark grey jacket with matching pants, and a brown T-shirt. I liked the way it looked in the dressing room mirror—relaxed and grown-up.

*I like that the colors are simple. I might want to try this out with some brown loafers.*

I left the dressing room to find Shinobu already standing right outside, waiting for me.

“Whoa!” she cried out happily the moment she saw me. “That’s so cool! You’ve got a surprisingly good figure, Mizuki-san, so these kinds of outfits really flatter you! Like, you look properly built. It looks exactly like I pictured it!”

“Yeah, I like it, too,” I admitted as I looked at myself in the mirror.

*She’s right, these clothes look better than I imagined.*

“I think I might just buy these,” I said. “Maybe two more of the same.”

“Oh? Really? It makes me happy I picked them out for you! Try on some glasses or some leather shoes. Some brightly colored sneakers could work, too.”

“Might be a good idea, yeah,” I said. “Anyway, did you find what you were looking for?”

“Already bought it all, yep.”

“Where are your shopping bags?”

“I already ordered everything I wanted online, so it should be delivered soon, I think.”

“Then what was the point in us coming here?”

“I told you. We’re on a date!”

“Damn it, Shinobu...” I’d been completely deceived. While I debated whether or not I should be angry with her, someone came out of the dressing room two doors down. Our eyes met, and for a moment, I froze.

“Ah, Mizuki-san.”

“Oh, Tachibana-san.”

Tachibana-san had come out of the dressing room with some fall cardigans

and a few other items in her arms, wearing her everyday clothes. This was the woman who had recently almost assisted Carol in *scoring* by selling me out for a grand total of 200,000 yen.

“*Ahem*, thanks for all your help the other day...” she said.

“Sure... Are you here shopping?”

“Ah, well... Yes.”

“With your 200,000 yen, right?”

“*Ahem*... Regarding that, yes... I really am sorry about what happened... I was caught up in the moment, heh heh heh...” She gave me a dry laugh.

I couldn’t tell whether she really meant what she said or not. *I don’t want you mentally assaulting me, whether you were caught up in the moment or bribed or whatever.* I entertained the idea that Tachibana-san might be a scumbag at heart—just one of the earnest ones.

“Who’s this, Mizuki-san?” asked Shinobu, seeing that the two of us knew each other.

“She’s from city hall,” I said. “The one I told you about.”

“Huh, seriously? I heard a bit about what’s going on, but I thought only guys worked there.”

“This is Tachibana Maki-san.”

“Umm...” Tachibana-san looked at me, then at my apparent companion, and tried to answer the *“describe the connection between these two individuals”* exam question that had formed in her head. She looked lost for a moment, but landed on an answer that, while not the truth, was the least controversial one she could have come up with.

“I didn’t know you had a little sister, Mizuki-san. Nice to meet you.”

“Huh? I’m not his sister.”

“Hey, don’t make this complicated. You’re my little sister.”



“I don’t think you’ll have many opportunities in life to use a line like that one.”

*Sometimes, the truth hurts.*

## 2

“**S**O, I LEAVE YOU ALONE FOR A LITTLE WHILE, AND you immediately start seeing that girl with an unfortunate-looking face and a huge rack?”

“You’ve only met her once, and you’re using some really rude words to describe her.”

I was in the food court with Shinobu, eating lunch.

“Wow, this is a shock! I just assumed all the new people you were working with would be guys, y’know?”

“I never mentioned whether they were guys or girls. Why does it matter?”

“I mean, I never thought you’d be with someone so *huge*. Like, the biggest titties of all time are one thing, but she also seems kind of smart, too.”

“Did big boobs kill your parents or something?” I groaned.

“I can’t forgive her for having boobs bigger than mine.”

“Yours are pretty big, too,” I pointed out.

“Oh, is this sexual harassment? Want to touch them?”

“*That’s* a new way of dealing with sexual harassment.”

Shinobu used her phone with her right hand and deftly ate her hamburger and fries with her left. I leaned back in my chair and looked around. A lot of people were in town for the training exercise. Tachibana-san included, there were a lot of familiar faces in the mall.

*Omori City is more countryside than city. When it comes down to it, there’s nowhere else to hang out...*

I looked around to see if there was anyone else I knew and immediately found

two people. The pair stood out like sore thumbs. I noticed them the moment they came into my line of sight.

“Gah hah hah, this is amazing, Matilda! I’ve never seen an ice cream cone stacked eight scoops high before!”

“Heath! It’s going to fall! It’s falling! A whole six of your scoops are about to topple!”

It was my two foreign neighbors, Matilda-san and Heath, the latter of whom held a *stacked* ice cream cone. It was practically taller than he was.

“Ah.”

As they looked around the food court for seats, they spotted me and walked over.

“Oh, Mizuki! Long time no see!” Heath said. “Never thought I’d meet you in a place like this.”

“Haven’t seen you in a while, Heath. Where have you been?” I asked.

“I was abroad. Just got back yesterday.” Heath sat down next to us and called Matilda-san over.

“Hi, Matilda-san.”

“Hello, Mizuki! Oh, are you here with your girlfriend today?” Matilda-san asked.

“Yup,” replied Shinobu.

“She’s just an acquaintance,” I answered.

“Gah,” Heath frowned, licking the top scoop of his eight-scoop ice cream. “What’s this green one on top? It tastes like medicine.”

“That one’s mint chocolate, Heath,” said Matilda-san.

“Why does it taste so weird? I wanted to eat ice cream, not lick a cough drop.”

“Aren’t you the one who picked it out?”

“Well, I didn’t know it was going to taste so catastrophically bad.”

“Where did you go when you went abroad?” I broke in.

“This country called America. I went for some observations.”

“Observations? Sightseeing, then?”

“Not quite sightseeing...but yeah, something like that,” Heath continued, pondering how he would conquer his eight-scoop ice cream tower. “I looked it all up on the computer you set up for me. First, I flew to a place called Narita, then I wasn’t really sure where to go, so I flew directly to America just relying on my map.”

I could only imagine how much stress Heath must have caused the staff at Narita Airport with his complete lack of common sense. *I bet he unfolded a big map at the information desk and just said “I want to go to this country.” Nah, not even Heath would go that far. That sounds straight out of a comedy skit.*

“Were you okay with everything? Your passport and stuff, I mean.”

“It was a pain in the neck, but I managed to get in. The Mercator projection on your maps is so annoying, though. I was relying on my map and compass, and I ended up in a country called Greenland or something. Apparently, the world is a globe, so the maps are all warped and twisted.”

“I feel like we’re talking past each other here.”

*It’s possible we’re talking about the same thing, just looking at it from wildly different angles, I guess...*

“Anyway, can someone eat that mint chocolate scoop right at the top? It’s in the way. I can’t get to the bottom ones. This whole thing’s going to melt and fall over.”

“Nobody wants to eat that after you’ve licked it!” said Matilda-san.

“Fiorenza would’ve eaten it for me.”

“What were you making this Fiorenza person *do*, exactly?”

### 3

**W**E EXITED THE FOOD COURT, LEAVING THE ever-mysterious pair of Heath and Matilda-san.

*Come to think of it...* I remembered something I had to do and took Shinobu to an electronics place on the second floor. She picked out something reasonably priced, and I bought it with my credit card. After we left the electronics place, my hands were full with a fairly big UNIKURO bag and another rather large one from the electronics store, and I didn't want the trouble of hauling them around while window shopping.

“Want to head home?” I asked. “We got what we came for.”

“Really? Why don't we catch a movie or something?”

“There's nothing out I want to watch.”

“Fine, okay then. Let's go straight to the love hotel.”

“Did you really think that's how this was going to play out?”

As we spoke, I heard a sudden meowing. I turned around and found a cat behind us. It was white, black, and brown, and it slowly came toward us, purring as it walked.

“What's a cat doing here?”

“Oh my god, it's so cute!” Shinobu ran over.

The tri-colored kitty seemed used to people and didn't try to run. The cat's fur was a bit dirty in places, though, and it wasn't wearing a collar. *Doesn't seem like it belongs to anyone... I guess this stray just wandered into the mall and isn't afraid of people.*

“What's the matter, kitty?! What are you doing in here? Are you lost?”

Shinobu picked up the cat as it meowed and purred at her.

*That thing really is used to people. Looks smart, too.*

*I bet it knows purring like that will get humans to come running with treats.*





“That cat sure seems used to people,” I noted.

“Wah! It’s, like, *sooo* cute! Like, the *cutest*! Like, more friendly than a little dog, even!”

“Smart cat, that one. A feline prodigy.”

“Ah, I know! Mizuki-san, will you take a video for me?!”

The cat showed no signs of struggling as Shinobu held it in her arms and fished her phone from her pocket. I took it when she held it out to me, awkwardly opening up the camera with an unfamiliar interface. I got ready to push the record button once Shinobu and the cat were both in frame.

“You’re going to post this?” I asked.

“I figure I can use it for a video! All right, here goes! Three, two, one, start! ‘Sup guys?! Welcome to Shinobu’s Channel! This is Himekawa Shinobu! I’m out shopping today, and take a look at this! There’s a cat lost in this mall! So, like, I figured I’d take a quick video of it! This little guy’s so used to people!”

In an instant, Shinobu had flipped her switch from insolent high schooler to professional YourTuber, her voice going up around two tones in pitch. After filming for a few minutes, we sat on a nearby bench, Shinobu still holding the cat in her arms as she reviewed the footage.

“All right! This is great stuff!”

“The camerawork is okay?” I asked.

“Perfect! I just need to stick an update on the end of this to stretch it out to ten minutes, but this works for the raw footage! We might even get a million hits!”

“I mean it’s not something you see every day, but no stray cat’s getting a *million* views.”

“Heh heh heh, you YourTuber casuals don’t get it,” she said, clicking her tongue at me. “Cats are super popular content. Videos about taking in rescue



kittens get a million views all the time and, like, tens of millions if the cats are kinda cute. I've only got something like thirty-six thousand subs right now, but if this goes viral, I could get a million! This is the most powerful content there is!"

"It's a *cat*. Stop calling it *content*."

"All right, I'm going to take this kitty home!" Shinobu declared, holding the tri-colored cat in her arms, her eyes glimmering. "I'm going to rescue it and turn it into a housecat! My subs and views are going to go through the roof for sure! I know it! My likeability's going to shoot up, too!"

"You have dubious motives for taking in this cat."

"It's a *business cat*!"

"Those are two words that you should *not* be jamming together."

"But it's a win-win situation! I get tons and tons of ad revenue, and this cat gets pats, a warm, comfy house, and cat food from a super-cute, pretty JK like me! Right, little kitty? You want to come home with me, don'tcha? You're so cute!"

"Meow," the cat replied.

*Well, I guess it's fine so long as both of you are happy.*

"Make sure you look after it. Buy it toys, cat litter, go to the vet—that kind of stuff."

"Of course I will. And I'm going to get *every last second* on video."

*She might actually treat this cat better than your average, inexperienced pet owner, depending on how you look at it.*

As we spoke, I noticed there was quite a commotion from the lower levels. I looked downstairs to see what was happening on the first floor and found it suddenly in an uproar. Customers ran, women screamed, and people rushed into stores with their families in tow. A figure stood in the middle of the wide hallway amid the chaos: a short green man holding a club...

A goblin.

“Huh?! A goblin?!” I exclaimed.

“What?! Really?!” Shinobu peered down beside me, the cat still in her arms. Someone began to speak over the mall’s PA system.

*“Attention, all customers! We have identified a cave-dwelling creature within the mall. Please follow instructions and remain calm as you evacuate the premises.”*

“What’s a goblin doing in here?!” I yelled.

“Whoa?! This is *gold*! Internet *gold*! A cat and a goblin walk into a mall!”

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“Shinobu! Stay where you are!” I shouted as I ran down the escalator.

“Huh?! What are you going to do?!”

“I’m gonna do *something*!”

“Seriously?!”

I reached the bottom of the escalator, catching up with the goblin just as it ran past.

*This must be the one that escaped from the Omori Dungeon. It’s been a while since that happened, though... I figured he was off in the mountains or the woods. Where’s he been hiding all this time?*

“Gob?!” The goblin noticed me and looked to be in complete panic. I imagined him escaping that cramped dungeon and emerging into our bright, wide world... *He still doesn’t know what’s happening. He’s just running around inside the mall in a manic state.*

The goblin was clearly behaving differently to the ones I’d seen inside the Omori Dungeon.

*Maybe this guy is just as scared of us as we are of him.*

The goblin gripped his club for a moment, then quickly looked around in fear, turned on his heels, and ran away.

“Ah! W-wait!” I called, opening up Skillbook as I pursued the goblin. The monster ran straight into a Chinese restaurant just off the main hallway.

“D-damn it!”

*I only came after this thing to get it under control before it attacked anyone! Should I have left it alone instead of provoking it? I'm the worst! If a goblin attacks someone in that cramped restaurant, they'll have nowhere to run!*

I followed the monster inside just as the screams of the customers began.

*Makes sense. I mean, anyone would get scared if they were eating Chinese food, and a goblin suddenly walked in. I'd freak out. Even Carol would freak, I bet.*

The seats were separated from each other by little walls, making the small restaurant's interior look like a maze. The panicked goblin swung his club.

“Gob!”

*Crack!*

The weak wooden board split in two from the brute force of the blow. It didn't seem like the terrified goblin had enough intelligence to consider taking hostages. He panted heavily, trying to intimidate those around him. “Stay away from me” was the message he conveyed with every swing of his club.

*I guess this place is just as weird to him as the dungeon is to us. It's easy to understand his dismay. It's the same kind of panic anyone would feel after being tossed into a dungeon with a bunch of unfamiliar monsters around them. Human? Goblin? Doesn't matter. Everyone reacts like this in unfamiliar situations.*

“C-calm down. Calm down...” I said.

The goblin focused most of his attention on me as I tried to slowly approach and calm him down. I kept Skillbook open in one hand, and my Blaze skill card in

the other.

*Wait. I can't use Blaze in here. This place is too small, and there are terrified customers curled up in fear on either side of me. I don't think the flames would spread that far without any buffs, but I still can't take a flamethrower to this place.*

"Calm down. I'm not going to hurt you," I said. "C'mon... I don't even have any weapons, see?"

"Gob!" The goblin glared at me as I slowly moved to take another card from my binder.

*If area-of-effect skills are no good, then I'll go with Goblin Assault. I'm going to have to grapple this guy.*

I returned Blaze to the binder, placed my finger on Goblin Assault, then moved to gently pull it out. That was when a "*waaah!*" suddenly echoed across the restaurant.

"Gob?!" The goblin jerked its head in the direction of the baby's crying. A trembling family cowered in the corner. The baby's mother was on the verge of tears herself, instinctively protecting her child, holding them tight to her chest.

"Gobh!" The goblin charged toward the crying infant, swinging his club.

*He's confused. They're confused. Heck, I'm confused too!*

"Damn it! Goblin Assault!" I activated my skill card and charged straight at the goblin. I caught him from the side as he leaped toward the family while swinging his club, thrusting into him with a physical-damage-buffed tackle.

"Gobhbh? Ghoo?!"

I caught the goblin on his left flank, and together we crashed into the wall of the Chinese restaurant. The +3 physical damage charge was powerful enough to leave a crack in the wall that looked straight out of a scene from some battle manga. The customers screamed some more. The goblin and I, still tangled up in each other, peeled off the wall and fell to the table below. There were plates

to be cleared away, but thankfully the seats were empty.

We rolled onto the table, smashing the glass cups and dishes that had been left there. I felt dizzy. Fireworks went off in front of my eyes like I'd just been in a car crash.

The goblin recovered from the impact first.

*That's just the difference in pure physical strength between us.*

"Gob!"

The goblin straddled me and brought down its club with one hand.

"Whoa!"

I reacted immediately, my hand catching the goblin's forearm as he swung. I unconsciously parried his attack, and the club went flying across the restaurant.

"Gob gobuhhh!" the goblin cried.

"Gaaaaaaah!" I yelled.

We locked hands, the fight becoming a contest of strength. I had forgotten how much more powerful a goblin was than a chimpanzee, despite Carol having told me. It was more than enough to compete with me, even with my skill buffs. I felt the goblin's rough breathing on my face. I wanted to kick him, but I couldn't get free with the way he'd climbed on top of me.

*I need to escape. I only did a little bit of MMA in college, but I know enough. Bridge, shrimp, single leg cross... But this is a short little goblin we're talking about, not a regular person. Doesn't matter how mixed the martial arts are. None of those techniques are meant to take down goblins.*

The slight differences between goblin and human physique made my head spin.

*Damn it. The duration on Goblin Assault is about to wear off.*

I saw the duration timer counting down in the corner of my eye, and when it was down to a millimeter left, I prepared myself for death. The very next

moment, I heard a ringing in my ears. Something *moved* the goblin that wasn't an attack.

"Gob! Gob gob!"

"Whaaat?!"

The goblin suddenly started excitedly licking my face all over. His foul-smelling drool dripped down, the stink hitting my nose as the sticky liquid made contact with the air.

"Gah?! What's the matter with him?!" I shouted.

"Gob!"

I tried to peel him off me, but the goblin held me down with such strength that I couldn't budge him. The monster was incredibly excited and started to thrust his hips as well, pushing his crotch against me.

"Wh-what the heck?! Stop it! Stop!"

"Mizuki-san! It's me!" Tachibana-san's voice rang out. I somehow managed to look over in her direction as the goblin licked at my neck. She stood from one of the seats in the corner and walked over to me. Apparently, she'd been eating lunch—there was a full-sized meal of Chinese rice, ramen, and gyoza on her table. The portions would put any man to shame.

"I used Induce!" she shouted. "Sexual Arousal! Now's your chance!"

"T-Tachibana-san?! Seriously?! Uhhh... All right!"

I reactivated Skillbook as the goblin licked me and took out my Blaze skill card. I then used Goblin Assault a second time before using Blaze.

*No, wait. First, I should...*

"Hey, Tachibana-san. Can you get everybody out?"

"Ah... Right! Everyone, please get out while you can! It's dangerous in here! Your children really shouldn't be seeing this!"

While Tachibana-san evacuated the restaurant, the sexually aroused goblin

leered at me and licked my face and neck.

I didn't want to remember much more about what happened after that. While the restaurant cleared out, there was plenty more licking, humping, and groping. Once it was safe enough to act, I burned the goblin to ash.

*That's all. I mean, do I really need to explain anything further?*

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"What the heck happened to you?" asked Shinobu, frowning.

"Meow," the cat added.

We sat outside the restaurant on a bench, waiting for the police—and whoever else was going to show up.

"I had to fight to save some people," I said.

"Does fighting to save people always make you so sticky and stinky?"

"Sometimes, yeah."

"That's weird."

"Life's weird. That's just how it is," I said, wiping my face with a towel.

I hadn't suffered much physical damage, only a little pain in my neck and shoulders from crashing into the wall. The mental scars remained with me, though. I thought about Shinobu being assaulted by goblins and Carol almost getting violated by that ogre. I finally understood how they must have felt. *One step closer to a world with gender equality, I guess.*

A flustered Tachibana-san ran over, her hands full of shopping bags. "Mizuki-san, are you okay?!"

"Ah, Tachibana-san... How did it go?"

"Um, they want you to stay here on standby for now. There are a lot of questions they want to ask you about the incident!"

"Gotcha. Oh, and thanks for your help. I never expected to see you there."

I thanked her for helping me out of a tough spot, then my eyes landed on the shopping bags of all different shapes and sizes in her hands. They were partly transparent. I saw a phone, shoes, clothes, and a purse along with some daily necessities. There were other things in there, too: the remnants of a 200,000-yen shopping spree.

“All that yen, eh...” I murmured when I realized.

“W-well, anyway! This doesn’t make us even at all, of course!”

“Nope, it sure doesn’t.”

“Right...”

*We may not be even, but she did help me out. That’s a fact.*

I sighed.

*I ended up using Skillbook in a very public place, didn’t I? I bet every last second of it is on the security cameras. This broken skill is about to make the news. It’s just a matter of time before everyone knows about it. I knew this was going to happen eventually, but I never thought it’d be so sudden. I’m glad it happened today of all days, though. I already know almost everything there is to know about Skillbook, and I’ve got a pipeline to the government in place with Major Himata.*

*The police questioning is going to use up my vacation time, but I should still make it to the last day of training. I won’t care that much if I don’t, though. Once this has all blown over, I need to take this broken skill and try to sell it, probably through Carol or Major Himata. There are more important things on my mind, this incident being one of them. Dungeon-dwelling creatures aren’t supposed to escape dungeons. This is going to make international headlines; I just know it.*

I remembered the words of a certain white dragon.

*“When one end of a bridge falls, those in the middle of it will no doubt make for the other side.”*



“Meow,” cried the cat.

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Two days had passed. I collapsed on my bed, exhausted after finally having made it back to my room at the training base.

“You look tired!” said Kessie, fluttering around in front of my eyes.

“Yeah, I kinda am. I never should’ve left this room.”

I rolled onto my stomach. I had spent the night of the goblin battle answering the cops’ questions, and I was with the police the entirety of the next day as well. I didn’t get home until five. I packed up some of my bags and headed back to the base. Carol and Major Himata came to get me in a rattling JSDF truck.

*That brings us to the present, nine o’ clock at night.*

I had only intended on saving some lives, not committing a crime, so the questioning was light and friendly. That said, the incident was a serious one, and with the Chinese restaurant having been turned into a battlefield with all those people inside, there was a lot of paperwork.

“Ah... Still, I’m glad I’m participating in the rest of the training,” I said.

“Yep, sure glad about that,” agreed Kessie, who had experienced the tumultuous aftermath along with me. After my lengthy detention, I’d arrived home from the police station to find several reporters outside my apartment.

I might have still been at home having my arm twisted by reporters if I didn’t have training as an excuse to get away. It let me escape into the training grounds of a JSDF base, somewhere the media couldn’t squeeze in.

*Oh, and Shinobu ended up keeping that tri-colored cat, by the way.*

“What are we going to do now?” Kessie asked.

“Well... I’m tired, so I’m going to sleep. Tomorrow *is* the last day of training.”

“R-r-r-roger that! Maybe Kessie-chan’ll get some sleep too!”

I remembered something as I was about to drift off. “Ah, wait a second,” I

said. "I bought you a PC at the mall. Sorry, it totally slipped my mind."

"Huh? Seriously?"

"I gave it to Shinobu for safekeeping, though..." I said, reaching over to my wallet on the bedside table. I took out a receipt with a warranty stapled to it, showing it to Kessie. "Here's what I got you."

"Lemme see! Hmm, hmm? Hmm?! Oh, niiice! This is a Bapple laptop! I kinda wanted one of these! Like, specifically one of *these*! I wanted one! It's an eleven-inch, 1.1GHz Dual-core i5 processor, 256GB SSD, 16GB model in cosmic grey!"

"You know way more about tech stuff than I do, huh."

"I'm super happy! I love you, Zukky-san! I love you! I love you! I love you to bits!"

"Glad you like it. It was worth buying, then."

*This little vacation has been outrageous and way too busy, but I am glad Kessie's happy with her PC, at least.*

"Nyah heh! I'm so looking forward to this! I can't wait to get my hands on it!"

"Hey, I've been thinking..."

"What's up?"

"You really don't feel like going back to your old world, do you?"

"What are you saying? Of course that's not true! No matter where I go, home is still home! I might be watching TV and YouTube every day, but I'm still dreaming of the day I can return to the fairy forest, and..." Kessie froze. "And go back to a world with no TV, no YouTube, no games, no phone, and no Zukky-san? To a forest filled with trees, deer, and *nothing else*? D-do I really have to go home?"

"Nah, I don't think so."

It seemed that I was on the same level as TV, YouTube, games, and phones in

Kessie's internal ranking. *I really don't know if I should take that as a compliment.*

"W-well, anyway! Returning to my home world can be a ten-year plan!" she said.

"You really don't have any intention of going back, do you?"

As we chatted, I remembered once more that the last day of the training was near.

*Tomorrow's finally going to mark the end to another step. I'm going to get it over and done with without incident. I'll bring an end to this whole affair and take back my peaceful, everyday life. Then all that's left is a slow life playing games and watching TV with Kessie.*

*A ten-year plan.*

## Chapter 6:

# Sorry, That's All You're Getting for Today!

### 1

IT WAS THE FINAL DAY OF THE COMBINED DUNGEON field test training exercise. Everything proceeded exactly as it had been explained to us in the final meeting. There were JSDF trucks and JSDF members holding rifles all around the training ground's perimeter, ready and on high alert. With each passing moment, the release of the chimera sleeping in the cage in front of us drew closer and closer. Despite all the nervous tension around me, I—Mizuki Ryosuke—stood yawning and swaying on my feet.

"Mizuki-san, you shouldn't be yawning during training..." Tachibana-san said somewhat feebly as she stood beside me.

"You were just yawning yourself. A few yawns in a row, even," I remarked.

"Well, yes, but...I haven't been getting a lot of sleep. Not with all the work regarding that incident the other day."

"You and me both."

"Of course."

We both suppressed a yawn. We were all standing in assigned spots in the square. Tachibana-san and I stood in the front—row A, position three—meaning we would be in the third group to battle the chimera. To be honest, being third was quite a safe place to be, so I wasn't even a little bit nervous. I could yawn as much as I pleased.

*Carol's standing up at the very front, after all, leading the elites of REA. The plan is for them to engage the chimera first by whittling down its HP and applying a number of debuffs to it. REA fights more like a team of special forces than a band of adventurers. They're mainly meant to be an example to the JSDF.*

*They're supposed to demonstrate their tactics in real combat, showing how a top-class adventurer like Carol can lead armed personnel through fighting cave-dwelling creatures.*

*Once REA has weakened the chimera a bit, the front-row position-two team will take over—Kawatani and his dungeon partner, Umayra Bara. Umayra Bara's supposed to show off his combat prowess as an adventurer. He's not using elite firearms like the members of REA. The aim is a practical demonstration on how an ordinary adventurer would deal with a chimera.*

*«Then after that, it's your turn to take the stage at long last, Zukky-san!»*

*«Don't interrupt me, Kessie. But, yeah, you're right. We're third in line, right after Kawatani and Umayra Bara—then it's our turn. Umayra Bara's attacks will have weakened the chimera so much by then that it'll be near death, so there's barely going to be any danger. According to Major Himata, a wild dog would cause more trouble.»*

There were other groups, too. Row B position two and row B position three were stationed behind us. They were JSDF rangers, mainly there to make sure everyone was safe if anything went sideways during combat.

*«As the ultimate, final security measure, we've got the highest-level guy, Major Himata, and the high-level official who created the training golem. They're our last line of defense if anything unexpected happens.»*

*«So, we're up against a real chimera, but we've got safety rails and seatbelts all over the place!»*

*«That's right,»* I said telepathically as Kessie jumped into my thoughts from inside my pocket. The moment I shifted my attention away from our mental conversation, I saw the chimera had been released from its cage.

“Yah!” Carol shouted, striking it with her sword.

There was a flash and a spirited slash as Carol's battle cry echoed about the square. Her blow from above landed squarely upon the chimera, piercing its

physical armor and damaging it, driving the lion's head into the ground. The impact shook the earth like the aftermath of an explosion, and I felt the physical sensation of the blow even from my place in line. The chimera was as bulky as a huge bear, but an armored young girl had just cut it down with a single blow. The crowd's voices went up in amazement at the spectacle.

Carol put some distance between herself and the downed chimera and began to explain her group's formation using her pin microphone. At the same time, the rest of the REA members deployed around the chimera, coordinated so well it was like they were one living organism.

*Ba-ba-ba-bang! Ba-ba-bang!*

The popping of small arms firing filled the air. The guns sounded somewhat odd. We'd been told in the meeting beforehand that they wouldn't be using real bullets, so what we heard was the sound of blanks. There were strict safety measures in place, of course, but live ammunition wouldn't be used when other people were in proximity. Their role was to show how damage could be dealt in a manner that looked like practical combat; the real damage was intended to come from Carol and Umayra Bara.

"Wow... It's like a movie," Tachibana-san said.

"Yeah. Way *better* than it looks in the movies, even," I replied.

"Carol-san is so cool... So why does she drop a hundred IQ points whenever she's around you, Mizuki-san?"

"You tell me."

Once the demonstration was over, the front line pulled back. Members of REA switched out with Kawatani and Umayra Bara from row A position two while Carol kited the chimera around. They were accompanied by the group of JSDF members armed with firearms from row B position two. Apparently, their weapons were loaded with live ammunition for emergencies, though if everything went to plan, they would never have to use them.

After checking that Umayra Bara and Kawatani were in place, Carol disengaged from the chimera. The monster's HP hadn't been completely taken down, but its movements were significantly slower as it turned its gaze on Kawatani and his partner. Even from afar, I could see that Umayra Bara looked calm facing down a real chimera. He once said that his "Japan's Number One Adventurer" image was a fabrication. *But even if he isn't the greatest adventurer in Japan, he's still got real strength.*

⟨*I'm almost up to bat... Gotta get myself mentally ready for this.*⟩

⟨*Oho?*⟩

I heard Kessie's voice in my head. I felt some movement near my pocket and looked down to see the fairy poking her head out to look at me.

⟨*What are you doing, Kessie? Don't let anyone see you.*⟩

⟨*J-just wait one minute, okay? Hmm?*⟩

⟨*What's wrong? Did something happen?*⟩

⟨*No...? Well, sort of. Something stinks.*⟩

⟨*Stinks?*⟩

Kessie swiveled her head about outside my pocket, left to right, searching for something. I glanced at the people around us, but everyone was so focused on Umayra Bara's battle with the chimera that nobody was going to notice Kessie.

⟨*Zukky-san, it smells like mind meddling. Somebody's using Charm skills.*⟩

⟨*What could that mean?*⟩

⟨*I don't know. It doesn't smell powerful enough to directly control someone, but it smells like something's burning, right in the very back. I wonder what it is?*⟩

"Hey, Tachibana-san," I said, switching my brain over to real world conversation.

"What is it?"

“You aren’t using Induce right now, are you?”

“Huh? No, I’m not.”

⟨Zukky-san, Zukky-san!⟩

I flipped my internal switch back to telepathy.

⟨What is it, Kessie?⟩

⟨I really do think something’s up. The smell is getting stronger and stronger.⟩

⟨What’s going on?⟩

⟨I don’t know, exactly... There are tons of these smells. Lots of people have had their minds meddled with. I think they must have had something planted in them, and now they’re all slowly getting activated. No, wait... Maybe they’ve always been active, and it’s just that the smell’s getting stronger.⟩

⟨Can you tell how their minds have been altered?⟩

⟨Hmm...⟩ Kessie groaned, like she was trying to work something out. ⟨I can’t figure out the details. But this smell... I wonder what it is. It’s not anger, sadness, or joy. It’s a special kind of emotion that I can’t place. It’s strong, though. It moves people. Like, it’s got the power to make people accept things blindly. It’s cloudy but pure. It’s straight, but it’s twisted at the root. Like... Ah, I get it now! This feeling... It’s righteousness. Duty.⟩

I looked back at Umayra Bara facing off against the chimera, surrounded by armed personnel.

*Tchak.*

The sound of dozens of firearms raising in unison rang out, and a flurry of muzzles pointed at us from all directions.

“Huh?”

“Eh?”

Tachibana-san and I spoke at the same time. The rangers who were there to keep us safe, standing behind us in row B positions two and three, now pointed



their guns directly at us.

An awful *screeeeech* from some giant speaker echoed across the training grounds, jarring and unpleasant. Then came a voice I knew well.

*“Hello to everyone participating in the training! This is Major Himata calling in from the command room.”*

I listened to the broadcast in a bit of a daze, given all the guns suddenly pointing in my direction.

*“This concludes our training. It’s over. Thank you all for your hard work this past week. Complete control was just handed over to me, so please follow my instructions. Anyone who disobeys will be shot dead. For now, just stay calm and listen.”*

“Put down your guns, all of you!”

A man who looked like a JSDF officer came out of the large tent in which the command room was situated, raising his voice angrily at the JSDF members. Their guns pointed in his direction as he approached.

He firmly scolded their actions. “Do you imbeciles know what you’re doing?! Drop your w—”

*Bang! Bang! Bang!*

Three pops of gunfire echoed.

The officer silently dropped to the ground, unmoving. We didn’t question what was happening right in front of our eyes, but we didn’t understand it either. It was all so sudden, so abrupt... It felt ridiculous, like it was part of some poorly acted melodrama. But there was no doubt that the man had been shot, and he was dead. Nobody present could fully take in the situation or accurately understand what was happening.

*“Hey now, c’mon. I just told you all to stay calm... Anyway, that’s how I’ll shoot you if you don’t obey. Don’t resist, and I won’t shoot anybody. Just wait on standby for now. Is that understood?”*

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The training grounds were under complete control of the dozens of armed JSDF members. After the first officer was killed, a few more tried to object to the JSDF members pointing guns at them. Higher-ranked officers attempting to give orders to their subordinates were shot without warning. It happened in an instant—it was more like a switch being pushed on a controller than a trigger being pulled.

After three people had been executed, nobody else stepped up to oppose the JSDF members. They were held at gunpoint with no idea what was going on, yet they had no choice but to stay where they were and wait.

“Wh-what’s going on?” whispered Tachibana-san, her voice trembling and hoarse. I flicked the switch inside my head and started talking to Kessie.

*«Kessie, what’s the situation here?»*

*«Ah, you see... I think those people with the guns are in some kind of hypnotic state. A Charm skill’s controlling them.»*

*«All these people at once? Is that even possible?»*

*«Hmm... I can’t really tell how this thing works, but I think it’s more of a suggestion that’s leading them in a certain direction rather than complete hypnotic control. Something like that, I think.»*

*«Suggestion... You mean a skill like Tachibana’s Induce?»*

*«Um, I think so. It’s not that they’re under total hypnosis and being ordered to do everything. It’s like these people have thoughts and inclinations, or have been educated or brainwashed ahead of time, and this Induce skill has gotten rid of their doubts and inhibitions. It smells like their sense of justice and duty has gotten stronger. It’s not like they’re doing things they don’t want to do. They’ve wanted to do this all along and have been pushing down their feelings of doubt. I think the mana cost must be low because whoever’s doing this isn’t controlling them directly.»*

‹*What the heck...?*›

As Kessie and I talked, a man emerged from the command tent: Major Himata. He strolled confidently into the completely subdued square, several armed JSDF members trailing behind him. It was clear he was showing us who controlled the situation, and who had brought it about in the first place.

Himata walked to the center of the square with his bodyguards, standing where he could look out over everyone. Umayra Bara had already been forced at gunpoint to return the chimera to its cage. Himata held a megaphone. One of his bodyguards put away his gun, took out a phone, and began recording.

“Ah, hello, hello. Thanks a lot, everybody. Once again, my name is Himata,” he said through the loudspeaker.

“First, this isn’t a coup or anything. I’m not doing this out of self-interest or for some kind of advantage, either. This is a strategic maneuver for the good of the country, one born of pure patriotism. The people pointing guns in your direction are comrades of mine who agree with me. They won’t hurt you if they don’t need to. Don’t worry.”

Himata paused and sighed.

“Right now, Japan is on the verge of destruction. We’re on a slow train to our demise, rolling down a gentle slope. The economy is stagnating, and our neighbors are beating us in growth. Our culture is in decline, and our birthrate continues to decrease as our population ages. The fundamental uncertainty of this nation is causing us to lose our spirit of international competition. We are all aboard a sinking ship, heading for death. To escape this irreversible situation, we must turn to this new, huge sector of the economy: dungeons. Our nation must be the foremost world leader in this new endeavor. We will be sure to take our place next to Australia, Great Britain, and the United States of America as the fourth great hegemonic dungeon power.”

Himata went on.

“But there will be harmful effects. The citizens of Japan have enjoyed peace

for so long that they are terrified of the expansion of governmental authority. That's why our nation's attempts to establish dungeon management systems and research institutions have languished, and we find ourselves falling one or two steps behind the world standard. Our organizations are still incomplete. Suggesting that Japan might lead the world in the dungeon sector is a dream within a dream with our present situation. A single authoritarian ruler must fundamentally improve and remake Japan, like Hitler, who rebuilt Germany when it was on the verge of collapse."

Himata seemed to frequently check what he looked like on camera.

"The deep-rooted will of our people won't be changed by calm, gentle instruction. What we require is an attack. A single, substantial blow—an incident so terrible that it has never even been conceived of before. When people come face-to-face with urgency and danger they will finally wake up and prepare for what must be done."

Himata went on.

"And so, I will now grow this chimera into a boss chimera. And though it breaks my heart to do so, I will release it upon Omori City."

The crowd had been silent as he spoke, but a faint murmur ran through it at those words. Himata seemed happy with the response and continued more fervently than before.

"Faced with the direct danger of monsters invading their cities and the terrible destruction they will wreak, I'm sure people will come to realize what has to be done. Our leaders will understand the need to manage dungeons with a stronger hand and how essential it is for our nation to explore this new frontier with a more robust and practical system in place."

Himata's tone grew more severe as he continued.

"Today is the day we go to war. Not against a foreign enemy but full mobilization against the dungeons beneath our feet!

We go to war for domination and prosperity! We will go down in history as villains for our great crimes, but we will die for Japan. We will become martyrs for this nation. I offer up my life to deal this destructive blow to educate the masses. I know and accept that my grave will remain unmarked.”

It seemed that Himata had said most of what he wanted to say.

“Thank you so much for your attention. I’m currently having one of my teams retrieve a level crystal which is under heavy guard in a nearby location. Please stay where you are a little longer... Right. Done. How was I? You get all that? Let me see the video.”

I looked around as I listened to Himata speak. Carol was nowhere to be seen, and I couldn’t spot anyone else from REA.

*Where are they? Are they hiding, waiting for their chance to strike? Or have they already been...*

My thoughts were interrupted by a man grabbing my shoulder. I turned to find a pistol in my face.

“Mizuki Ryosuke, you’re coming with me.”

## 2

“**Y**EP, YEP, YEP. NICE WORK. GO AHEAD AND SHIP IT over here. Oh, yes. The whole place is completely under my control. Don’t worry about that, Captain. Everything’s proceeding according to plan. Over and out.”

Himata had made himself a base in front of the chimera in the center of the square, sitting on a folding chair and talking over a wireless radio. Several JSDF members stood around him, constantly on guard with their rifles up. I was brought to Himata’s side and forced to kneel, three of them pointing their guns at me.

“What are you going to do?” I asked when Himata was done speaking. “You

gonna execute me?”

Himata looked surprised. “Execute you? Don’t take this to extremes, Mizuki-kun. I’d never kill you. You know that.”

“Then what?”

“That Skillbook you’ve managed to get your hands on is one of Japan’s greatest assets, Mizuki-kun. There’s no doubt in my mind that broken skill of yours is going to be a huge boon to our nation. I should be giving you a medal for your distinguished service. Thank you for holding that skill in your possession for the people of Japan, Mizuki-kun. Don’t worry, I have no intention of mistreating you.”

“Answer the question, Himata,” I said, my voice growing louder. “I asked what you’re going to do with me.”

“First, you’re coming with us. I’d really like you to join us, Mizuki-kun. Once we get out of here, I want to take you home and give you a proper education.”

“Why don’t you cut the crap and just take my skill?”

“No. I can’t do that,” replied Himata, his voice suddenly stern. “I don’t want to take that skill away from you. If that thing is what I think it is...then taking Skillbook away from you would mean losing it entirely. I think it’s likely that things have already reached that stage.”

“Losing it entirely?” I repeated. “What do you mean?”

“Let’s have a long talk about that when we get back. We’re in the middle of an operation right now. Oh, they’re here.”

Himata looked toward a JSDF jeep that had just arrived. It drove straight into the square and pulled up beside us. A young JSDF member in camouflage gear got out and gave Himata something wrapped in cloth, cradling it carefully as he handed it over.

“Well done, Captain. I was right to leave the management facility’s operation in your hands.”

“Thank you, Major!”

The elite officer gave a swift salute, then stepped back. Himata unfolded the cloth to reveal the golden level crystal he had shown me earlier.

“Good. Our plan’s almost complete.”

He took the crystal in hand and walked toward the cage that housed the chimera.

“Wait, Himata,” I called out to him. “Releasing a boss chimera on the city... Are you serious?”

“What part of me doesn’t look serious?” he asked, looking back at me and grinning.

I remembered the boss ogre variant I had fought. What would that ogre have done if it’d made its way into town? A single goblin that strayed into the mall had been more than enough trouble. How many casualties would this chimera cause?

It was then that I realized something.

“That goblin in the mall... *You* were the one who set it loose.”

“Correct,” Himata smiled. “I wanted it to cause more damage, though. It was a set up for this attack. A warning shot, you might say. A series of incidents will scale up the tension and make the problem clearer, no? Same deal with celebrity scandals, drug arrests, that kind of stuff.”

“So, the people who broke into the dungeon... They were working for you.”

“Indeed. But, man, I really did try my best on that one. I never expected you to put that goblin down. I was short on soldiers, which is why I did it on our days off. That was a mistake. But, hey, it’s a small city. Shit happens. Might be that your involvement got us even more eyeballs. After all, people sure do love their heroes.”

Himata laughed loudly, then continued.

“Forget goblins. Boss chimeras are several times stronger than even boss ogres. I’m thinking the JSDF on the ground won’t be able to handle it, and they’ll need to bring in a tactical strike team. Might end up with several thousands dead if that happens.” Himata’s tone was indifferent. “The more sacrifices, the better. This is a revolution, a plan to lift morale. The more powerful the better. The more casualties the better.”

“You’re crazy,” I said, somehow managing to choke out the words. “I know why you’re always laughing now. You don’t want anyone to see that evil blackness inside you. *That’s* why you pretend to be so cheerful. You insane bastard... That’s why you invited me over for hot pot, isn’t it? You were just trying to convince me to join you without using force.”

“No. That’s not true, Mizuki-kun.” Himata finally stopped, turned toward me, and pointed in my direction. “Don’t talk like you’ve got this all figured out. I *am* cheerful and happy. I care for my subordinates, and I won’t hesitate to sacrifice myself for this country. That’s all me. I wanted to bring you around, that much is true, but more than that, that I enjoyed drinking beer and eating hot pot with you. I liked you a lot. All human beings wear masks as they walk through life, but they’re still all aspects of the real us. We’re collective beings, made up of several masks—our real faces. You don’t know that?”

“You’re insane. Don’t play philosopher with me.”

“I didn’t think you were that kind of person. I’m very disappointed in you.”

“You’re not real smart. That’s for sure,” I said, looking straight at Himata. “You plan a huge terrorist attack like this one and then get caught up talking to me right at the last moment?”

I never took my eyes off of him—not for a second. I couldn’t see her, but I knew there was a single swordswoman flying through the air above him.

Himata finally realized something was wrong and looked up. I did the same. A young girl flew toward him like a missile, a two-handed sword in her hands.

It was the captain of REA, Carol Middleton.



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Carol soared in from a distance, attacking from above like a nose-diving plane about to crash. It appeared that she had taken shelter the moment before Himata's control took effect, hiding at a distance this whole time.

The instant that he saw the attack coming, Himata let his body go limp, curling forward and letting both arms droop down between his legs. It was clear he was preparing for something. *Probably some kind of skill to counter Carol with.*

"Kessie!" I shouted.

"Roger that!"

Kessie shot out of my left pants pocket. Fluttering as fast as she could, she went straight for Himata's face. His attention was drawn away by the unexpected fairy ambush.

"Wha—?!"

"Yay! Bullet Kessie-chan's here! Ambush!"

Kessie flew in Himata's eyes as a distraction with the speed of a fighter jet. He was surprised, and his body stiffened a little as his posture faltered. Kessie then flew higher, made a quick spin back, and looked down on us from above.

"Zukky-san! The person on the left is going to shoot!"

"Skillbook!" I yelled.

*Bang!*

I heard the gunshot from the left at almost the exact same time as Skillbook activated. The bullet, which otherwise would have passed straight through me, instead hit Skillbook as it materialized to my left, deflecting it without a sound.

*That was another feature of Skillbook I figured out during training. Once it has materialized, it's capable of blocking all physical attacks.*

*Bang! Bang! Bang!*

More gunshots rang out, but none were directed at me.

“Guh...!”

The JSDF members who had been pointing their guns at me all collapsed to the ground in unison. The rest of REA had provided supporting fire from afar.

Carol Middleton slashed at Himata.

“Yaaaaaaaah!”

She spun like a tornado, coming at Himata with a flurry of blows the moment she landed. Her swordplay was so fast I couldn’t follow it with my eyes.

*Himata must be mincemeat by now. Nobody could survive a series of attacks like that. All right, she did it!*

“Self Hypnosis.”

Before Carol’s two-handed sword could split Himata into two—or rather, eight—pieces, he activated some kind of skill. His long legs and arms moved at speeds so fast I couldn’t follow them. He was so quick it made me dizzy. It looked like he was a lagging video or in some low-budget anime that didn’t have the money for in-between frames.

Himata spun with unnatural speed, firing off spinning kicks into the air. He looked inhuman, like he was pulling off a one-second combo in a fighting game. The slashes and spinning kicks collided. Himata was the first to land a hit on his opponent’s body.

*Crack!*

A terrible sound rang out, like a railgun striking a wrecking ball.

“Gah?! ”

The kick caught Carol from the side as she swung her sword, and she went flying like a ping-pong ball struck by a paddle. She tumbled like an acrobatic gymnast after striking the ground, picking up speed and rapidly trying to get back to her feet.

But Himata was already right there, waiting for her.

“Wh—?!”

Carol’s armor broke apart at that second kick, fragments of it scattering across the ground with a dull *crack*. It was less like watching someone getting kicked in a fight and more like witnessing someone being hit by a direct blow fired from a large caliber anti-materiel rifle. The sound, impact, and shock of it washed over me—I felt it in the air and in the ground as Carol fell. Another to her chest sent her body flying, and she was thrown into the earth as if she’d fallen from a great height. Her new armor had been completely smashed to pieces, and the force of the landing had blown those fragments away. Underneath, I saw the shame-powered sexy swimsuit armor she’d worn during our recent dungeon trip.

*She really was wearing that underneath her regular armor, huh?*

Carol rolled and skidded across the grass, which peeled up behind her. Then, she kicked off the ground and propelled herself forward with another acrobatic spin. She landed some distance from Himata and plunged her sword into the ground, only just managing to stop her own momentum.

“Ghh...!”

Her face twisted in pain as she took up her sword and gripped it tightly once more. The armor around Carol’s torso and waist was completely destroyed, but the knight’s helmet atop her head remained intact, as well as the pieces protecting her arms and legs. The sexy bikini armor underneath the destroyed set was already soaking up her sweat and starting to turn transparent.

*Everything up to her privates is completely exposed, and she’s only covering the parts that really don’t need to be covered. It’s twisted, perverse—like some reverse bunny-girl costume. No, this isn’t the time to be making mental comparisons like these!*

*⟨It really isn’t, you know!⟩*

*Bang! Bang! Bang!*

The gunfire rang out somewhere far across the base. *Probably REA engaging a group of Himata's underlings.*

Himata himself made no further attacks, instead fixing the collar of his military uniform and sighing.

"That was a close one... You would've killed me if I hadn't set that maximum strength Self Hypnosis off in time."

"You're limit-breaking your own brain with Self Hypnosis..." Carol muttered disdainfully, glaring at Himata with her Scale Eyes ability activated. "Then you're using Operant Conditioning to reflexively attack!"

"Correct. Seems my legs went a little crazy as a result," Himata said, walking toward Carol as he spoke. "I'm worried what this is going to feel like once the pain inhibition wears off."

Carol tightened her grip on her sword and prepared to face him. She didn't show it on her face, but the previous two attacks appeared to have dealt her serious damage. Her shoulders heaved up and down, and her arms trembled under the weight of her sword. She continued pouring sweat, turning her now-soaked sexy bikini armor more see-through by the second.

"You used to be stronger than me," Himata said. "Are you sure you haven't been neglecting your training?"

"My next strike's going straight through your throat," Carol answered quietly.

Himata sighed. "Surrender, Carol-kun. Give up peacefully, and I will spare your life. I'm going to need to borrow Mizuki-kun for a while, but I'll give him back to you once this is all over."

"Mizuki is my husband," said Carol, glaring at Himata. "He's mine. I'm not giving him to you. He's not yours to take."

"Well, that's too bad. I wouldn't have been so sure last year, but the difference in our strength is now clear. You sure love hasn't made you weak?"

What's with that lewd outfit you're wearing, anyway?"

"Mizuki's into it," Carol said. "This is for him."

"Right... Well, different strokes for different folks, I suppose. Not for me to judge."

I felt like I was being seriously slandered, but this was no time to worry about my reputation. I was ready to strike, already holding my Blaze and Explosive Nature skill cards between my fingers.

"Carol isn't the only one you're up against here, Himata!" I shouted, trying to throw myself in between the two. "You're the one who should give up! Take one more step, and I'll blast you with Blaze!"

"Huh?" Himata slowly leaned back and twisted to look in my direction. "What's some weakling with no mental defense skills going to do? I'm having a showdown with Carol-kun here. Don't spoil the mood."

His voice was lower than it had been before, and I saw something in his eyes change as he glared at me. For an instant, they seemed to flash a dark red. "Fine... No harm in adding another pawn to the chessboard. Hypnosis."

"Huh?"

There was a ringing sound in my ears, and my consciousness started to fade. I felt like I was sinking silently into a vast hole, submerged in the darkness. The darkness was deep—too deep. I fell as far as I could fall. Trapped in a black bog in the depths, I found myself completely unable to move.

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I silently activated my Explosive Nature and Blaze skill cards, but not of my own free will. My body moved on its own, activating attack skills and firing them at Carol. All I could do was languish in the muddy depths of my own mind and look on, like I was watching a movie.

Once the buff was applied, I fired Blaze at an already injured Carol. A roaring inferno headed straight for her small body, set to roast her whole.

“Gah!”

Carol managed to sidestep the attack. The flames licked at the grass, scorching it and leaving an unpleasant burning smell in the air. I prepared my next Blaze in an instant—again, not of my own volition.

“Mizuki! Stop!”

“Mwah hah hah hah!” guffawed Himata as he watched the scene unfold. “Charm skills can control hearts and minds! They’re the most powerful skills of all! You’ll never defeat me with your close combat skills, Carol-kun!”

“Damn it... Hypnosis?! Mizuki!” Carol cried out, her face in agony as the next Blaze I fired roared toward her.

All I could do was watch from the darkness as my body attacked Carol on its own. I’d completely lost control over my own motions, my consciousness crammed into a place removed from reality. My body had been transformed into an unfeeling puppet. My consciousness was trapped by Himata’s Hypnosis skill, stuck in what seemed like an endless swamp. I was unable to move. No matter what I tried, I couldn’t get free. It felt like some kind of sleep paralysis: the uncomfortable feeling of being conscious but completely unable to move. It was so intense that I felt like I was going to suffocate. I stood there, struggling, unable to do anything except watch as I assaulted Carol again and again and again.

Fresh red blood spurted onto the grass.

“Guaaaaah!”

She had dodged my Blaze attack but was then caught by a bullet by one of Himata’s underlings. Carol cried out in pain as she went rolling across the grass.

“Guhhh!”

It seemed like the bullet had grazed her shoulder. She looked like she was about to collapse but somehow stayed on her feet. The bullets, however, just kept coming.

“Tch!”

“What’s wrong, Carol-kun?” asked Himata. He held his phone in one hand, glancing over at her struggle as if it had nothing to do with him. “Mizuki-kun’s the biggest danger to you now. Shouldn’t you take him out first?”

“Don’t be ridiculous!”

“Oh! That’s the spirit! That really believable speech I just gave is already starting to go viral on social media! Now this is really *blowing up*! Keep on blazing, and I’m going to keep these *fires* blazing! All so we can take back our country, our beautiful Japan! Gah hah hah hah hah hah!”

Himata roared with laughter again, his clear voice carrying through the square. Carol had no time to take aim at him, though, even if he did happen to be on his phone.

*No. She doesn’t even have time to protect herself.*

“Gaaah!”

Carol cried out again as another bullet she couldn’t quite escape nicked her. It was then that my body began to run. Himata, still in full control, ordered me to deal the finishing blow.

*No...! No! No! No! I need to do something!*

I ran, the Blaze skill card in hand, getting in close enough to Carol that I was sure to be able to put her down. She noticed me nearing, but with bullets coming from all directions, she had nowhere to run.

“Damn it!” she cursed, glancing in my direction. Her eyes were wet, and her face glistened with tears.

*Damn it.*

All I could do was watch as *my* body and *my* actions went on, whether I wanted them to or not. This was the most intense sensation of powerlessness that a person could feel.

⟨Zukky-san!⟩

The next moment, a light shone above me as if the skies had ripped open inside my consciousness. Through the tear came a naked woman, dazzling as she descended, bringing light to the darkness. In the muddy, clouded depths of my consciousness, she looked like an angel from heaven. But it wasn't an angel—it was a buck-naked Kessie.

⟨Aaaall right! I'm in! Kessie-chan's a super genius! Kessie-chan's just too good at this telepathic hacking stuff!⟩

Kessie, who had fallen into my captured consciousness, pushed through the waves of bleary mud as she approached. I felt strange. My eyes were seeing the real world, Kessie a superimposed image in my mind.

⟨Oh, come on! What are you getting so muddy for? It was just a little mental attack! Right! All that's left is to pull you out of here! How do I do that, though, I wonder? Aaah?! What do I do?!⟩

Kessie panicked. She was normally palm-sized, but she looked just as big as any other human in the prison of my mind. Her face, her height, her breasts, her thin arms—for the first time since we'd met, we were face-to-face on the same scale. Kessie wrapped her arms around my consciousness, drew her naked body close to me, and tried to pull me out of the bog. But it wasn't going well.

⟨It's no use! Kessie-chan's weak even in the mental world! I'm going to have to wake you up by force!⟩

Kessie made her decision and placed her hands on either side of my face. She pulled her face close to mine, stopping the moment before our lips touched.

⟨Do you think mental kisses count as first kisses?⟩

⟨I dunno.⟩

She pressed her mouth to mine.

Kessie's lips were soft and sensual in a way that made my thoughts melt



away. My mind numbed. I felt something pass from her mouth into mine, passing *through me*, blocking my synapses. She drew her slender frame closer to my consciousness and wrapped her arms around my waist. My brain was paralyzed, free from all reason and the bounds of society. All that remained was pure, primordial instinct.





All I wanted was more—more Kessie. I drew my hands out from the mire of my consciousness. With one hand free, I pulled out the other. But when I reached out to touch her soft body, Kessie drew her lips away from mine. She gently laid her index finger on my lips.

*⟨Sorry, that's all you're getting today!⟩*

\*\*\*

My feet screeched to a halt on the grass as I stopped walking. Kessie had rescued me from the muddy prison of my consciousness. I had control of my body back.

*⟨All right! Rescue successful!⟩*

*⟨You saved me, Kessie!⟩*

*⟨I had to sacrifice my first kiss to wake up those instincts of yours, though, Zukky-san!⟩*

*⟨That doesn't count. It was only in my mind.⟩*

*⟨I've never heard that one before!⟩*

My head felt so clear. It felt as if I'd slept for twenty-four hours straight. A mysterious feeling of power flooded my body. I raised the Blaze and Explosive Nature cards I held toward Carol into the air, then drew another card from my binder as I twisted in Himata's direction.

"Hmm?"

Himata looked up from his phone, suddenly realizing that I was looking at him.

"Hand in Hand Amplify, Explosive Nature, Explosive Nature, Blaze."

$2 \times 2 \times 2 \times 4 = 32.$

*Blast him to hell.*

*Rooooooooaar!*

A great hellfire instantly exploded with the force of ten huge flamethrowers combined, completely consuming an area of several meters around the place Himata stood. He hadn't realized that the hypnosis spell had been broken and couldn't dodge the attack in time. He'd had no choice but to take it head-on.

"Gaaaaaaaaaaaaah?!"

Himata screeched as he escaped the flames and rolled on the grass. His military uniform was now black and charred, and sparks stuck to his clothes from the blaze. His short, neatly cut hair was torched, and his skin looked painfully red from the serious burns that covered his body.

"Aaagh! Gaaah! Fuck! You bastaaaard!"

Himata glared at me, his face bright red and inflamed as he roared with rage.

"Miiiiiiizuuuuki-kuuuuuuuuun! I did so much for youuuuuu! How could you burn me like thiiiiis?!"

With Himata's terrifying cries of resentment in my ears, I quickly returned my cards to their binder and loaded up my next round of skills.

*I need to get him with another Blaze. But am I going to be able to do it? It won't be a surprise attack this time.*

Kessie's voice echoed in my head.

‹Kessie-chan here with a special report! Good news!›

‹What is it, Kessie?!›

‹That attack just now disabled the Charm skill that was cast on everyone! All the hypnosis spells have been lifted!›

‹Seriously?!›

‹Oho! The dominoes are falling! What a magnificent sight! And almost all thanks to Kessie-chan, no less!›

I looked around and saw that all the JSDF members who'd had their guns pointed at me had frozen. They began to twitch and shake after a few moments

of lag, one after another. Then, they came to their senses one by one, like students waking up after falling asleep in class. They looked around as if they had no real idea what they'd been doing this entire time. Once Himata realized that his hypnosis had worn off, he glared, his face twitching even more.

“Tch! Fuck! What’s happening? Damn it! Damn *you!*”

I tried to work out the timing for my attack as he panicked.

*Now? No. If I miss, I won’t have time to reload for a second shot.*

I felt someone charge up behind me. It was Carol.

“Are you okay, Carol?!”

“I’m fine. I didn’t take any direct hits!” she said. She stood by my side, holding her stomach and shoulder where the bullets had grazed her. “More importantly, how did you dispel his hypnosis?!”

“Kessie helped me do it!” I said.

“How?!”

“Well, she hugged me and kissed me, then... Ah, never mind.”

“She *hugged* and *kissed* you?! What the heck?!”

“I’ll explain later!” I turned my attention back to Himata and found him slowly walking in our direction.

“I’m going to choke you two to death! So what if my hypnosis is gone?! What can the two of you do to stop me?! You think you can defeat *meeeeee*?!”

*Nope, I don’t. I don’t think that at all, Mr. Himata.*

The raw hatred exuding from Himata as he approached us was so terrifying, even my internal dialogue turned polite and deferential.

⟨*Well, at least I’ve dealt him some damage, but now...*⟩

⟨*It’s like we caught a tiger by the tail, eh?!*⟩

*Yep. In other words, we’ve pissed him off. My attack knocked out his*

*gentlemanly facade and exposed the real monster underneath as he burned up... I think I might have been better off leaving him as he was. I wish he could've stayed the old Himata, smiling and happy.*

*This is bad. He's definitely going to kill me without a second thought. Well, I guess I was the one who ruined any chance of negotiating with him, so there's nothing to do but fight. His reflexes are so insanely good, though. He got the upper hand and countered Carol, even when she took him by surprise. Combine that with his hypnosis skill and incredible combat strength... I don't think a little broken skill or two is really going to be enough to take him down when I face him head-on.*

"Carol, what do we do?" I asked.

"I'm thinking," she said.

"You think we can beat him?"

"Honestly? No, I don't."

*Of course not... I thought the same thing.*

*«I've got Phase and Disable, but at the speed he's capable of moving, I know he'd just kill me while I prepare it. Kessie, you got any brilliant ideas?»*

*«Nope, nothing at all! Maybe this is one of those fights where we have to lose to keep playing?»*

*«Figures.»*

"I'm going to rip out your eyes and shove them up your assholes... Damn you two!" Himata's whole body trembled with rage, and the angry smoke rising from him was no metaphor. His spine curved forward and he let both his hands hang limply between his legs.

*Those are the movements I saw earlier. He's getting ready to use Self Hypnosis. This isn't good. If he attacks me with that speed, I'll be cut to pieces.*

"Here he comes, Mizuki!" Carol cried.

“What do we do?!”

“Just shoot or something!”

“Ah, damn it! Fine!”

A female voice suddenly rang out across the chaotic square as Carol and I shouted at each other. “Carol-san!” It was Tachibana-san, running toward us from the crowd.

“Tachibana?”

“Huh? Tachibana-kun?”

Neither Carol nor Himata could help but exclaim this in confusion. Tachibana-san stopped once she got through the crowd.

“Carol-san! Look into my eyes! Induce!” she screamed at the top of her lungs.

Tachibana-san activated her skill, and I heard that familiar ringing in my ears. Himata stood up straight when he heard the sound, realizing what it meant.

“A Charm skill? You use the same skills as I do?!” Himata immediately raised one hand and used it to cover both of his eyes. “Tch! They just keep coming! But nobody can compete with my hypnosis! I’ll never lose in a duel of Charm skills! Mental Block!”

Himata seemed to think he was being attacked by some kind of Charm skill and used a skill of his own to counter it. Tachibana-san’s target wasn’t the big boss, Himata, though. Her Induce skill had been aimed at Carol.

“Huh? Me?” Carol pointed at herself when she realized she’d been targeted.

“That was Induce: Shame!” Tachibana-san shouted, her voice hoarse. “I’ve made you feel shame, Carol-san! That armor gets more powerful the more embarrassed you are, doesn’t it?! Right?! I’m so sorry if I’m wrong—”

“Huh? Shame?”

“What? Shame?”

Carol and Himata spoke in unison. Neither of them seemed to understand the



wild action that Tachibana-san had just taken. *Not that I understand it any better than they do, of course.*

“What was she thinking...?” I asked Carol.

It was then that I noticed the change that had come over her. Her fair complexion had turned strawberry red.

“Oh...?”

A little gasp escaped Carol as she looked down at what she wore: obscene, perverted bikini armor. With her outer armor broken, all that was left was a string bikini set that only covered her nipples and crotch. The thong rode up into her butt, leaving it fully exposed, along with her stomach, back, underarms, and chest.

Then there was the fact that Carol’s lewd armor had soaked up her sweat and was almost completely see-through already. It seemed that she had finally come to the realization that her clothes were incredibly depraved.

“I-I’m so embarrassed,” she whispered, trembling as she turned an even brighter shade of red.

“Huh?! *Now* you’re embarrassed?!” I exclaimed.

“Mizuki, what do I do?! I’m so ashamed that I could die! I want to die! I want to die right now!”

“Carol?! Calm down!”

“What’s with this perverted stuff?! In what world do people actually *wear* these degenerate clothes?! I’m embarrassed to be wearing it! I’d rather be naked! Why am I fighting in this perverted cosplay armor?!”

“You’re the one who’s been wearing it every day!” I shouted.

Carol blushed even more. And the more deeply her shame appeared on her face, the more brightly those mysterious rays of light shone around her see-through suit of perverted armor.

*Ah, right. That perverted armor of hers gives her buffs as she feels more shame... It's just like she told me. That's no ordinary suit of perverted armor!*

*⟨It's a practical suit of perverted armor, too!⟩*

*⟨There are way too few situations where that thing's practical!⟩*

“Whoooooa! Wh-what do I do?! Nobody will marry me now! I can't fight in this super porny getup!” Carol trembled and shook, redder than ever as she tried to cover her body with her arms. “D-don't look! Th-this isn't what it looks like! Mizuki's into this kind of stuff! I didn't *choose* to wear this, you know?! Don't get the wrong idea!”

“What the heck are you talking about?!” screamed Himata in confusion.

“Huh?! So that really is what you're into then, Mizuki-san?!” cried Tachibana-san in shock.

“Of course it's not!” I yelled. “And that's not important right now, anyway!”

“I don't really get what's happening, but are you good? Can I kill you now?” Himata asked.

“W-wait! Himata, wait!” Carol exclaimed. “Just let me change, will you? Okay?!”

“No way am I waiting!” he yelled. “Gaah!!”

Himata grew impatient and charged at Carol with incredible speed.

“Whoa! Carol, he's coming!” I warned.

“Wah! I told him to wait!”

“I don't know what you're playing at, but take *this*, Carol Middleton!” Himata roared.

“Wh-whooooa! Waaaaah! Just die, Himata!”

Among all the confusion, the second part of the battle kicked off.

*But, hey...not even Himata seems to understand what's happening right now.*

*Figures. He just found out the strongest adventurer in Britain, the beautiful young girl with golden hair, wears sexy armor underneath her regular armor set. Not only that, but her sweat is turning it transparent, and the shame is buffing her strength due to the armor's special bonuses. Add to that the fact that Tachibana-san's mental manipulation is letting her use it to its full strength. Only a truly perverted individual would be able to understand this situation. It's all just too weird.*

*Himata's crazy, sure, but I don't think he's a degenerate. This is a battle between a crazy man and a pervert.*

A crazed man who continued to hypnotize himself and those around him, and a pervert who gained strength by exposing her naked body to the crowd launched themselves at each other at explosive speed before sword clashed against kick. The death match was so fast, it couldn't be perceived by the human eye. All I could see was the light from Carol's sword as it swung up at her enemy. Something flew away from Himata after the slash.

It was a human arm.

"Gyaaaah!" Himata let out an awful wail as Carol's sword severed his right arm.

"Yaaaaah!"

Not letting up, Carol kicked him mercilessly as he writhed in agony. The shame buffed the speed and power of her front kick so much that it sent Himata's huge body flying like a pinball.

"Aaaaagh!" He rolled across the grass with a moan. Just as he tried to jump back to his feet, he found Carol's two-handed sword pressed against his neck. "Ghh...!"

"Don't move, Himata," she spat, her face bright red. "One twitch, and I'll sever your head. Move a single muscle, and I'll kill you."

"How are you so fast?" asked Himata, looking up at Carol with anguished

eyes, pressing down where his right arm once was. “You’re so much faster now... What happened?!”

“I told you not to look at me!” Carol cried.

“Guh?!”

A violent but justified knee caught Himata in the face. Carol then put her foot on his neck and her sword back to his throat.

“Mizuki! Come here!” she called. Looking over at me only made her blush more. “On second thought, no, don’t come over here! Walk backward!”

“There’s no time for that!” I argued.

“Just do it! Look at me any longer and I’ll take *your* arm next, you hear me?!”

“You’re being ridiculous! *You’re* the one who put that thing on!”

I hurried to Carol’s side, but when I arrived, I heard Kessie screaming at me as she soared down from above.

“Zukky-san, wait! He’s still using Hypnosis!”

“What?! On who?!”

“I don’t know! But someone’s g—”

*Bang!*

A gunshot rang out from behind me.

In that instant, Carol fell back like she’d been punched in the head, and I watched as her neck and back collided with the ground. I didn’t know what just happened. I turned around to see the JSDF member who had handed Himata the level crystal running toward me, gun in hand. The next moment, he seemed to jump back to reality, his expression returning to normal.

“Huh? Eh?”

“Carol!” I ran to her at full speed and clutched her body in my arms.

“Agh...!” She moaned, her face twisting in pain from the gunshot. By her side

lay her helmet, crumpled from the bullet that had collided with it.

“H-hey?! Are you okay?!”

“I-I’m fine! My helmet deflected the bullet! More importantly...where’s Himata?!”

With a gasp, I tore my eyes from Carol and looked to the cage where the chimera was held. Himata stood there, holding the golden crystal in his hands.

“Good grief,” he murmured, looking completely exhausted. “God knows what’s happening here, but it’s time to retreat... Main objective accomplished. That’ll have to be enough.”

“Wait!” I exclaimed.

“See you soon, Mizuki-kun. I’ll make sure to kill you next time.”

Himata stuck his hand into the cage and pushed the crystal into the chimera. The cage exploded with light.

### 3

**B**RIGHT ARROWS OF LIGHT BURST FROM THE CENTER of the cage.

That wasn’t a metaphor for how bright the light happened to be. It was a very real, very powerful flash. The explosion of light was like looking directly at the sun, the twisted rays burning my retinas. I reflexively held up my hand as the force of the blast threw me to the ground. The moment after I lost my vision and fell back, a great rumbling sound reverberated through the air around me. It felt like the earth was splitting open. I closed my eyes, scared my eardrums might burst.

⟨Zukky-san?! Are you okay?!⟩

Kessie’s voice echoed in my head, but I couldn’t even open my eyes let alone answer her. Suddenly, someone grabbed my arm, pulling me back at a terrifying

speed. I was dragged along the ground with such force I thought my body would be scraped raw. I was then thrown sideways into a roll.

“Mizuki... Mizuki! Get a hold of yourself!”

“Ah? Aaah?! Carol?!” I managed, still completely off balance.

My vision clouded as if I’d just been looking directly at the sun. I couldn’t see anything at all.

*Slap! Slap! Slap!*

As I floundered in the darkness, I received several slaps on the cheek.

*Slap! Slap! Slap!*

The first flurry had been restrained, but the next few were more like a beating.

“Aghh?!”

My eyes were forced open amid the chaos of the battlefield. The first thing I saw was Carol’s face right in front of mine: her pale skin and flawless features. Her double eyelids were opened wide, scanning me with Scale Eyes.

“All right! No abnormalities or external injuries!” she barked at me once the scan was done. She pulled me to my feet and led me behind a large, rugged JSDF truck parked behind the standby line. It seemed I’d been blown across the square, and Carol had dragged me even further.

“What happened?!” I asked.

“Look for yourself!”

At her insistence, I peeked out from behind the JSDF truck toward the center of the square. The earth around us was breaking apart into large fissures. The grass was patchy in places, exposing the dirt underneath. Smoke rose from the center of what had been a mock battlefield mere minutes ago. I couldn’t see it clearly, but a blurry shadow loomed inside the smoke. It was incredibly large—as tall as a house. And from its shape, the shadow seemed to be alive.

“Damn it. He’s got us now,” muttered Carol, poking her head around to look too. “He’s gone and used a crystal on that thing... It’s a boss chimera. Not to mention, it looks like a variant!”

“What was that explosion just now?” I asked. “Was that one of the chimera’s attacks?”

“No, it wasn’t. That implosion was a result of the rapid transformation that completely ignored the rules of physics.”

The drifting smoke gradually began to clear as we watched and waited behind the truck. What appeared before us was a tremendous mass of well-developed brawn and muscle.

There was a lion’s head with a dark mane of fur and wide-open, bloodshot eyes. There was also a goat’s head, baring grotesquely protruding teeth. Last was a snake’s head with a mouth so wide it looked like it could swallow a human whole. The three-headed beast had rapidly grown not just two but a full five times its previous size. It stood there like a statue, unmoving inside the dispersing smoke. Then, its snake head lowered to the ground as if it were tired.

As hideous as the huge chimera was in appearance, all it did was sit there comically, like a dog that had been told to wait for treats. It sat heavily on the ground with its mouths open, drooling and motionless.

“Hey, it’s not moving. What’s the deal?” I asked Carol, looking out hesitantly from behind the truck.

“It’s confused. You’d be confused too if you suddenly found yourself five times bigger than you used to be.”

“Well, I suppose so, yeah.”

Carol’s pupils turned into snake eyes again, and she scanned the chimera with her Scale Eyes skill.

*Where’s Himata? Where’s Tachibana-san?* I looked around but couldn’t find Himata anywhere. *I don’t know where he’s run off to, but he must be hiding*

somewhere.

I swept the chaotic square again. The regular training participants were in complete panic, some running aimlessly, some sinking to their knees in terror, and others rooted to the spot. Everyone reacted differently to the extreme situation. Some were in an idle state of confusion but were able to reach out to those around them on the ground, helping them up. Others sought out officers to give them orders, scanning the people running past for anyone of a higher rank.

I couldn't see Tachibana-san anywhere. *Where the heck is she? Is she okay?*

"Tch." Carol clicked her tongue. "This isn't good, Mizuki. We might not be able to deal with that thing anymore."

"What do you mean?"

Carol dispelled her Scale Eyes and turned to look at me. "That's no standard boss chimera. It's evolved in an unusual way."

"How bad is it?"

"Its base stats aren't that different from a regular boss chimera, but its resistances are abnormal. It's probably due to that attack I dealt to it before it evolved. It understands it's in a dangerous spot and has evolved to deal with the situation. Its physical armor is incredibly high. So are all its other armor values," Carol explained.

"Meaning...?"

"We aren't going to be damaging that thing with the weapons we have. We've got no way to beat it."

"What?"

For a moment, we locked eyes.

A low, heavy thump resounded in the bottom of my stomach as I looked to the square. The boss chimera, taller than a house, had finally begun to move. It lifted its giant feet—which looked like they could easily stomp a person to



death—and raised each of its three heads, pointing them in different directions. I felt like I was watching an SFX-heavy section of a monster movie.

“Himata can wait. We need to hold that thing off until the evacuation is complete.”

“Hold it off *how*? You said no attacks will make it through, right?”

“There’ll be enough time to think about it when we’re in combat. I’m moving out.”

“You just got shot. And Himata dealt you some damage, too, didn’t he?”

“Don’t worry about me. I’ve had a little time to recover, and the embarrassment has blown all of that away. I feel refreshed.”

“You aren’t embarrassed anymore?”

“Seems like the duration ran out. I feel like I normally do.”

*Recovering from damage is fine, but to be honest, I wanted the shame to stick around.*

“All right. What can I do to help?”

“Back me up. I’ll handle the chimera.”

I opened Skillbook and looked down at the available cards. *Use what? Back you up* how?

“Mizuki! I’m moving out!”

“Right, fine! Kessie, you coming?!”

“Yep! Roger that!”

## Chapter 7:

# I, Tachibana Maki, Am the Japanese Government!

### 1

SOME PEOPLE RAN. OTHERS STOOD FROZEN. MORE tried to escape the training grounds. Carol, carrying her two-handed sword, walked briskly toward the center. In her snake-eyed sight was a huge boss chimera straight out of a kaiju movie.

*Just how big is that thing?! It's taller than a two-story house... Five, six meters? Maybe more?*

"Mizuki! Buff me!" Carol ordered.

"R-right! I got you!"

I followed behind Carol, turning Skillbook's pages. I had memorized the positions and types of cards in my binder in preparation for the day's combat training.

***BLAZE: deal 4 points fire damage to target. Damage over time: 3 (burning).***

***GOBLIN ASSAULT: for 1 turn, all your melee range physical attacks deal +3 additional damage.***

***EXPLOSIVE NATURE: for 2 turns, double the power of all fire magic.***

***HAND IN HAND AMPLIFY: for 2 turns, all buff effects applied to you are doubled.***

***PHASE: for 1 turn, you are immune to all physical damage.***

***DISABLE: for 1 turn, block the effect of one of a target's skills/magic.***

*Then there's Chip Damage. All these skills have different numbers of uses left, but all I remember is that Blaze has six remaining.*

"Hey, Carol!"

"What?!" she screamed, without turning back to look at me.

Himata's terrorism, along with the sudden appearance of a boss chimera, threw the training grounds into complete chaos. It was the kind of catastrophe you only saw in a disaster movie or news footage. People ran wildly wherever I looked, screaming and frenzied. It wasn't just screaming, though. JSDF officers barked orders, and I could hear others trying to form units to fight the chimera. The many different shouts almost drowned each other out, only adding to the sense of panic. The quietest one on the training grounds was the huge, slow-moving boss chimera that was sleepily waking from its rapid evolution.

"Can't I just use Skillbook to hit it with some insanely powerful Blaze?!" I shouted. Carol stopped and looked at me.

*I managed to power Blaze up to 144 damage during training with my glitched skills. Wouldn't that be enough to blow away even a boss chimera?*

"It wouldn't be enough. That boss chimera has 1,000 points of armor against magic attacks."

"Huh? I'm sorry. *How* many points?"

"It has 1,000. It's got 50 HP, too, so you'd need to deal 1,050 damage in one hit for your idea to work."

*A whole 1,000 points? Wasn't the previous record for the highest damage attack in the world 87? That's a whole two extra zeros to deal with. Is that even fair?*

"It shouldn't be possible, even with all of your buffs, Mizuki. Even if it were possible in theory, activating all those skills within the time limit... I don't think that would be physically possible, would it?"

I caught up to Carol and reflexively covered my mouth with my hand.

*To use the Skillbook stacking bug, I need to reload a skill I've already activated once, put it back into the binder, and pull it out again. The procedure's a pain. If only there was an easier way to activate these skills... I mean, this is already a glitch, so I can hardly complain. The most powerful combo I could manage right now would be using Hand in Hand Amplify first to buff Explosive Nature, which is another buff that doubles the power of my Blaze skill. That increases the power by  $(\times 2) \times (\times 2)$ .*

*Blaze deals 4 damage, so that comes out to  $(\times 4) \times 4 = 16$  damage. Then, using the stacking bug, Skillbook can multiply and multiply, increasing the damage.*

I glanced down at the Hand in Hand Amplify card in my binder—there were seven uses left. I looked at Explosive Nature, the skill to double the power of Blaze—that had six uses left.

*Even if I tried to deal the maximum amount of damage, the duration of these skills is just two turns, meaning I'd need to reload and fire off my skills sixteen times in twenty seconds, then cast Blaze. It's not physically impossible, but it's also fairly unrealistic to try to pull off. My head's spinning, so I can't do an accurate calculation... Even at max damage, I don't think Skillbook is going to be able to top 1,000 points of damage with its multiplication. Maybe 800. Maybe.*

〈Skillbook can pull off 864 points, Zukky-san!〉

〈You did that in your head, Kessie? You're amazing. You can do anything, huh?〉

〈You're too kind!〉

"You get it now, right? You can't defeat that chimera, Mizuki, not even with your Skillbook. I...I have to be the one to stop it," said Carol.

"But...your injuries. Are you sure that you're okay?"

"It hurts, but I can move. I'll be fine."

With that, Carol charged. She seemed intent on drawing the chimera away, bearing the brunt of its attacks to prevent anyone nearby from becoming a

victim to its rage. I turned to look at the other members of REA, who started deploying to support her.

*Seems like they've finally made their way over here now that the hypnosis on Himata's underlings has worn off.*

I took a few steps back, watching the battle unfold.

*If Skillbook's huge damage attacks aren't capable of getting through to that thing, there's nothing more for me to do here. If all I'd end up doing in combat is getting in the way, then the best I can do is to stay here and watch. I'll be ready to jump in at a moment's notice if things get really desperate for REA...*

Unfortunately, there was no time for me to sit back and leisurely watch the battle unfold. The chimera's lion head opened its huge mouth, a red, spark-like energy gathering inside of it.

*Huh? Where have I seen that before? Wasn't it...? Ah, that's right.*









Kawatani and Umayra Bara inside. *I'm still a city hall employee, though, she thought to herself before following them.*

Inside the command room, she found Kawatani, Umayra Bara, and a group of JSDF officers.

"What do we do?!"

"What's the status of the evacuation?!"

"I can't get in contact with Charlie!"

Tachibana just stood and watched as they flailed in confusion.

*What's going to happen? What are they going to do about the situation? Is there anything they can do? It's not like I can just jump in and ask, though. I don't think there's anything I can do to help, anyway.*

"The armored divisions! One of the tanks is still operational!" shouted one of the younger officers.

"Connect me!"

The officer who looked to be highest in rank picked up a wireless radio and began talking to the armored division. There was a click, some static, white noise, and finally a tank operator could be heard on the other end.

*"Delta, reporting. One tank ready for deployment. Orders to engage? Over."*

"This is command. Stand by. Don't move until our order. Over."

*"Delta, reporting. Citizens in combat with dungeon creature. Visual confirmation. Wish to provide support. Orders to engage? Over."*

"This is command. Stand by! Understood?! Over!"

Once the commanding officer cut the line, the others turned to him.

"Major General, we should order the armored division to assist."

"Two civilians are engaging the target. If our tank unit moves in, it could give them a chance to escape."

The major general fell silent at the other officers' suggestions. He seemed awfully torn, though Tachibana didn't know what mental calculations he was running. His eyes shifted around the room. Finally, he noticed that Tachibana and Kawatani were present.

"You two. You're the cave management officials from Omori City?"

Tachibana nodded. Kawatani nodded silently, holding his breath.

"I want to ask you something about the government's opinion on this. Our armored division... Should we send in the tank?"

"Do we have any other choice?" asked Tachibana.

"Do not to engage!" said Kawatani.

Kawatani and Tachibana looked at each other, realizing they'd just expressed the exact opposite opinions. Kawatani stared at her in shock for a moment before turning back to the major general.

"Major General, the tank shouldn't be ordered to engage. Carol Middleton and Mizuki Ryosuke are currently in combat with the chimera, as are the members of REA. They are not citizens. They are *adventurers*. This fight is why they are *here*. Middleton is British, no less. If the tank misses the chimera and kills her, we'll have an international incident on our hands."

"There's no time for this!" Tachibana screamed despite herself. "Major General, order the tank to move in and support them! This is urgent! Our help might not make it in time if we delay for even a few more seconds!"

"Major General!" Kawatani screamed. "I'm presenting my opinion here as a representative of the government! Large numbers of JSDF personnel and civilians remain in the square. Firing a tank's weapons out there could catch those civilians up in the blast! Order the tank back around to the main entrance of the base, and we'll use it as our last line of defense to prevent the chimera from escaping!"

"Major General!" Tachibana screamed as well, not to be outdone. "This isn't

the time for that! They're out there fighting *right now*! We should give them all the firepower, all support we have! If they're killed, everyone in the square will be dead anyway!"

"Tachibana!" roared Kawatani, grabbing the collar of her shirt. "You bitch! Don't get so full of yourself! Who's going to take responsibility when a stray shell from that tank kills a civilian, or Middleton?! It'd all be over! I'd be done for! You'd be done for! The major general, too! Keeping the tank on standby is the safest option! We aren't making it do anything. Order it to the main entrance to defend! Everyone will agree with that. Nobody's going to blame us for it, either!"

"What do you mean, 'everyone will agree'?! " Tachibana shouted back, Kawatani still gripping her by the collar. "Who's looking to agree with you here?! Enough with the jokes! Hurry up and deploy that tank!"

"Shut up! You little—"

Enraged, Kawatani raised his right hand and balled it into a fist.

The moment she saw he was readying a punch, she shrank back. Expecting the man to turn violent, her throat closed up. Fear caused the innately fragile Tachibana's internal hyperventilation regulating machine to crack into pieces, like a hammer taken to a glass cup.

She raised both hands to protect herself and started hyperventilating. "Haah! Haah! Hyaah!" Tears came to her eyes, and her breathing became noticeably uneven. She was in complete and total surrender.

"Shut the hell up!" Kawatani yelled. "Shut your mouth forever! Those guys taking a liking to you made you too big for your damn boots! You uneducated moron! You good-for-nothing bitch! What were *you* thinking, speaking up against *me*?!"

"Hyah! Haah! Ha-haaah!"

Tachibana panicked, trying desperately to somehow regain control of her

breathing. She wasn't in full panic mode just yet. Her long years of experience with the condition made her acutely aware of it.

*I need to get a hold of myself. I should be good at this. It's my specialty. I need to say something back to him. I need to save Carol and Mizuki. I need to do something to break out of this situation! There's something I can do! I need to do it!*

"You get it now, huh?! Don't ever come at me again! The tank remains on standby. All things considered, that's the best course of action!"

"Haah! Hhnh! Nhhhhhhh! Aaaah!"

*Crack.*

Tachibana suddenly thrust upward, her clenched fist knocking Kawatani in the jaw. The uppercut powered by her blessed physical proportions was powerful enough to send Kawatani flying into the air for a brief moment.

It was an extremely rare fight-or-flight response. Her incredibly high Charm allowed her to unconsciously activate an ability similar to Himata's Self Hypnosis and partially unlocked the limits of her mind.

"Argh?!"

Kawatani, hit with an uppercut that would've put any professional martial artist to shame, fell backward and passed out.

"Haah! Haah! Haah! I-I've done it! I've finally done it! Me!"

Tachibana looked around her in excitement. She was thrilled not only at her uppercut but also at having knocked out a grown man for the first time, and in a single blow, no less. It was only then that she realized that the major general she'd been trying to convince as well as all the other officers—and even Umayra Bara—looked completely appalled by the offense she'd just committed. Confusion and fear flashed in their eyes as they watched at her.

*I've really done it now, she thought, feeling refreshed and free. Well, fine. I'll need to see this through, then.*

“Th-the tank! Major General, give the order for the tank to engage!” she ordered.

“Huh?! N-no! Why would I listen to someone who uses violence in an argument?!”

“I’m telling you to order the damn tank to engage! Graaah!” Tachibana Maki, for the first time in her life, screamed in unbound rage. “From this moment forth, I, Tachibana Maki, *am* the Japanese government! The prime minister! The girlboss! I don’t care what you call me, just send in the tank, you worthless major general!”

“N-n-no!” the major general cried. “Someone restrain this woman!”

“You think I’ll let you?! If you won’t obey me, I’ll just have to make you obey me! Induce: Obedience! Do what I say! You’ve no right to refuse! I’m temporarily suspending your human rights! Deploy the tank immediately! Full firepower support! Target that boss chimera! Let’s support Carol-san and Mizuki-san with everything we’ve got!”

## 2

**T**HE TORRENT OF FLAMES RAN OVER MY BODY, swallowing me whole.

*I hear candle flames can get as hot as 700 to 1,000 degrees Celsius. How hot is this blue and red inferno, then?*

In any case, the fire breath completely blew me—and everything around me—away.

“Nhaah! Haah!” I panted as I rolled backward.

My sight still wasn’t back to normal. It was like I was looking through the lens of a shaky camera rolling through the grass. The grass itself was burning, embers scattering all over the place. I turned around and saw the flames stretched out some distance behind me.

I'd been standing with Carol on the front lines, but there were still some JSDF members and civilians behind us, either planning a counterattack or still escaping, caught up in the blaze. They panicked when they saw the fire clinging to their arms and legs, and had others nearby put out the fires with their skills. The JSDF members who'd been completely bathed in fire writhed as they were showered with water skills. I looked down at the skill card in my hands.

## **PHASE**

***For one turn, you are immune to all physical damage... This is a special effect skill card.***

"That was a close one!"

Kessie's earsplitting voice came from my pants pocket.

"I thought I was going to die! I was 0.1 second away from being roasted fairy!"

"You're okay then, Kessie?!"

"Only because you activated that skill the moment before the attack hit! It seems like I was in range of your protection!"

"Great! I was worried it might only protect me!"

"Anyway, in terms of Skillbook, it seems like I'm considered a piece of your gear! Like I'm counted as a part of you!"

"That can wait! For now, you're safe!" I screamed, getting to my feet. My body was still semitransparent from the Phase effect.

*I'm only still here because I managed to pull out Phase and activate it in time. Seriously, if it had been a millisecond later, I'd have burned to death. So that attack just now was considered physical damage!*

"Mizuki!"

I heard a high-pitched voice call my name and saw Carol standing at the chimera's feet, looking my way.

"I'm okay!" I shouted back.

Carol smiled at me, relief momentarily flashing across her face. But then...

"Wait, wait, wait!" I screamed. "Look out!"

I tried with all my gestures and body language to get the point across. Carol noticed it, too, putting up her sword and raising her head. The chimera's arm thick arm swung for her, great claws slashing her from the side. The moment before it struck, she seemed to activate some kind of defensive skill. Then, the chimera flung her small body into the air, like a child throwing a doll. She flew parallel to the ground for several dozen meters, then rolled across the grass. I rushed over to her the moment she stopped.

"Blaze!" As the chimera lumbered after Carol, I pulled out my skill card and sent Blaze in its direction. Compared to the chimera's inferno, my fire skill looked like a lit match.

*It's not even reaching the monster! I'm out of range!*

The chimera seemed to notice I'd cast Blaze at it, though. One of the creature's colossal heads—the goat head—fixed me with its huge eyes as I sprinted toward Carol. The monster turned right as it was about to stomp on her and spun its giant body around to face me with each slow, rumbling step. The goat head opened its mouth, baring its grotesque teeth. *I always thought goat faces looked pretty scary.*

The horns that sprouted from its head began to glow with electricity.

*It's readying an electric attack?! That's right! The chimera heads attack with different elements! Is Phase going to make me immune to lightning?! Does it count as physical damage?! Either way, I'll just going to have to cast Phase again and try to ride it out!*

When I activated my defensive skill, having no idea whether it would work or

not, a sudden explosion hit the side of the goat's face as it tried to fire its electric attack toward me.

"Baaah?!" the goat yelled.

I felt the goat's cry in the pit of my stomach. Its head shook just a little, and its attack fizzled.

"Fuck you!!! Kiss my ass, boy!" someone shouted in English.

"You piece of shit!"

I looked over to find the members of REA formed up. One of them held what looked like a grenade launcher, firing wildly at the chimera.

*Th-they're doing everything they can to help! They saved me!*

While the chimera was drawn away by REA's fire, I found the former athlete within me and charged straight for Carol at a full sprint. She tried to stand when I got there, but her arms and legs flopped back to the ground like a puppet whose strings had been cut.

"Nhh!" Carol moaned, her face contorting in pain. Her right leg was twisted at the knee, sticking out in an unnatural direction.

*That thing's clearly broken!*

"At least I wasn't taken out in a single blow!" she managed to say.

"I'm getting you out of here!"

"Do it...!"

I picked up her slender body and began walking backward as fast as I could, dragging her with me in retreat. Her armor was almost completely destroyed, leaving her basically naked except for the protection on her arms and legs. It didn't take that much strength for me to pull her light frame away from the fight.

REA continued to use their modern weaponry to desperately draw the chimera's attention away from us. The monster lazily blew fire at them in reply.



“Whoa, whoa, whoa! That’s not good!” I screamed in panic.

“It’s okay! Kevin, our medic, has some basic support skills!”

“What are support skills?!”

“Defensive skills, buff skills! That kind of stuff!”

The supersized flame breath consumed REA. As the flames trailed and dissipated, I saw they were all safe. Looking closer, the grass in a one-meter radius around them had been left unscathed as well.

*They must’ve used some kind of barrier skill. That boss ogre was basically playing Solitaire when it wiped them all out in an instant with its ambush attack. And these guys are the elites of the strongest adventuring party in Britain, huh?*

The chimera turned back to me and Carol as it got back to its feet. The lion’s head opened its mouth, forming floating embers and sparks that lingered there, as if to say *“I can fire off another of these any time!”*

“Damn! It’s coming back this way!”

“You’ve got something that disables the skills of a target, don’t you?! Use that to get us through this!” came Carol’s high-pitched shout as I dragged her away.

“I can’t use Skillbook while dragging you!”

“Then leave me!”

“I can’t do that either!”

I dragged Carol in retreat as fast as I could, but I didn’t have the speed to get us out of range. The enormous lion’s mouth gaped as it continued reloading its inferno breath.

“Zukky-san! Leave it to me!”

The moment I heard Kessie’s voice, I knew what she was going to do. Our communication was much faster than telepathy could ever be. We were connected, completely in sync.

“Skillbook!”

Skillbook appeared before my eyes and landed in front of Carol as I dragged her.

“Whoa!”

Carol somehow managed to catch it and, sensing what I needed her to do, rapidly flipped through the pages. The chimera’s inferno was a moment away.

“Graah!”

In the shadow of that great chimera’s body, we must’ve looked like ants or mice as we tried to escape.

*What’s the idiom again? Something about a lion hunting mice? Or was it a rabbit?*

The inferno breath came at us like an erupting volcano. *One direct hit from that would be enough to kill us a dozen times over, let alone once.*

The burning vortex of overkill surged toward us.

“Whooooaa! This isn’t good! This is *not* good!” I shouted.

“Is this it?!” Carol asked. “Which one is it, Mizuki?!”

At almost the exact same moment that the breath came, Kessie flew out of my pocket.

“That’s the one!” Kessie swiftly glided through the air and pulled a particular skill card from the page that Carol had open.

“Disable!”

The moment Kessie drew out the card, I activated it, and the raging inferno about to turn us to ash split apart in the air, evaporating with a whooshing sound.

*Disable—a permission type skill that blocks the effect of one of a target’s skills or magic. Apparently, that chimera’s fire breath consumes MP, much like our skills do.*

“All right!” screamed Kessie, holding up the skill card, which looked a little

heavy for her. For a moment, the chimera looked confused about why the hellfire it spewed had instantly dissipated. Its lion head tilted in confusion, which would've looked cute and cat-like if the thing wasn't two stories tall.

"It's not done! Here comes the next one!" Carol shouted.

The next head floated up from the chimera's behind, taking the confused lion's place. It was the snake head, already locked on to our position.

"The snake head uses ice attacks!" Carol said. "There's one coming!"

"Reload Disable for me!" I asked Kessie.

"Okay, okay! This thing's heavy! This card's super, super heavy!"

I dragged Carol with her broken leg, and Kessie... Our full-speed retreat was a shouting match of total chaos. The snake head opened its mouth wide and let out a blizzard of spear-like icicles in our direction.

*Crack! Crack!*

The sound of cracking reached my ears as countless ice crystals of all shapes and sizes descended upon us, ready to crush us to death.

"Waah?! We're going to die!" Kessie exclaimed.

"Give me that!" Carol grabbed the Disable skill card from Kessie as she struggled with it. She quickly jammed it into the binder and pulled it back out, meeting the conditions for another cast.

"Mizuki!"

"Disable!"

Just in the nick of time, I activated my skill, and the icicles about to brutally impale us all vanished in midair. But it was the lion head's turn next. It opened its mouth, readying another inferno.

"It's coming again!" Carol shouted.

"Gyaah?! This just gets worse and worse!" Kessie yelled.

“Disable!”

I barely had time to breathe as I continued to counter the hail of one-hit death icicles raining down.

*Just how far do we need to run to get away from this thing?! Are we going to make it?! How many more times can I use Disable?!*

It was only then that I noticed a gap in the chimera’s attacks. I looked up and saw that the lion and snake heads that had been delivering alternate rounds of fire and ice attacks looked somewhat tired. Both mouths hung open, panting a little.

“All right! Is it out of mana?! Did we outlast it?!” asked Kessie.

“No... No, that’s not what this is,” muttered Carol.

I followed her gaze and found the third chimera head—the one that had been absent from the fight for some time. The hideous goat horns were charging up electric energy.

“The goat head is an electric type...” Carol frowned. “You won’t be able to counter that!”

“Wh-why not?” I asked.

“What do you think you’ll be able to do to that lightning before it strikes you?”

*Ah... So that’s what she means.*

I understood.

*I’m blocking attacks that are already coming my way. So that’s Disable’s weakness. When an attack’s too fast for me to react, when I’m not physically able to use Disable, I won’t be able to block it,* I thought to myself, somehow remaining calm. The goat head continued to accumulate electricity in its curved horns. It was preparing to burst, converting the current into a thunderbolt of rage to turn us all to carbon.

“Mizuki! Use Phase!”

“That won’t protect you!”

“Just do it! If you don’t, we’ll *all* die!”

Suddenly, there was a great booming sound as an iron hammer sped toward the goat head’s thick neck.

*Thonk!*

“Whooooa?!”

“Baaaaah!”

I felt the goat’s unpleasant cry reverberate in my stomach as its neck twisted. I spun around, looking past the command tent on the corner of the square, further into the distance. A single tank appeared, advancing toward us on its caterpillar treads. It had just fired a shell from its main cannon, the barrel still smoking. Standing by the tank’s side was...

“Tachibana-san!” I called out without thinking.

She had her hands over her ears but took one away to wave at me.

“The armored division!” Carol laughed faintly. “Hah, hah... I heard there was one stationed here for emergencies, but I never expected they’d still be operational.”

There was another explosion as the next shell came. I managed to get one hand over an ear, but it felt like my other eardrum had burst.

*That’s a type ten. I heard the name once during our briefing.*

The shell flew through the air so fast my eyes couldn’t follow it and pierced the chimera’s body.

*No. Those pointed shells made contact with the chimera, but neither of them pierced its physical armor.* The shell was repelled by the chimera’s soft skin and fell to the ground with a thud as if it were a mere pebble.

The chimera’s snake head hissed. A hail of icicles spewed from its mouth like a

barrage of gunfire, flying straight for the tank. The tank's armor blocked most of the icicles, but some stuck in its outer plates. The caterpillar treads stopped turning, and the tank halted. Still, the main cannon shifted in place a little and took aim at the chimera. With a thunderous boom and great flare, the cannon fired. In response, the chimera's snake head fired off more icicles. The sound of booming cannon fire and air-crystallizing ice colliding shook the ground beneath our feet.

Caught in the JSDF versus kaiju war, we had to abandon our retreat attempt. All we could do was crouch close to the ground and cover our ears. Every time the tank fired, the earth shook and our whole world trembled. I felt like the explosions themselves damaged us with how loud they were. After the tank's fourth shot, it fell completely silent. Countless icicles were stuck into the ground around it. As for the vehicle itself, several sharp spears pierced the tank's armor. The chimera dropped to its knees, but it didn't fall further.

*It took four direct hits from those armor-piercing shells, so it was knocked off balance a little...but with its bugged physical armor, it survived them all.*

The chimera got its feet back squarely on the ground and raised itself up again. Once the monster had confirmed that the tank was no longer raining down intense cannon fire, it turned back in our direction.

For some reason, this made me laugh. "Ah... Ha ha. Maybe we really are done for."

"Zukky-san?! Don't give up!"

"Kessie, run. Escape on your own."

"Don't give up! Do your best! Do! Your! Best!"

*Easier said than done... If a tank can't take down that huge monster, what am I supposed to do? I don't have the will to keep getting up any longer. That crazy bout of tank fire has made my whole body feel weak, like I've just woken up in the morning. It'd be such a struggle just to move. How do I put this...? It's like I've realized I've overslept past the point of no return, and I'm starting to think I*

*should give up on the day. I just don't give a damn anymore.*

I looked down at the Disable skill card in my hand. There were two uses left.  
*I've already used this thing a whole eight times?*

"Mizuki..." Carol put a hand to her sword, trying to stand on her broken leg.  
"I'll draw it away. You run as fast as you can."

"Your leg's broken," I said. "Forget about it."

"I can manage a few seconds. Use Phase. You'll be able to make it alone."

"I don't want to leave you here."

Kessie fluttered down to us amid the painful exchange of words. "Zukky-san!" she exclaimed. "Come on, don't give up! Stand up, you—"

"I told you to run, Kessie! Go!"

"I don't wanna! I don't wanna, I don't wanna!"

"Don't be unreasonable! Just go! You can fly away, can't you?!"

"I don't wanna, I don't wanna, I don't wanna, I don't wanna, I don't wanna!"  
Kessie threw a childish tantrum, sobbing like a baby.

*Come to think of it, I've never seen her cry.*

"I don't wanna! I want to be with you, Zukky-san!"

"Gh!"

*Damn it!*

As I collapsed to the ground, I pulled out my Disable skill card once more. *The lion head is coming... Fire. I can counter it with Disable.*

I feebly held up my skill card as the lion opened its giant mouth and glared at me.

*Damn it. There's nothing more I can do. My hands are shaking. I just want to give up on everything. But I've made Kessie cry, haven't I...? There's nothing else to do but kick myself into gear and to struggle through, to get off my ass for*

*that palm-sized roommate of mine.*

*“Damn it! Come on, you freakin’ monster!”*

I waited patiently for the moment to come, for the lion to release its fire breath.

*Come on then. I’ll cancel out your attack. I’m not giving up. I’m not.*

*I’ve always been like this, now that I think back. Always pretending to be smart, half-pretending to be a hero, then throwing up my hands and sighing. Haphazardly dealing with whatever problems come my way without ever taking any real responsibility. I’ve got this impressive Skillbook power, Shinobu and Carol love me, REA wants me join up, but all I do is brush it all off, making no real decisions and running from my responsibilities. I think I’ve been hoping that somehow, someday, all of this will just magically work itself out for the better. I’ve been confusing fence-sitting for cynicism. In the end, this is my irresponsibility coming back to bite me.*

*I had more than enough chances to grow, but I haven’t changed at all. This is only the natural consequence of my actions—my BAD END, with everyone around me caught up in the crossfire.*

I held my Disable skill card up toward the chimera, my hand trembling.

*All right, I get it. This is my fault. I was wrong about everything. But seeing my little roommate cry woke me up.*

*Give me the chance to start over. Give me the chance to take responsibility for all of this. Just a little more time, please...time to face it all. Skillbook! You’ve saved me so many times. I’m sorry for thinking about you like a curse, a liability. Please, lend me your strength one last time! If not for me, for Carol and Kessie! Give me the power to save them! Let’s fight together, up to the very end!*

Finally, the monster’s head began spewing fire. The moment it came, I shouted the name of my skill, my voice hoarse.

*“Disable!”*



*I'm going to cancel that inferno of yours. I'll continue to struggle pathetically until the very last second, until I expend every option and bet on that one-in-infinity chance of salvation!*

That was the plan, at least. Disable didn't activate.

"Huh?"

The hellfire approached.

*Something's different. Why didn't the fire disappear?*

"Wait, hey!" I shouted pitifully. "Activate, damn you! Just when I decide I'm going to fight, you quit on me?!"

My words of protest were meaningless as the supersized hellfire wrapped around me.

*Ah. I'm done for. Even Skillbook gave up on me. Figures.*

I threw myself over Carol, who was balled up on the ground. I heard the sound of grass burning around me, like the plants were scorched by some gigantic blowtorch. Yet, I felt no heat on my skin.

"Huh...?"

I opened my eyes. Right before me was an invisible defensive line. A shield had deployed around us all, protecting us from the flames.

*What did I activate? Did I accidentally pull out a different skill card? No, I don't have any skills that can do this...*

⟨Tutorial completion detected.⟩

⟨Ending tutorial.⟩

A computer-like voice echoed in my mind. It wasn't Kessie's voice. This sounded more like an AI assistant, the kind that you could find on modern smartphones.

⟨Transitioning to full control. Please wait.⟩

A cracking sound came from Skillbook, which was in Carol's arms. The thick binder I'd materialized cracked like a boulder. Bright light shined out through the fissures.

*«Disabling all limits. Please wait.»*

*Doo-doo-doodoodoo!*

A song that reminded me of the hold music on a call center line started playing. The electronic sounds were emotionless and completely devoid of tension. As the music played, the barrier continued to hold off the vortex of flames surrounding us. Then, Skillbook broke apart and the skill cards inside came flying out, sticking to the barrier like trading cards in a display cabinet. With a *whoosh*, a series of letters appeared before my eyes. It was the same screen I'd seen in my very first fight with the goblins, a warning message.

***Connect to Skillbook's full control?***

***Warning: this action cannot be undone.***

***Yes / No***

I tapped the "Yes" button.

That moment, there was an explosion, as if everything around me had just been blown away. I heard a sound like breaking glass, and a sudden gust of wind rushed at me from all directions.

"Huh...?" I looked around as I rolled on the ground.

Skillbook was gone. In its place, skill cards floated in midair in a wall in front of me like an open book.

***Transition to full control complete.***

***Limits have been disabled.***

***User recognized: Mizuki Ryosuke.***

***Thank you.***

Static sounded in my ear, like a connection had been cut. The chimera stood before me, still under the impression it had burned me to a crisp with its inferno. Upon seeing that I was inexplicably still alive and getting to my feet, it cocked its head at me in wonder.

“I’ve got no idea what just happened!” I said, stumbling to my feet. The rows of skill cards spread out like wings in front of me—they almost felt like extensions of my arms and legs.

*It’s weird. It’s like I’ve got this instinct. I just know how to control these things.*

“You answered me, eh, Skillbook?! So admitting your own faults *is* worthwhile!”

The goat head started building electricity for an attack. I saw it coming and tapped the Disable card to my left. I felt like I was using a phone’s touchscreen or playing a rhythm game. I gave the card a long press and a new series of options opened up, just like they would on a smartphone menu.

***Activate***

***Activate against immediately following skill›***

***Exchange skill uses***

***Advanced settings***

I tapped the “activate against immediately following skill” button. The Disable skill card darkened, on standby and ready to cast. The goat head sparked with electricity. Just as it made to bring the lightning down upon me, I screamed.

“Disable!”

**M**Y SKILL, SET ON STANDBY BY THE “ACTIVATE against immediately following skill” option, activated at almost the exact same time as the chimera’s electric attack. To put it more accurately, Disable countered the skill at 0.00000. That was how *immediately* it activated.

Disable was limited by that fact that a person had to activate it, subjecting it to human reaction speeds by its very nature. But with the new, advanced functionality of Skillbook, I was able to activate Disable immediately after I was attacked, locking the skill in as an automatic response, like a computer program.

*Crack!*

The moment the electric attack sounded, Skillbook’s wall of cards glowed blue for a moment. Disable automatically activated, and the chimera’s lightning bolt fizzled out disappointingly. After that, there was only silence. It was all too anticlimactic, as if no attack had taken place at all.

“Gahh?” the chimera cried in astonishment, unable to comprehend the situation. The goat head looked up to the sky, then down again, searching for the lightning attack that it was sure it had just fired. I used the opportunity to grasp Carol’s arm and start pulling her away again.

“Mizuki! What is this?!” she asked, looking around at the Skillbook wall around me. The cards were lined up on the invisible wall to the left and right, as if they were in an open book. They almost looked like a giant set of wings.

“Ah, I don’t know!” I said. “I honestly don’t!”

“But you were just using it!”

“Well, I know how to do that!”

It felt like I had add-ons and a whole user manual installed in my brain—as if I were one with Skillbook itself. As I retreated, Kessie floated back out in front of my eyes.

“Zukky-san! Is there anything I can do?!”

“Another Disable! Give it a long press, and then push ‘*activate against immediately following skill*’ for me!”

“Roger that!”

*I’m only retreating to buy a little more time. I know what I’m going to do. I’ve got it all planned out. I understand it all. I just need a little more time.*

*I can counter one more of the chimera’s attacks with my last use of Disable. But if it doesn’t use a skill, and it comes after us directly with those huge claws for a direct attack, there’ll be nothing I can do to stop it. I can use Phase, but that skill can’t protect Carol.*

While Kessie busied herself setting up Disable on my left, I started working on the right, pulling Carol with one hand.

I double tapped my Blaze card. The activation details appeared in a pop-up, just like they would on a smartphone screen.

***Activate***

***Set activation time***

***Activate with boost***

***Activate in tandem with other skill***

***Move remaining uses and activate***

I tapped “activate in tandem with other skill,” and another pop-up window appeared that showed other available skills that could be linked.

***Explosive Nature × 0 → Blaze***

***Chip Damage × 0 → Blaze***

I pressed Explosive Nature, adding the maximum number of six stacks I had remaining. Once the number hit six, I couldn't add any more stacks, so I pressed the OK button at the bottom. Another pop-up appeared.

***Activate in tandem***

***Add another skill***

I pressed the *add another skill* button, and the list of usable skills popped up again.

***Hand in Hand Amplify × 0 → Explosive Nature × 6 → Blaze***

I began stacking Hand in Hand Amplify without hesitation.

“Fire incoming, Zukky-san!” shouted Kessie.

My eyes went to the chimera's lion head, which readied another fire attack.

*That's fine. I've got Disable on standby. That'll take care of it for me automatically.*

After stacking Hand in Hand Amplify, I had the maximum number of uses remaining set—seven. I tapped OK, and a final confirmation pop-up appeared.

***Choose stacking method***

***Calculate all by addition***

***Calculate all by multiplication***

***Select all manually***

## ***Processing settings***

Just as I was about to press the “calculate all by multiplication” button, my finger froze.

*Umm... Wait a minute. This is going to do what I think it's going to do, isn't it...?*

I heard the briefest of roars as the chimera spit flame.

“Kyaaa! I know we’re safe, but it’s still scary!” screamed the noisy fairy beside me. The flame breath dissipated in an instant with the Disable skill I set on standby.

“Zukky-san! Here comes another one!”

I glanced over to see that it was the snake head this time, icicles forming in its open mouth. *This isn't good. I don't have any more uses of Disable!*

*Well, actually there's a way to use the advanced functionality of Skillbook to get it to activate, but I don't have time for that!*

“I can’t push the Disable button anymore! Zukky-san?!”

“It’s okay! It’s fine! Good work, Kessie!”

“It keeps saying ‹*would you like to transfer uses?*› over and over! I didn’t even do anything, and it’s already messed up!!”

“It’s not messed up! Hyah! Take that!”

I made up my mind and pushed the ‹*calculate all by multiplication*› button. A final pop-up screen displayed the calculation.

***Stacking method: calculate all automatically by multiplication.***

***Target skills: Hand in Hand Amplify, Explosive Nature, Blaze.***

***Formula:  $(2 \times 2 \times 2 \times 2 \times 2 \times 2) \times (2 \times 2 \times 2 \times 2 \times 2 \times 2) \times (4)$***

**Activate?**

**Yes / No**

I tapped Yes.

There was a *pop!* as yet another pop-up appeared.

***Final damage will be calculated at point of activation.***

***Don't show this message again.*** ☒

**OK**

Just as I pushed *OK*, the chimera's snake head spouted a barrage of countless icicles at us like cannon fire. In that instant, the Skillbook wall around me glowed red.

The Blaze, Explosive Nature, and Hand in Hand Amplify cards began to shine, drawn together by golden lines. There was a *ding!* as a white ball of fire appeared floating in the air between us and the icicles. I ducked down close to Carol, holding her in my arms, catching Kessie and hiding her behind me. Right at the very end, another screen appeared.

***Final damage amount: 32,768.***

***This message can be disabled from the Skillbook "display settings" menu.***

**OK**

*According to Carol, that boss chimera has 1,000 points of armor against magical attacks and 50 HP.*

The white fireball, burning so hot it looked like it could melt the whole world



and everything in it, went forward. There was a strange ringing sound in my ears as I set the fire loose, bursting like a nuclear explosion.

## Epilogue:

# The Mysterious Adventurer Mizuki Ryosuke's Totally Wild True Identity

**A**LLOW ME TO BRIEFLY EXPLAIN WHAT HAPPENED IN the aftermath of the combined dungeon field test training exercise, the first practical test exercise of its kind in Japan.

There were over forty casualties as a result of Major Himata's terrorist plot, including the boss chimera's rampage on the final day. Most were injured by the chimera's supersized infernos or killed by Himata's hypnotized men. Including light injuries like sprains, the number of casualties was likely even higher. The majority of injuries and deaths were on the JSDF side—four JSDF members died of their injuries.

Major General Yamamoto, who commanded the base during the incident, was interviewed to determine whether his ordering of the armored division to engage was the correct decision under the circumstances. The media reports and polls, however, seemed to suggest that many people had a positive view of the major general's decision, so it was likely that his write-up would reflect that fact. Details were being investigated by the Ministry of Defense as well as the police, and a nationwide manhunt for the individual ostensibly responsible for the attack, Major Himata, was underway.

A debate raged about how the hypnotized JSDF members who helped carry out Himata's plans should be treated. They had been attending "revolutionary education" and "study meetings" with him, but the details of this discovery were still under investigation. How crimes committed while under the influence of skill-based hypnosis should be prosecuted was an open question, surpassing the limits of established law.

All the extraordinary chaos that followed the incident had made one

individual famous—that individual being me, Mizuki Ryosuke.

“It was awful,” I said, sitting in the back seat of the black van.

The vehicle sped down the road, leaving the scenery outside the window far behind. More came into view just as quickly. I saw the same thing every time I looked, no matter how much time passed. It was a gray highway, showing me nothing but man-made concrete and evenly spaced metal poles. I was exhausted, and looking out the window made me depressed.

“Well, you’re free now, right? What’s it matter?” said Carol as she sat in the seat beside me.

“I seriously thought they were going to arrest me,” I said.

“Everyone thinks that the first time they’re questioned by the police. You want to go get some ramen?”

“Why does it have to be ramen?”

“Getting ramen calms you down,” Carol explained.

“You’re just into Japanese ramen. That’s what this is.”

“Can I come with you?” asked Kevin in English from behind the wheel.

*When are you going to buy yourself that Auto-Translate skill? I should buy one for myself at this point, shouldn’t I?*

We stopped at a ramen place along the highway. Carol, Kevin, and I walked inside. We sat in the tatami section at the back of the restaurant. Carol and I ordered soy sauce ramen, and Kevin got Chinese rice.

“How’s Kessie?” I asked Carol as we waited for our orders.

“REA’s been looking after her,” she said. “Don’t worry. She’s okay.”

“Did she say mention me at all?”

“She’s worried about you. You should come see her soon. She’s been really down lately.”

“I can’t wait to just relax and watch TV with her.”

“Miss Kessie’s favorite comedian is on a break—something to do with criminal underworld connections, apparently. I think that might be what she’s sad about, come to think of it.”

“I can’t believe her. What’s this break anyway? Who was it?”

Our ramen and Chinese rice came as we chatted. Shiny oil floated on the top of my thick, Chinese-style soy sauce ramen. I broke my disposable chopstick set in two and added a bit of pepper before slurping some noodles.

*This is good—super good. I’ve been used to the bland food they have in the police station, so this hot, thick soup is filling my whole body.*

I felt the salty soy sauce traveling through my veins, completely satisfying me.

“What did they ask you about?” asked Carol.

“Some stuff about Himata, about Skillbook. Then they asked about the explosion. All kinds of things. I really thought they were going to take me to trial,” I said.

“They were just keeping you there as a suspect because they didn’t have anyone else. That’s why they didn’t release you.”

“Well, I guess I did put on the biggest show.”

“I suppose that’s why then,” said Carol, sipping some soup from her ramen bowl. “So, about Skillbook... What happened to it?”

“Long story short,” I said, “I can’t give it away anymore.”

“You can’t give it away?”

“Apparently not, no. It’s a part of me now. I can’t trade it,” I continued, chomping down on the thin noodles and drinking the thick ramen broth. “It’s turned into a unique skill. I think that’s what they’re called. But hey, I don’t plan on giving it up now anyway, so the timing couldn’t be better.”

The moment I spoke those words, a wing-like pattern appeared in the air

before my eyes, a glowing wall flashing for just an instant.

Carol and Kevin blinked at me. I had activated Skillbook by accident, just by thinking about it too much.

*I'm still not used to controlling this thing. It just kind of pops out in front of me sometimes as an instinctive reaction. This thing isn't even really shaped like a book anymore. It's something that appears before me—this broken skill of mine, this Skillbook that's now a part of my body and mind.*

\*\*\*

I suppose I'll also have to talk briefly about the fate of former prefectural office employee-turned-Omori City Hall employee Tachibana Maki. After the combined dungeon field test training exercise, Tachibana-san had a lot of questions to answer, given how closely she'd been working with Himata during the event. She was currently taking time off work and going through the process of leaving her job. She was exhausted, preparing to walk the same glorious path of unemployment as me.

*Why do the people who involve themselves with me always seem to lose their jobs and positions?*

"Are you going to join REA?" I asked.

*"No, well... I'm still thinking about it,"* said Tachibana-san, laughing.

I was back in the backseat of the black van next to Carol, talking to Tachibana-san over the phone.

*"After everything that happened, I want some time to rethink everything. I still have quite a bit in savings..."*

"Right. Well, then... Let's go get a drink sometime, eh?"

*"Ah, of course! Let's go! Oh, and are we by any chance still remembering the 200,000 yen incident?!"*

"We're still not even."

*“Oh no...”*

“I’m kidding!” I laughed. “Thanks, you really helped us out.”

*“Not at all. It was nothing,”* Tachibana-san answered happily. She lowered her voice. *“Oh, and Mizuki-san?”*

“What is it?”

*“Have you seen the articles?”*

“What articles?”

*“The news reports. Those articles... The things they’re reporting about you, Mizuki-san.”*

“I’ve heard about them, but I haven’t looked for myself yet. I just got out.”

*“I think...you should take a look.”*

“What should I search for?”

*“‘Mizuki Ryosuke.’ Just ‘Mizuki’ should be enough at this point, I think.”*

“All right. I’ll call you back later.”

I hung up with Tachibana-san and went straight to a search engine, putting in my own name. The moment I typed in “Mizuki,” the search suggestions that were displayed made my heart sink.

› *Mizuki combined dungeon field test training exercise*

› *Mizuki Ryosuke training ground fire*

› *Mizuki Ryosuke skill chimera*

› *Mizuki Ryosuke identity goblin*

› *Mizuki Ryosuke Showa Securities*

Even just the term “Mizuki Ryosuke” was enough to throw up several

different news articles.

*The Combined Dungeon Field Test Training Exercise—Wilypedia*

*Japanese Adventurer Breaks American World Record for Highest Damage in Single Attack*

*[REDACTED]% of [REDACTED] Training Ground Vanishes as Skill Runs Rampant*

*Who is Mizuki Ryosuke? [Article]—Niho Niho Pedia*

*Who is Mizuki Ryosuke, the Man Who Defeated a Boss Chimera? [Overseas media reaction and full story]*

*The Mysterious Adventurer Mizuki Ryosuke's Totally Wild True Identity—International/Economic Angles*

*Are Mizuki Ryosuke and Himata spies? Both in Bed with British Adventuring Party*

I didn't feel like tapping on a single one of them to read more.

"We're heading to your house, Mizuki, but there's something I need to tell you," said Carol, as if she'd been waiting for me to get off the phone with Tachibana-san. "I'm sure you're aware, but now that your training has drawn out the full potential of Skillbook, you're in a really dangerous spot. Forget the boss chimera. You basically set off a nuke in the middle of a JSDF base. The incident already made international headlines."

I sat there in silence. The final damage I had dealt to the boss chimera that day was 32,768. With Skillbook's limits unlocked, all my buffs had been multiplied together in the calculation, resulting in a simple Blaze skill with truly unprecedented power.

*The previous world record used to be 87, right? I hit 144 damage before the final day, but both those numbers are nothing compared to the destructive,*

*annihilating, overwhelming firepower of that final one.*

Apparently, the explosion had not only vaporized the huge boss chimera without a trace but had also blown away all plant life within a two-kilometer radius and charred everything within its area of effect.

*Thankfully, I was able to steer that force toward the chimera.*

“Agencies and adventurers all over the world are interested in you, Mizuki. Everyone you meet from here on out will have some kind of agenda. You should doubt everyone they send your way. We still don’t know where Himata is, or what his goals are. I don’t think you should consider it safe to leave your house alone,” Carol said. “That’s why we at REA have rented every room in your apartment building, Mizuki.”

“What? Every single room?” I asked in disbelief, breaking my silence. “What about the people who used to live there?”

“We paid their moving fees and compensated them for their departure.”

“You totally just kicked them out then, huh,” I said.

“Ultimately, yes. Everyone seemed happy to receive the compensation money, though. We did pay them millions of yen, after all.”

“You’re insane...”

“There was just one apartment we weren’t able to take—the one to the right of yours. A man and a woman are living there, Heath and Matilda. You’ve met them before. They weren’t even willing to negotiate.”

“Then you took all the *other* apartments?”

“We’ll live together to ensure your safety, Mizuki. I’ll live in the apartment to the left of yours, and Kevin will be in the one next to that. We’ve filled the others with REA members as well. They’re already in place.”

As she spoke, the van arrived at my apartment building. There were several black vans in the parking lot. *I’m sure these are REA vehicles, but anyone walking past is definitely going to think this is a dormitory for the Yakuza.*



As soon as I got out of the car, I made straight for my room. But before I went inside, I stopped and turned around.

“Hey, Carol,” I said.

“Hmm? What is it, Mizuki?”

“You want to go on a date this weekend?” I asked.

She looked at me wide-eyed, as if she didn’t understand what I meant.

“Huh?”

“Yeah, a date. Well, er... If you’re busy, that’s okay too.”

Carol stood in stunned silence for a few seconds. Gradually, her cheeks began to blush red, and she smiled at me faintly. “S-sure! I want to go! Let’s go somewhere, Mizuki!”

“All right then, it’s settled. Don’t make other plans.”

Once I was done, I went upstairs and found myself standing by my front door. I unlocked it, stepping inside to find my beloved fairy friend.

“Zukky-san! You’re okay?!”

“Kessie! I should be asking you the same thing!”

She fluttered her wings and zoomed over to me, frantically waving her hands around in front of my eyes.

“I was so worried, you know?! I thought you were going to be in that cell forever! Life imprisonment! I thought about going to see you, but then I realized I’m, like, a fairy, you know?! Could I even do that?! Like, do fairies have visitation rights?! Then I was totally going to write you a letter, but I can’t hold a pen!”

“I didn’t do anything wrong! What would they give me a life sentence for?” I asked, laughing to myself.

*Well, anyway...good.*

The mountain of unruly problems in my life had exploded, scattering them everywhere. Trouble was already on its way, drawn in by the noise. That much was unavoidable, a fact of life. Before I realized what was happening, I was riding a super-express train to hell.

*No, that's not right. I'm the one that decided to get on board this train, in the end. Well, no matter what happens, I'm alive, and I've got Kessie.*

"Let's watch some of the Thursday's Downtown I recorded while the members of REA were hiding me!"

"Sure... Hey, have we got any beer in the house?"





## A Note from the Author

**S**O, THIS WAS THE SECOND VOLUME, AND THERE HAVE been quite a few changes from the online version. Let's look back at the diary of some of the struggles I went through during revisions with my editor, Y-sama (henceforth Editor Y, honorifics abbreviated).

1. A certain month, a certain day... Immediately prior to deadline.

Due to major revisions, Kimikawa bugs out at the schedule for the first draft.

Kimikawa sends a tearful email, which the Buddha-like Editor Y accepts.

2. A certain month, a certain day... The day of the deadline.

A first draft is submitted, with revisions very different in scope to the ones planned. Editor Y somehow accepts the way-too-sudden revisions.

3. A certain month, a certain day... The day prior to the second deadline.

Kimikawa thinks the illustrations that CruelGZ-sama sent are frankly just *too* wonderful. The burst of excitement drives him into a craze, and he stays up all night doing even more revisions. He then panics at what he's done, and calls Editor Y.

4. A certain month, a certain day... The day of the second deadline.

Kimikawa submits a draft that is significantly revised compared to the first. Kimikawa asked for even more time for revisions. The magnanimous Editor Y decides to hold out and wait until the very last moment, giving Kimikawa a chance.

(I speculate that Editor Y may be the reincarnation of Fan Ju (?–255 BC) who gave the twenty-eighth ruler of the state of Qin King Zhaoxiang (306–251 BC) a chance for promotion.)

5. A certain month, a certain day... Immediately prior to the final extended deadline for revisions.

In the period of time set aside for brushing up on fine details, Kimikawa attempts further rewrites. Editor Y deals with this at such a fast speed, it's as if he's taking part in the Blitzkrieg.

(I speculate that Editor Y may be the reincarnation of John Frederick Charles Fuller (1878-1966) who [abbrev.])

6. A certain month, a certain day... The day of the final extended deadline for revisions.

What is brushing up, anyway? (Epistemology).

Kimikawa submits a new draft, with eleven more big revisions.

Editor Y responds immediately. He must have Speed Attacker.

(I speculate that Editor Y may be the reincarnation of Bombazar, Dragon of Destiny (Armored Dragon/Earth Dragon) (Speed Attacker, Double Breaker) (Product name: *Duel Masters Developed by: Wizards of the Coast* Sold in Japan by: Takara Tomy) who [abbrev.])

7. After that.

Editor Y somehow manages to slide the manuscript through.

Kimikawa sadly causes a pileup in Editor Y's schedule.

(I speculate that Editor Y may be the [abbrev.] [abbrev.]

The lesson we must learn from all this? Don't cause problems for your editor during revisions.

I think author's notes are filled with acknowledgements pointed in all directions in many novels. The reason, I think, is that these kinds of things happen to varying degrees. It's only through a whole group of different editors and managers, and with a lot of technique and effort, that these books are somehow brought into print.

I think I read that the University of Oxford has recently done some research (or maybe it hasn't) that proved novel writers are, as a group, much more likely to be misfits in society than your average person, so I think this is the kind of thing that happens (or maybe it doesn't).

*Ga-thunk. Ga-thunk.*

Anyway, that's how the second volume of this work made it into print.

Thank you to the main character of this passage, Editor Y-sama, CruelGZ-sama who handled the illustrations, and to Sturkey-sama and Editor Y-sama, who handle the manga.

Also, thank you to all of the readers who have supported me since I started posting this story online. As a result of the rewrites, we've somewhat come off the rails of the online version of this story. I hope we can meet again in the next volume, even if things are going to be a bit off the rails.

Goodbye!!!



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